

YORKE S OFF-FIELD ANTICS RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS FUTURE

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Manchester United striker Dwight Yorke s career prospects appear to have taken a turn for the worse because of his off-the-field behaviour. Yorke incurred the displeasure of the Trinidad and Tobago FA last week by failing to turn up for an international match against Panama. The friendly was part of his country s preparations for a World Cup qualifier against the United States.

Yorke s actions have caused consternation back at Old Trafford, where United director Sir Bobby Charlton said the player was making it difficult for Sir Alex Ferguson to use his services. Charlton added that Yorke was in danger of ruining his career – a reference no doubt to Ferguson s increasing irritation with the lifestyle of his wayward star.

Newspapers in the UK have carried lurid stories about Yorke s private life on several occasions, and just this week another splashed details across its front page of steamy sex sessions that allegedly took place between the player and two well-endowed female models.

In his defence, Yorke explained that he d missed the match because he d returned home to be with his critically ill sister. But, clearly stung by Charlton s criticism, he subsequently issued a statement saying that as a young bachelor it was up to him how he conducted his private life, and that it was not a crime to enjoy the company of attractive young women.

Yorke s problem is that his form last season appeared to take a noticeable dip. A combination of injury and, ironically, time away from Old Trafford to represent his country restricted his first-team opportunities. When he *did* play, he was a less consistent threat than he had been in his first season with United – though there were exceptions, such as a quick-fire hat-trick against Premiership challengers Arsenal in February.

His partnership with Andy Cole had become less prolific and, with options available to Ferguson including Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and the in-form Teddy Sheringham, Yorke slipped down the strikers pecking order. Sheringham has now departed for Spurs; but the arrival of Ruud van Nistelrooy for a record fee suggests that Yorke s position remains

vulnerable. However unfairly, his colourful lifestyle provides a ready-made explanation for reduced effectiveness on the pitch.

He is certainly not the first player whose antics away from the pitch have courted controversy. Some thirty years ago another United star, the magnificent George Best, was rarely out of the gossip columns. His fondness for night clubs, drink and the company of an endless stream of beautiful women was legendary. Sadly, Best's playing career ended early under the pressure of all these distractions – particularly alcohol – and as a result world football lost one of its true geniuses prematurely.

More recently, Paul Gascoigne's exceptional talent has been blighted by excessive appetites off the pitch, which have sapped his fitness and left his potential unfulfilled. Stan Collymore's career – now apparently over – was another in which achievement failed to match expectations. A succession of troubled relationships and unwelcome headlines followed Collymore from club to club with monotonous regularity, and manager after manager lost patience with the player.

At Leeds United, Jonathan Woodgate and Lee Bowyer spent much of the Spring in court, accused with others of affray and causing grievous bodily harm with intent to Sarfraz Najeib, a student, in an incident outside a Leeds night club in January 2000. Another Leeds player, defender Michael Duberry, was accused with Woodgate and two others of conspiring to pervert the course of justice. All the players denied the charges. The trial collapsed when a newspaper printed prejudicial material as the verdict was about to be considered, but a re-trial was ordered so the defendants must go through it all again later in the year.

Liverpool's Robbie Fowler was attacked and slightly injured outside a night club earlier this year, causing manager Gerard Houllier to express annoyance that the player was out in the early hours of the morning during the football season.

Arsenal's captain Tony Adams fell down concrete steps outside a night club in 1993 and required stitches in a deep cut above one eye as a result. Remarkably, he recovered to play and score – with his bandaged head – in a vital FA Cup tie a few days later. Adams had been jailed for a couple of months earlier in his career for driving (and crashing) his car while drunk. In 1996 he confessed publicly to being an alcoholic and immediately set about changing his lifestyle with admirable desire and determination. He has gone on to play some of the best football of his career and is a role model for many.

His ex-Arsenal team-mate, Paul Merson, is another who strayed but then succeeded in sorting himself out. Merson admitted addictions to drink, gambling and drugs in 1994, but cleaned himself up with support from the club, raising the quality of his football significantly in the process. Despite the break-up of his marriage and the constant threat, faced by all recovering alcoholics, of being just one drink away from disaster, Merson remains one of the Premiership's best performers. For the last two seasons he has been Aston Villa's player of the year.

Their talent brings all the top Premiership players fabulous rewards. But it can also bring temptations which they have the money to indulge if they choose to. Yet giving in to those temptations too often can dramatically shorten their playing careers at the top. This is a lesson Alex Ferguson may be hoping Dwight Yorke will quickly learn.

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