



A CUPPA WITH  
**PHIL BABB**

# steven gerrard

FP's Editor at Large grabs a cuppa with an old friend...

Words PHIL BABB Photography TIM BRET-DAY

**D**o remember the first time I saw Steven Gerrard play as though it was yesterday, but in reality it was a good 12 years ago now. It was back in my Liverpool days, and myself and a few of the lads had decided to watch a bit of an under-18s game one afternoon after training.

At first glance he didn't look any bigger, quicker or stronger than the other boys playing that day. But we'd heard good things about him; he was touted as a kid with great potential and straight away he stood out that day – in terms of his ability he was head and shoulders above the other lads in his age group.

His energy and pace bursting forward and ferocity in the tackle was one thing. But then he stuck one in the stantion from 25-yards and yet didn't seem surprised. We should've known the kid was going to be special, and he ended up joining us in the first team squad soon enough.

I've watched from slightly further away over the last decade, as that feisty young kid evolved and developed into one of the hottest properties in world football, with a Champions League, 70 England caps and an FA Cup Final named after him, to boot. So it was with a collection of memories, a sense of admiration, and a box of PG Tips, that I met Stevie G to conduct this interview.

And I wasn't surprised to find the same enthusiastic, modest, football-loving Scouse lad I'd played alongside so many years earlier...

◀ **PHIL BABB:** The first time I ever saw you play was for the youth team at Melwood (Liverpool's training ground.) You scored a free kick from 25 yards out, bent it right into the top corner...

**STEVEN GERRARD:** Yeah I do remember some of you first team lads watching that game; you were standing with Jamie (Redknapp) weren't ya?

**PB:** Yeah and a few others. I won't tell you which one said it, but the shout was: "that lad's gonna be a star, as soon as he learns to tackle properly because he leaves himself open to injury..." Even at that early age had any coaches flagged up your – how can i phrase it – 'over-enthusiasm' in the tackle, and tried to calm you down?

**SG:** Every coach I worked with said the same thing back then – Steve Heighway, Ronnie Moran, Roy Evans, older players, even me dad! It was definitely a worry.

**PB:** Where do you think that streak, or desire to win at all costs, came from?

**SG:** When I was young I used to play with kids who were a lot older than me, so I was bullied on the pitch a bit. As I got older I had to learn to look after myself so I gave a bit back. But I've just about learnt to channel it now!

**PB:** Yeah, sure... There was a rumour that you broke your leg from a reckless tackle as a youngster?

**SG:** No, I've never broken my leg – touch wood – but I did have a lot of injuries back then.

**PB:** Do you think your dynamic style of play added to your injury woes? I mean, the persistent groin trouble, your back problems etc. Your high-octane energy has to have some drawbacks?

**SG:** I think a lot of my problems have stemmed from me rushing back into action too soon. As soon as the injury feels better I try to play my 100mph game, and I end up doing myself more damage. Experience teaches you to ease back into it, and you obviously learn more about your own body as time goes by. I got into the first team at quite a young age, so playing regular Premiership football while my body was still growing must've taken its toll as well.

**PB:** So, being a couple of years away from 30, have you started to think about changing your style of play maybe to help prevent injury?

**SG:** I think towards 32-33 I will inevitably have to look at that. Maybe the box-to-box element and the 100mph stuff.

**PB:** It's now over a decade since you made your Liverpool debut – I was playing! Do you remember much about it?

**SG:** To be honest my actual debut was just a cameo, with two minutes to go, but i was fuckin' buzzing to get on. I still remember the date – November 29, 1998.

**“I KNEW ABOUT THE OFFER FROM CHELSEA, AND THERE WERE CONTRACT COMPLICATIONS AT LIVERPOOL...I DIDN'T KNOW IF I WAS COMING OR GOING...”**

**PB:** Back then did you have any different dreams than the 'normal' footballer's aspirations? I say that because from the age of 16, I wanted to be the Republic of Ireland's most capped black player!

**SG:** Not really actually. Because of where I grew up – me mates, me family and that – it was massive just to say that I'd played for Liverpool's first team. Whether I'd played once or 100 times, the fact that I'd worn the shirt in a first team match was so important. If anyone back then would have told me I'd go on to play over 300 games, I would never have believed them.

**PB:** Can you believe it now?

**SG:** Sometimes when I look back, I realise how lucky I've been, and what I've achieved. But for me, it's always been more about looking forward and enjoying myself, and my football. I realise that my career is going by so quickly, I might only have four or five years left at the top level, so I have to enjoy it.

**PB:** You've had an amazing career already, with many more highlights to come I'm sure. Tell me, did you get a lot of stick from your scally mates about your MBE and going down to the Smoke to meet the Queen?!

**SG:** Yeah, yeah... I've had all the snidey comments! But in all honesty it was a very proud day for me. I certainly wasn't gonna turn it down.

**PB:** So what was the score with the whole 'Gerrard to Chelsea' saga back in 2005? You made a massive U-turn after the breakdown in contract talks at Liverpool. Why did you stay? Did you go home one night, open a packet of crisps on the sofa and say 'fuck it – I'm staying'?

**SG:** To be honest I did have that and many other thoughts. Looking back it was a difficult time for me. I knew about the offer from Chelsea and there were complications with the contract offer from Liverpool. For a time I didn't know whether I was coming or going. But I sat down with my dad and my brother, and all the people closest to me. We talked it through and came up with the right decision. I'd been at Liverpool FC since I was eight-years-old, and deep down I didn't really want to give it all up.

**PB:** But since then obviously Chelsea went on to win back to back Premiership titles. And they're in the hunt for more trophies again this year. Surely two titles would have graced your CV though...

**SG:** I never think about what could have been. They won those championships, and fair play to them. But put it this way; if I'd won those medals at Chelsea, what would they have meant to me? Whereas I could win the full set at Liverpool, and it would mean everything to me and the people of my home city. The prospect of winning the Premier League with Liverpool was one of the main reasons I stayed. I could enjoy that victory for the rest of my life with the people that are important to me.

**“I'M A SENSITIVE GUY - IF I HAVE A PROBLEM OFF THE PITCH I CAN SOMETIMES BRING IT ON WITH ME. BUT I'M LEARNING TO CONTROL THAT...”**





**“CAPELLO HAS GOT RID OF THE FEAR FACTOR, HE’S INSTILLED A LEVEL OF DISCIPLINE AND RESPECT, AND THE LADS ARE ENJOYING IT.”**

**PB:** A lot of people are saying this is Liverpool's year, so you must, as skipper, feel added pressure to deliver the first title to Anfield in so long?

**SG:** The longer it goes on without us winning it, the harder it becomes. You've played here, Babsie, you know that there's pressure to win every single game for Liverpool. Plus Man U could equal our record of league titles this month so that adds a bit too!

**PB:** This question isn't about ego, as I know you're a modest guy, but do you truly realise how good a player you are? Some of your body language would suggest signs of a lack of confidence at times...

**SG:** Quite a few people have mentioned that to me lately. It's not a lack of confidence, it's just that I'm too honest about my own contribution and tend to be really harsh on myself. When I do post-match interviews I try and be as honest as possible, and sometimes that doesn't translate well. I'm my own biggest critic, and maybe sometimes I do undersell myself, but that's just the way I am. I'm a sensitive guy – if I have a problem off the pitch sometimes I can bring it on with me – but I am learning to control it more. Honest...

**PB:** So opting not to take a penalty in the Champions League final shootout was never a confidence thing?

**SG:** No way! I'll have you know I was down to take the 5<sup>th</sup> pen! If Shevchenko had scored I would've been in the John Terry 'score to win it' scenario!

**PB:** As skipper, and with your ball-striking ability, wouldn't you have liked to have smashed in the first one and set the stall out for the rest of the lads?

**SG:** I'd love to have taken the first one. When Rafa came round and asked who wanted to take one, I said yes. But he then said: 'Ok, you've got the fifth!'

**PB:** There are so many 'true' footballing icons that come out of Liverpool FC; Dalglish, Keegan, Rush, Fowler, and yourself. Other teams have great players, but Anfield seems to produce legends. Any thoughts on why?

**SG:** I don't know if it's got anything to do with any sort of magic or whatever. But playing for a top club like this, with its history and tradition, inspires players to succeed. Liverpool FC is all about winning and there's not too many clubs with that same pedigree. When you score a goal in a cup final people cherish that moment on Merseyside; the team win but the scorer is immortalised forever.

**PB:** Some people say that you are the template for the modern day footballer. If you don't agree with that statement, then who is?

**SG:** I certainly don't see myself as the complete midfielder, let alone the complete footballer. In fact, I don't even think that most parts of my game are strong! I still make mistakes, and I've got weaknesses that I'm still working on, even at 28. Some people think Steven Gerrard only has to turn up to training and his name is first on the teamsheet, but I still have to graft in training to maintain playing at this level. But to answer your question, I think there are top midfielders out there now like Scholes and Lampard, and before them, the likes of Keane and Viera were particularly impressive. But to be honest, I couldn't name one player as the template.

**PB:** From my point of view I think you're a frustrated centre forward. Fuck that midfield

**“I DON'T THINK I'VE GOT THE PAIN THRESHOLD FOR A BODY WAXING. BUT IF THE MISSUS REALLY WANTED ME TO, I GUESS I'D HAVE A GO...”**



Wife Alex - she's the boss...

rubbish, you'd score 20-goals-a-season up front!  
**SG:** Haha! It's hard up front! We all saw Robbie (Keane) struggle when he was here.

**PB:** Who would you say is the best player you've ever played with?

**SG:** Wow, that's a difficult question. Someone asked me to name my top five recently and that was difficult enough. I've played with modern Liverpool heroes like Robbie (Fowler) and Michael (Owen,) and of the current squad no one can hold a torch to Nando (Torres). You've seen him on form, but when he's fully fit, sharp, and you train with him everyday, you realise how good he is. I reckon in three or four years' time he'll be the one.

**PB:** You're currently on course to become Liverpool's most capped England international ever. Are you as driven as Beckham was to reach the 100-cap mark?

**SG:** It would be nice, sure, but I'm just looking forward to getting the next cap because you never know what's gonna happen at international level, especially with midfielders like Michael Carrick performing so well for his club. I'm only 28 so I've still got quite a while left to get close to 100 caps. I'd like to think that it was possible.

**PB:** I had you down to be England captain when Fabio Capello was appointed. How big was the disappointment when he chose JT ahead of you?

**SG:** It wasn't a big disappointment at all. I was pleased for John because I don't think he would've deserved to lose the armband – he'd done nothing wrong. Rio was another strong candidate, although I was slightly disappointed that I was overlooked for the vice-captaincy. But that's not important, as long as England do well I'm happy.

**PB:** The England team finally looks to be playing free-flowing football with confidence. You have Kazakhstan and Andorra coming up in June, what do you take into those fixtures?

**SG:** All is going well right now and the friendly win in Germany last winter showed we don't only have a good national team, but a decent squad as well. Capello has got rid of the fear factor, he's instilled a level of discipline and respect, and the lads are enjoying representing their country.

**PB:** Hang on... How has he done all that? He took over a team that looked deflated, how does instilling discipline translate into confidence?

**SG:** You just have to respect his standing in the game and his CV; he's the type of manager who's held in high esteem. His training methods are geared towards players not only working hard, but being comfortable in possession, and not being scared of receiving the ball. He's built a team ethic, and it's not about individuals, we work for each other.

**PB:** So is 4-4-2 England's best formation?

**SG:** You can't just play in one formation in this day and age. A lot depends on opponents, if you're playing at home or away, and of course your own squad of available players. I think 4-4-2 will be used the most,





## STEVEN GERRARD MBE

ENGLAND: 70 CAPS  
(14 GOALS)

LIVERPOOL: 324  
(64)

HONOURS:-

FA Cup: 2001, 2006

League Cup: 2001,  
2003

Champions League:  
2005

UEFA Cup: 2001

UEFA Super Cup:

2001, 2005

PFA Young Player of

the Year: 2000/2001

PFA Player of the

Year: 2005/2006

FIFPro World

XI: 2006/2007,

2007/2008

UEFA Team of the

Year: 2004/05,

2005/06 2006/07,

PFA Team of the

Year: 2000/01,

2003/04, 2004/05,

2005/06, 2006/07,

2007/08

and it seems to be working, but I feel there's a way to go before we're a successful team.

**PB:** One thing that strikes me, especially coming up to major tournaments, is the pressure the tabloids put on the national side. They whip the country up into a frenzy and it seems to have a really negative effect on performances?

**SG:** Definitely, I totally agree with you. We tend to be made one of the favourites to win major championships before a tournament has even begun, that adds ridiculous pressure. The media need to be more humble, and take one game at a time.


**PB:** It's the build 'em up to knock em' down mentality. But if all the media got behind the team and were uber-positive like the American's tend to be with their national teams, that would surely help wouldn't it?

**SG:** Yeah it would, but on the other hand you have to look at recent results, and how the team has under-achieved, the supporters have a right to have a go. I agree with you that there needs to be a certain amount of togetherness though. For the team to be successful we need everyone pulling in the right direction. That includes the team, the fans and the media.

**PB:** So, do England have a chance of winning the 2010 World Cup?

**SG:** We have the players to deliver on the big stage. It's so easy for me to say that, but the hard work still has to be done on the pitch.

**PB:** Well, if it's about hard work, what's the best bit of coaching advice you've ever had?

**SG:** Corr...I've had tonnes of good advice. I had tonnes off Benitez, some off Capello, there's loads. But I think the main message for me has been: "every time you come off the training pitch make sure you don't leave what you've learnt still out there." 

**"WE HAVE THE PLAYERS TO DELIVER THE WORLD CUP, BUT IT'S EASY FOR ME TO SAY THAT. THE HARD WORK STILL HAS TO BE DONE ON THE PITCH..."**



## HAVE YOU EVER?

TEN QUESTIONS THAT SEPARATE THE PUNK FROM THE PANSY...

### 1. What's the most expensive round of drinks you've ever bought?

"When I do go out it's normally a case of booking a table for 10 or more of my friends and family and I usually cover the bill, so however much that all costs!"

### 2. What's the fastest car you've ever owned?

"An Aston Martin DB9. I got rid of it because it was too quick, and I'm not the best driver!"

### 3. What's the most you've ever spent on a hair cut?

"I used to pay £5 back in the day, that's probably why my barnet was so bad! I've got a deal going on at the mo - free cuts for tickets!"

### 4. Ever been in trouble with the law?

"A regretful drink driving incident when I was 19. The rest I'm not gonna talk about!"

### 5. Have you ever missed training with a hangover?

"No, but I've trained with a few, and it's not easy grinding it out!"

### 6. Ever been sick with nerves?

"No, I've been close a couple of times; when I had to stand up and speak at my wedding I almost lost it! Whenever I have to do public speaking my confidence just hits the floor. It's one thing in life that I definitely have to improve on!"

### 7. Who's the most famous name in your mobile?

"Daniel Craig at the moment, he's after some tickets! I don't think some of my family are gonna be happy when they get cast out of my box, but I can't say no to James Bond!"

### 8. What's the funniest one-liner you've heard from the terraces?

"The Scousers have got so many but I couldn't repeat them!"

### 9. When you were a single lad, did you ever take one for the team?!

"I used to have to! I had a really spotty face when I was younger, but since then it's fair to say my standards have got a lot higher!"

### 10. Would you have a back, sack and crack done?

"Have you seen my arse?! It's like an Alsatian! I don't think I've got the pain threshold to do that, but if the missus really wanted me to, I'd have a go!"

