

TONY McMahon has never been part of the gang. While other teenagers were swigging cans of lager on village street corners every Saturday night, Tony was more likely to be watching Match of the Day in bed, with nothing stronger than an orange juice in his hand.

But as hard as it was growing up on the outside, Tony was so focused on his dream of becoming a professional footballer that he never gave in to temptation.

And even now as he comes to the end of his first season as a first team choice at Middlesbrough Football Club, the 19-year-old, is not so different from his schoolmates, and he remains an Evenwood lad through and through.

The McMahons' Wellgarth house is no different to any other in Evenwood, it is only the shiny silver BMW sitting in the drive that gives any clue that it is the home of a rising football star. The car is one of the few luxuries Tony has bought since he became a pro.

And while the stereotype of the hard-drinking, over-paid teenage footballer is familiar to most of us, Tony's feet have remained firmly on the ground, and he could not be more different.

With the season over, Tony is turning his attention to the England Under-21 team's fixtures in the summer, I caught up with him at home to find out whether the reality of Premiership football lives up to the dream, and to reflect on the long journey from Barnard Castle Juniors to Middlesbrough Man of the Match.

"Ever since I could walk and talk I was playing football," said Tony, his eyes sparkling with excitement just talking about the game. "I wake up every day and I can't wait to go training. It's my job but I love it."

But the young defender's dream did not come without a price.

After signing for Middlesbrough at the age of 12, his childhood was consumed by endless hours of playing and training. And Tony admits that dedicating his life to football was not easy.

"At first it was hard. When I was at school I was training four nights a week," he said. "All my friends were going out Friday nights and I wouldn't because I was playing the next day. I was never part of the group."

And even Tony's girlfriend of four years often struggled to understand why her boyfriend was so determined to spend all his time playing football. But these days 20-year-old Lyndsey from Cockfield never misses one of Tony's games.

"Lyndsey wasn't interested at all," said Tony. "She didn't understand how well I was doing, and she wanted to be with me all the time. But she loves going to games now."

The teenager's focus remained so strong that he declined all teenage temptations in favour of training, training and more training.

"Going out and getting drunk is just not me," he said. "I have never touched alcohol, ever. I see people wake up on a Sunday morning saying they will never drink again but then they start again the next week."

"When I was young it was the in thing to hang around the streets and drink but I was training every day and then went straight to bed," he added. "I knew what I wanted to do and I wouldn't let anything get in my way."

Nothing did get in Tony's way. After school he began training full time with Middlesbrough. And childhood heroes became workmates when he

# local legend in the making

took to the training ground with the senior players.

"I was nervous to start with and it was strange," Tony remembered. "They are the people I looked up to and when I got a chance to train with them it was like a dream and I was a bit star struck."

But like many other youngsters that come through Middlesbrough's thriving youth academy, the older players took Tony under their wing. "All the senior players look after us, they are brilliant," he said. "They often invite us round to their houses to play pool."

And one player in particular has clearly become Tony's new role model. "The one that I look up to is Gareth Southgate," he said. "He just does everything right every day, and that's how I want to be. He keeps your feet on the ground. If you ever need anybody to talk to, you can go to him for anything. He will help you with any problems you have, even away from football."

The support of the seniors helped Tony get through what was sure to be one of the most nerve-racking moments of his life, when he made his first start for Middlesbrough, at Old Trafford last October.

Nerves almost got the better of the teenager when he found himself in the tunnel alongside Manchester United, the team he supported as a child.

"Usually the gaffer names the team on a Friday but I didn't find out I was playing until two hours before," he remembered. "I was in the tunnel stood next to Ryan Giggs who was like my hero, and one of my team-mates tapped me on the shoulder and said 'they are just normal people' and then my blinkers went on and I focused on the match."

And Tony's Premiership career got off to a flying start. After an impressive 1-1 draw, marking Ronaldo and Giggs, he was named Man of the Match. His bottle of champagne still sits untouched in the lounge at his Evenwood home today.

Tony is slowly getting used to his new-found fame, but still has to pinch himself when he hears his name on the television, or a fan approaches him in the street for an autograph.

"It is still really strange," he said.

"One night I was watching Match of



**Top talent:** Tony McMahon in Premiership action for Middlesbrough  
Pic: MFC

the Day in bed with my girlfriend and they highlighted me, tipping me to play for England, and my mam and dad came running up the stairs. I never used to miss Match of the Day when I was young and there I was on it."

Perhaps the only people more excited about Tony's success than he is are his family. For as long as Tony has been playing, proud mum Tracey has never missed any of his games and match days are now a family affair for the McMahons who are at the ground for every match.

"If I'm playing at home we have to be at the ground for 1.30 so I tend to have a lie in and get up at around 11," explained Tony. "Then my mum makes me some pasta and chicken and I get my suit on and drive to the ground."

And once on the pitch Tony always gets a great reception from the fans who are delighted to have a young local lad on the team.

"The fans would like to have 11 local lads but in the modern game it's not going to happen," he said. "We always get a good reception and they make us feel important."

While Tony's playing career has gone from strength to strength, life off the pitch is also pretty rosy for the teenager, who has just bought his first house, in Cockfield.

Tony hopes to commit his future to Middlesbrough and has no intention of leaving Teesdale either.

"I enjoy living here, it's a nice, quiet village and everybody is friendly," he said.

"I wanted to stay local. I'm not ready for moving. My mam does everything for me and I couldn't cope without her."

Somehow this teenager has managed to stay level-headed despite his new-found wealth, and Tony still believes he owes much of his success to the support of his family.

"I always knew the money was going to come, but my mam and dad look after my finances and I'm not one for spending," he said. "If it wasn't for the support of my mam, dad, brother and sister I wouldn't be where I am now. They have kept my feet on the ground and I just want to thank them."

Even Premiership footballers get time to relax, and while many of Tony's team mates might choose to spend their free time in pubs and clubs, he prefers to play snooker and tennis or stay in and watch television with Lyndsey.

And what is the professional player's programme of choice?

"We never miss Footballers Wives," he said. "It's so funny because it's nothing like how it really is and that's what makes me laugh."

Despite having achieved so much in his short life, Tony remains as determined and focused as ever. He hopes that he will soon become a permanent fixture in the Middlesbrough line-up, and has his sights set on the England team.

"Football is my whole life, I want to play every game," he said. "I would stay at Middlesbrough for life, why would I want to move. All my friends and family are here and I will stay as long as the club wants me."

And there is one particular England defender whose boots Tony McMahon would love to fill.

"I want Gareth Southgate's armband one day. I want to be captain of Middlesbrough."

SOPHIE DOUGHTY



**Home turf:** Tony McMahon hones his skills in his home village of Evenwood