

*“It is not an excuse for me
to say, ‘Oh, I had it rough,
I had it this, I had it that.
I never. The reality of it is I was
fucking stupid. There are no
two ways about it”*

Exclusive interview *with* Joey Barton, *by* Dan Davies



“Stop booing him”

shouts the middle-aged woman sitting behind me at Fulham's Craven Cottage ground. It's a cold night in early February and Joey Barton, Newcastle United's number seven, is getting the bird from the home crowd. It's something he experiences at pretty much every stadium he visits these days. As he jogs towards the touchline to take a throw-in, Barton smiles at those in the enclosure of the Eric Miller Stand aiming less than savoury hand gestures in his direction. The same woman is more vociferous in her disapproval: “Why are they booing him?” she complains to her neighbour. “What's he ever done?” The short answer to her question might be: “Where do you want to begin?”

It's unusual enough to hear fans of one football club sticking up for a player from another, let alone one with arguably the most notorious rap sheet in English football. For those unfamiliar with the back- and front-page stories given over to Joey Barton's myriad misdemeanours, a brief (although by necessity not that brief) primer is probably in order.

In July 2003, the then 20-year-old Scouse midfielder had only recently broken into the Manchester City first team when he first made headlines for his off-field activities: he was convicted of ploughing a Peugeot 405 through the window of a car showroom and leaving the scene without reporting the accident. He was arrested later the same night taking a taxi from a nightclub. Over the next 12 months, he established a reputation as an energetic, tough-tackling and skilful presence in a mediocre City side, but was also infamous for his short fuse. Manager Kevin Keegan had already rebuked Barton for storming out of Maine Road after being told he'd been dropped from the starting 11, when Keegan was compelled to read the riot act again after Barton sparked a mass brawl in a friendly against Doncaster.

In December 2004, Barton achieved genuine tabloid notoriety. The City players' Christmas party was an inevitably drunken, fancy dress affair that saw Joey arrive at the Lowry Hotel attired as Jimmy Savile. An initially high-spirited exchange with a younger player he had known since his teens spiralled out of control and ended in shocking violence with



PLAYING TO THE CROWD: BARTON APPLAUDS THE NEWCASTLE UNITED AWAY SUPPORT AT FULHAM'S CRAVEN COTTAGE, FOLLOWING THEIR MATCH ON 2 FEBRUARY 2011

Barton jabbing a lit cigar into the eye of his tormentor. He was fined six weeks' wages, suspended for two weeks and, not surprisingly, denounced in the papers as a mindless thug.

In May 2005, Barton was again in the news, this time for breaking the leg of a pedestrian while driving through Liverpool at two o'clock in the morning. On the club's close-season tour of Thailand that summer, a combination of alcohol and a quick temper led to an exchange with a 15-year-old Everton fan in the hotel bar turning nasty. Barton ended up brawling with Richard Dunne, his club captain, who had been trying to pull him away. Dunne was left crying tears of frustration while Barton was sent home in disgrace, fined £120,000 for gross misconduct and ordered by the club chairman to seek professional help for anger management.

Wary of the tabloid press pack that would be waiting for him at the airport, Stuart Pearce, who was by then City's manager, agreed Barton should be sent on a less than direct route back to England. The elongated journey gave him plenty of time to think and, by the time he got back to his house, he was jet-lagged and filled with self-loathing. But if he thought that things couldn't get any worse, he hadn't figured on the phone call he was about to receive. It came from his younger brother Andrew and told of almost unimaginable horror.

JOEY BARTON was born in Huyton, a tough suburb on the eastern edge of Liverpool, in September 1982. His

father, Joey Snr, was a physically commanding man who was the life and soul of the party when he'd had a pint. He was also a decent footballer, although little of the extra 35 quid a week he earned playing as a striker for non-league Knowlsey United, Warrington Town and Northwich Victoria on a Saturday survived until Sunday morning. Joey Snr worked as a roofer and had married young, meeting Rita when they were both 19. Little Joey was born two weeks before his father turned 21, and his twin brothers, Michael and Andrew, arrived just under four years later.

Money was tight and discipline lax in the family's Thirties semi-detached on Boundary Road, although Joey Snr drew the line at visits from Rita's brothers who were known locally as being bad news. “It caused a split — a division — in the family,” Joey says now of one of his father's only ground rules. When the boys were very young, their uncle was murdered. In 2005, in an unconnected incident, an uncle on their mother's side was beaten unconscious and left in a pool of blood on a betting shop floor. Two years ago, two of his cousins, Kevin Corke and Carl Taylor, were jailed for stabbing a man to death.

Huyton was a tough, deprived area that was, and still is, beset by high unemployment, failing schools and depressing crime statistics. In 2007, it was named as one of Britain's 10 worst places to live, although Barton is adamant this had little to do with the mistakes he's made: “Some good people come from there. It's not an excuse for me to say, ‘Oh, I had it rough, I had it this, I had it that’. I never. The reality of it is I was fucking stupid. There are no two ways about it.”

Joey has likened the group of friends he hung out with as a “pack of stray dogs”. To them, he was known as “Danger Mouse”, mainly for his fearless attitude when it came to either jumping off a roof or crashing into a tackle on the football pitch. They played football wherever they could and Joey learned to stand up for himself, something his father was prepared to do when the situation > required. Indeed, one of Joey's abiding childhood memories is of coming home in tears after an older boy had taken one of his toys from

1



2

Fight club

1) Jamie Tandy, once an up-and-coming Manchester City player, after Barton stubbed out a cigar in his eye at a Christmas party in 2004. He suffered what his lawyers called "a major psychiatric deterioration", and was dropped by City six months later 2) Tandy, during his playing days, the year before 3) Barton, then 25, is captured on CCTV in Liverpool on 27 December 2007 in a brawl in which he punched a man 20 times and left a 16-year-old boy with broken teeth 4) Barton arrives at Trafford Magistrates Court on 9 August 2007. Later that day he would plead not guilty of attacking his former Manchester City team-mate Ousmane Dabo in a training ground fight 5) French midfielder Dabo with the injuries he sustained in the affray with Barton



3



5



4

Joey Barton

him. Joey Snr reached behind the fridge and handed his son a rounders bat with the instruction to sort it out for himself. On another occasion, when Joey had badly gashed his arm climbing over railings to retrieve a ball, his father insisted on removing the resulting 16 stitches himself.

Football was Joey Snr's passion — he'd buy his sons boots and take his eldest boy to sit in the Park End at Goodison Park. The game quickly became the most important thing in little Joey's life, and by the age of eight he was joining in training sessions with his father's teams. Despite his size, he went on to excel in the competitive junior leagues that had spawned such combative, singular midfielders as Peter Reid and, more recently, Steven Gerrard. Skilful, tenacious and preternaturally determined to give as good as he got, Joey Barton Jnr's performances for St

memories of lying on a bed, listening to The Smiths on Tom's stereo.

With this new stability and routine, not even the heartbreak of being released by the club he'd supported as a boy (the youth team was disbanded, plus his coaches worried his slight build would mean he'd struggle to make the grade) could derail Joey for long. Manchester City snapped him up, and he went on to pass 10 GCSEs. Back on the St John's Estate, Michael was struggling at school and getting into the sort of trouble that Joey's single-minded focus on football had helped him avoid. As time passed, Joey saw less of his mother and the twins, although he had fewer concerns about Andrew of whom he says, "always had his head screwed on."

Some years later, after he had established himself as a rising star in Kevin Keegan's Manchester City team, Joey was warned by a friend

discussion with his team-mate Sol Campbell and the club's goalkeeping coach, Andy "Woody" Woodman. This, it transpires, is one of their regular haunts for a spot of post-training lunch. Smaller than he looks on television and casually dressed in jeans and an Arcade Fire T-shirt, when he leans back and puts his hands behind his head, an angry scar reveals itself on the inside of Barton's right bicep: the legacy of those railings and his father's amateur suturing.

Campbell wears his now familiar expression of knowing detachment as the discussion centres on the morning's training session and last night's 1-0 defeat. Woody then recounts details from the team's recent bonding trip to Portugal, remarking that he was pleasantly surprised to observe how Barton was still able to enjoy himself and be a focal point for the party while remaining sober. Barton is obviously pleased by this and embarks on an articulate and frank assessment of where he's at in his life. One of the first things you learn about the new Joey Barton is that he doesn't need anyone to make excuses on his behalf. This is for the simple reason that he refuses to make any for himself. In these media-trained times of anodyne, monosyllabic post-match sound bites Barton's forthright opinions and willingness to swim against the tide have marked him out almost as much as his well-publicised falls from grace.

At Manchester City, he repaid the club's loyalty following his extensively documented infractions by explaining to the press why he felt he was worth a more lucrative contract. It hardly endeared him to the fans. Not long afterwards, Barton responded to a disappointing City defeat by suggesting that, as a fan, he wouldn't pay to watch the lack of effort displayed by some of his "sub-standard" team-mates. In 2006, after England's players had returned from a limp World Cup display in Germany, Barton questioned how certain senior players could bring themselves to cash in with autobiographies — quotes that required some explaining when he won his first and only call-up weeks later. As recently as two years ago, he remarked that most Premiership footballers were "knobs" and "so detached from real life it's untrue". His comments were broadcast on an episode of Radio 4's Today Programme guest produced by Tony Adams, the former Arsenal and England defender.

On this occasion, however, the

“By the age of eight he was joining in training with his father's teams”

Anne's Rovers (along with Whiston Juniors, one of the top clubs in the Huyton area) quickly brought him to the attention of Everton's scouts.

When he was 14 and still enrolled in Everton's Academy, Joey's parents split up. He went to live with his father, who moved in with his own mother, Julia, Joey's Nan, a mile or two up the road. His younger twin brothers stayed with Rita on the St John's Estate. His life improved in the more disciplined environment provided by his nan. They had always enjoyed a special bond and now, with his aunt and her husband living a couple of doors down, and his uncle Tom under the same roof, the boy was in a better place.

Tom was the youngest of his father's four siblings. In his mid-twenties at the time, he was unlike the others in his family: cool, mysterious and meticulous, especially when it came to clothes. Joey came to regard him as the big brother he'd never had, even more so after Joey Snr began a new relationship and moved out a few months later. Tom ignited his nephew's passion for music, and Joey has fond

that Michael was in danger of getting into trouble so deep that he might never come out. He offered his younger brother an escape route from the distractions of the estate, the same temptations that had led so many of his own childhood friends down the wrong path. Michael moved in with Joey for a while, but the pull of his old life proved too strong and his occasional forays back to St John's became more frequent.

IT IS the afternoon after the Fulham game, and the Joey Barton I meet in a fashionable delicatessen in Jesmond, an upmarket district of Newcastle, bears little resemblance to the drunken lout demonised in so many tabloid stories. Instead of clenched fists and features contorted in rage, I find a contented 28-year-old who is now being spoken of more in terms of a likely England call-up (he won his only previous cap coming on as a substitute in a 2007 friendly against Spain) than for his violent outbursts and appetite for self-destruction.

When I arrive, he is in animated

conversation meanders through less controversial territory: tales of how he used to bunk over the wall to watch the racing at Chester (at which point, he excuses himself in order to nip to the bookmaker's to see how one of his own horses has fared in a race in Dubai) and the flawed system for the development of young players within English professional football.

By the time Campbell gets up to say goodbye, it's dark outside. Woody follows not long afterwards, but Joey is only starting to warm to his task. We talk extensively about his family and his upbringing in Huyton and he tells me how proud he is of the man he's become. He celebrated last year's promotion to the Championship over a pot of tea with the Newcastle striker Alan Smith while all around them the room was being doused in champagne. "Smudge has never had a drink in his life," Barton says, shaking his head in wonder. "I figured that must have had something to do with a bad experience when he was younger, but it wasn't that at all. He's just never tried alcohol. I find that amazing."

ANDREW BARTON was phoning to tell Joey there had been a murder on the St John's Estate. Anthony Walker, a black student, had been found with a mountaineering axe in his head on an area of open ground known locally as the flower garden. He had been racially abused, chased and slaughtered. Andrew said that Michael, his twin brother, and Paul Taylor, a cousin on their mother's side, were the prime suspects, and the pair had vanished.

Over the next 24 hours, the phone rarely stopped ringing. Officials at Man City, not knowing what was going on, wanted Joey to apologise to his team-mates for his behavior in Thailand and seek help for his temper. Frantic conversations were also going on with Michael, who was asking for money. When Joey tried calling his brother the ringtone confirmed what the family suspected: he'd fled overseas. Joey went to the police. Two days later, he was on the news again, this time expressing his shock and sorrow at Walker's death and urging Michael to give himself up. His father's side of the family decamped to his house, but amid the anguish and recriminations Joey found he couldn't give vent to what he was feeling inside.

Barton tells me he has become fascinated with human behaviour: how character traits are formed and why behavioural patterns become



Family affairs

1) Anthony Walker, the 18-year-old who was murdered in 2005 2) Michael Barton, Joey's brother, was found guilty of Walker's murder along with cousin Paul Taylor 3) A Kent Police CCTV still showing Michael Barton and Taylor in Dover, fleeing the UK 4) Joey Barton's cousin Nadine Wilson and brother Andrew outside Liverpool Crown Court. They received suspended sentences for their part in an assault in 2007



ingrained. We pay up and go outside to his car. Back at his house, I stand in the generously appointed kitchen chatting to Georgia, his girlfriend, about the couple's two dogs while Joey sits in the hallway talking to Peter Kay, who set up the Sporting Chance Clinic with Tony Adams. Kay has become Barton's friend and mentor, equipping him with the tools to arrest what looked to be an inexorable slide into oblivion.

Over lunch, Joey had explained how he met Kay in that fateful week after his return from Thailand and the death of Anthony Walker. An alcoholic and former drug user turned counsellor, Kay had left two messages

on his mobile but Joey dismissed them. When they finally talked he said he had no interest in finding out what Sporting Chance had to offer, reckoning it to be a One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest-style retreat for wackos — people with problems he didn't have. Kay suggested he try a week at the clinic and, in the midst of his family's involvement in a high-profile murder and the disgrace of his expulsion from the squad, a temporary sanctuary suddenly looked like the best option open to him.

"I didn't want to go," Barton readily admits. Initially, he says, he kept himself to himself, looking down his nose at the other residents of Crouch House, the clinic's HQ in Hampshire. Gradually, though, as he attended group sessions, he began to see how his own issues related to those of the people around him. His week-long residency at Sporting Chance ended with a trip to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at World's End in Chelsea.

At first, Joey protested about going inside but a gut instinct changed his mind. He sat at the back and listened, and the penny dropped. "I came out with that same nervous excitement in my stomach that I feel before a game," he recalls. "Afterwards, in the car on the way to the airport, I turned to Peter and said, 'Do you think I'm an alcoholic?' He said to me, 'Only you can answer that question.'"

It was shortly after this that I first met Joey Barton. Sporting Chance had arranged a fund-raising fishing event that saw well-known football figures

standing around two small man-made ponds on a grey day in the north. Peter Kay arrived with Barton, looking chastened, in tow. I recall Tony Adams' all-white ensemble being uniquely unsuited to the requirements of match angling, and Joey Barton's readiness to talk.

In November 2005, Michael Barton and his cousin Paul Taylor were sentenced to 17 years and 23 years respectively for Britain's most notorious racist murder since Stephen Lawrence was stabbed at a bus stop in 1993. On the night the judge handed down his verdict, Joey Barton attended a fund-raising event for

autistic children.

IN MARCH 2007, Barton was arrested on suspicion of assault and criminal damage in an incident involving a taxi driver, which he denied and was later cleared of. While still on bail, a training ground flare-up with his team-mate Ousmane Dabo resulted in the French midfielder slapping Barton and being punched to the floor, rendered unconscious and hospitalised. Barton was suspended for the rest of the season. That summer, he transferred to Newcastle United for £5.8m.

In August, he appeared in court to answer a charge of assault on Dabo before hitting rock bottom in the early hours of 27 December on a pedestrianised shopping street in Liverpool city centre. And rock bottom was not the only thing he hit, as the shocking CCTV footage attests. After consuming 10 pints and five bottles of lager, Barton got into an argument with a youth outside a McDonalds, and landed more than 20 unanswered punches before turning on a bystander, breaking his teeth.

He was arrested and remanded in custody. “When I woke up in the cell I was thinking, ‘What the fuck’s gone on?’ I had a grasp of what had happened but I was still hazy. I was like, ‘What set me off there?’ I was feeling like shit because I was hungover and can remember thinking, ‘What am I going to say to the gaffer?’ Bit-by-bit it’s come back to me. They showed me the CCTV and I was looking at it thinking, ‘I don’t even remember doing that.’ To tell you the truth, it put the fear of God into me; it was almost like an out-of-body experience. I was aware something had gone on but I wasn’t in control. I could have fucking killed him.”

Binge drinking had become his pressure valve. “I never experimented with drugs because it would have finished my football career. Alcohol was a legal drug. I’d get out of my brain and think I was invisible. I thought I was getting away with stuff and no one could see me, but I would be ending up in stupid situations at stupid o’clock in the morning. Nine times out of 10 I would be OK, but on the odd times trouble would find me, or I’d find trouble. I would get into trouble, stop drinking for a bit and then the pressure would build up and I’d go back to drinking. I was an all-or-nothing drinker. I could leave it for six months but when I had a drink I would drink to oblivion. I was doing

the same thing time and time again but expecting a different result every time. It was basically insane.”

I ask him what was making him so unhappy, triggering this destructive cycle. “I think it was my struggle with perfection,” he replies. “Nothing was ever good enough. I’d try setting new goals but the slog, the never being content, was basically consuming me. Football is such a fickle game; one minute, people are saying you’re brilliant and the next minute they tell you you’re shit. It’s not a normal environment; it gets you down. Inside the game you see people who really struggle with it. It consumes them, which is why I think so many ex-pros are so bitter and twisted. I had a phase where I didn’t want to know anyone,

“It was like an out-of-body experience... I wasn’t in control”

I didn’t want to be anyone’s friend. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to do this on my own — me against the world. Now I’m like, ‘What the fuck was I thinking?’ I just went into myself. It suited me, I knew I could respond to it and if anyone said anything I could go, ‘Fuck you, I’ll do it my way.’ My vulnerability shut me down a bit.”

The six days Barton spent on remand provided a stark reality check, although the following seven months proved to be the hardest of his life. He now describes the period as being the culmination of six years of increasing disillusionment. When he came off remand, he went straight back to playing in the Premier League. At first he struggled for form but managed to play on to the end of the season. “Most of the lads were talking about where they were going on holidays. I knew I was going to jail — my lawyer told me there was no two ways about it, plus the media were demanding it. What I didn’t know was how long for.”

In May 2006, he found out: he received a six-month sentence after pleading guilty to common assault and affray. The first month was spent in Liverpool’s Walton Prison, surrounded by familiar faces: “I knew a lot of people in there — friends of friends, or people

I knew from school.” He says it made the transition easier — “That and the fact I never went in with a big attitude, like, ‘Fucking hell, I play football so I shouldn’t be in here with you.’”

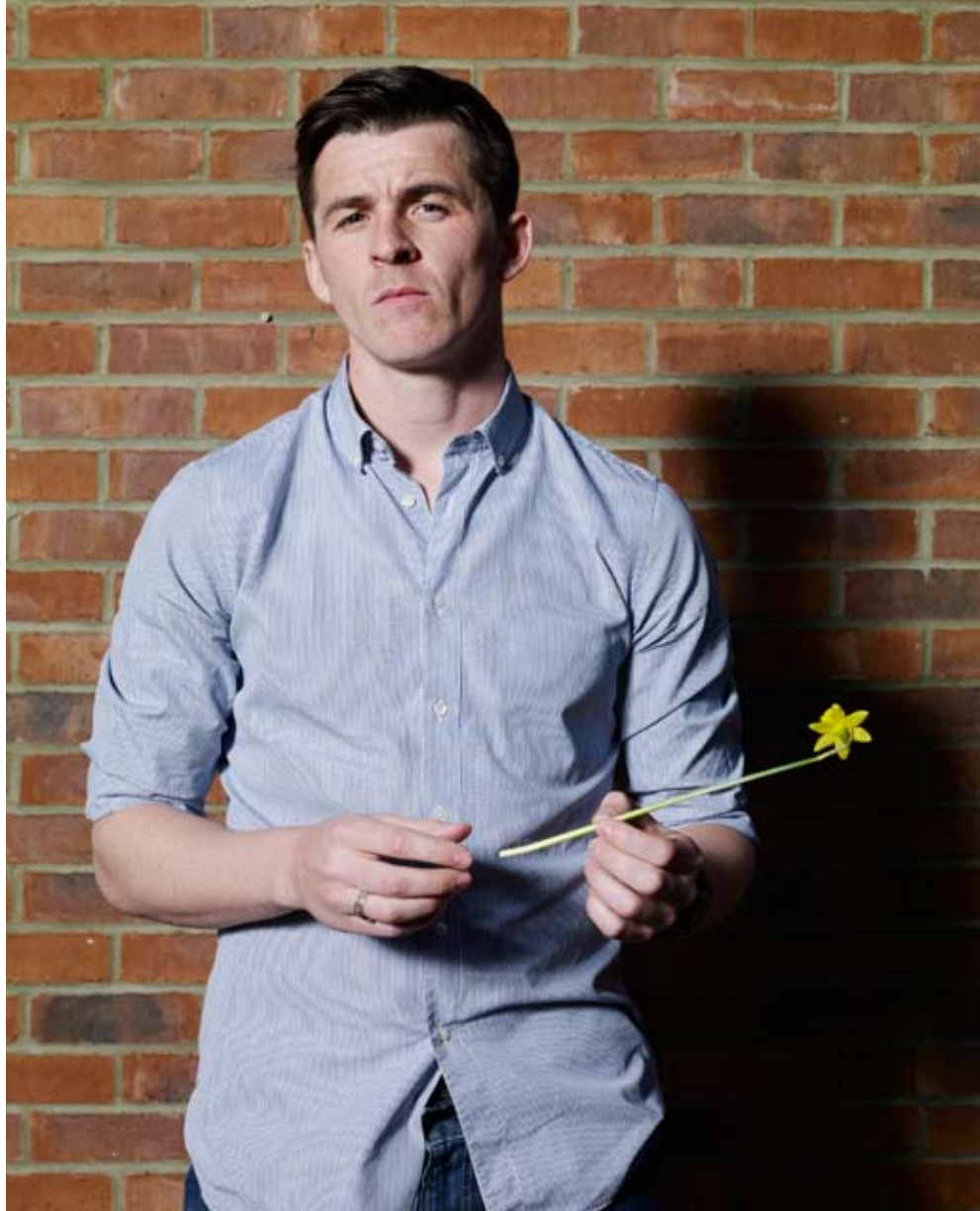
As a millionaire Premiership footballer with a big reputation, he was nevertheless an obvious target. “It happened,” he confirms, “but no one really got in my face. People test you, that’s human nature. When a new kid comes into school people test them, and obviously I was in that sort of environment. If I’d had to, I would have defended myself, but it never came to that. The reality was when people met me they were like, ‘Actually, he’s an alright lad who’s fucked up like the rest of us.’”

Barton likens the experience to

“looking into a void”. For the first few days in jail he wrestled with whether to return to football when he got out. “I sat there and thought, ‘I’ve had enough. I don’t need this shit any more.’” He even contemplated a new life abroad where nobody knew him, but thought better of it: “That’s the coward’s way; once you start running you never stop. You’ve got to lift your head up and face up to what you’ve done.”

Against all odds, his attitude changed. “The way I was looking at it was, for some reason I’m here. This is my path and whatever decisions I’ve made in my life I have to take the most out of this.” He attended AA meetings and was transferred to Strangeways in Manchester, during which time he received a four-month suspended sentence for the assault on Dabo. More significantly, he realised he was not down and out after all. “Some people had nothing at all. When you talked to them they were either heroin addicts or had nobody come visit them in years.”

Barton was released after 74 days. Kevin Keegan, the manager he’d endured a rocky relationship with at Manchester City, offered him a fresh start with Newcastle. He was booed loudly when he made his first appearance, as a substitute away to



Arsenal. The FA greeted his return with a 12-match ban, with six matches suspended, for the assault on Dabo.

JOEY BARTON has not had a drink since the early hours of 27 December 2007. He is also very different to the bloke you might think he is. He says he is learning to deal with his own perfectionism and trying to master the art of avoiding confrontation — or at least ensuring it doesn't escalate. That said, he's still prone to blowing a gasket from time to time — like the dressing room tirade at caretaker manager Alan Shearer after he was sent off against Liverpool in Newcastle's doomed relegation fight in 2009. Or the instinctive punch to Morten Gamst Pederson's chest last November.

Having played a part in Newcastle's return to the top flight, Barton has been the club's outstanding player this season. He tries to operate within a narrower emotional range, something which has made him a happier person and a more effective footballer."

Against Arsenal he sparked the fight-back that earned Newcastle a draw from being four goals down, first by staying cool when Abou Diaby grabbed him by the throat, then by scoring twice from the spot once the opposition were reduced to 10 men.

For all the changes he's made in his life, he remains refreshingly incapable of ducking difficult questions. I ask him when he last let anger slip into rage. He rubs his jaw and thinks for a moment. "It's been a long, long time. I'd say it was the Dabo incident. I threw three punches; the first was self-defence because he struck me first. The other two were rage because I carried on hitting him. Where I'm from, there are no rules in a fight. If I raise my hand to hit you and you hit me back that's par for the course. What I know now is the most powerful thing to do is walk away. Then, you take away all their energy."

Joey admits to feeling resentment towards his parents for a while, but by understanding himself he has come to a better understanding of them,

particularly his father. "He was more like a mate than a dad. He never taught me how to be a man; he never gave me the tools. I only realised later it's like a line of dominoes. My grandad was never taught to express his emotions, other than not to show any sign of weakness, and that was passed down to my dad. Only now do I know I can stop this domino effect. Everyone's walking one way but I've got the chance to say, 'Stop, let's walk the other way.' That's where I'm at now." He has talked about this a lot with Andrew, who he remains close to and says is doing well. His nan remains the most important female influence in his life, while Tom is still the arbiter of musical taste, even if they agree to disagree over Vampire Weekend. He doesn't see his mother much, and hasn't seen Michael in two years.

"We'd all love to go back and make things a bit better," he admits when I ask him if he has any regrets. "But the fact is I can't. Obviously I have got my regrets, but to say I regret some of it would detract from who I am today. The man sitting in front of you is trying to be as honest as he can. I look back now to the lad who went in jail and I think, 'How the fuck did I get from there to here?' If you said this is what you'll be doing in three years' time, I'd have said you were insane."

He now avoids the type of scenarios that have resulted in him being a target for the boo boys and the tabloid press, not to mention being denied entry to a Vampire Weekend concert in Liverpool because the venue said they were not insured against him causing trouble. (He is now friendly with the band and their manager, who has since taken a keen interest in him.) Although he would rather not be a poster boy for bad behaviour, he says he is grateful to the media for publicly underlining the error of his ways.

That Barton is a different man today stems from one key decision: to stop drinking. It was a decision he says was taken for no other reason than his legacy. "Not as a footballer but as a person," he adds by way of qualification. "I want to be a good role model and, one day, a good father to my children. Being a man is not just about standing up for yourself and saying, 'I'm a fucking man.' Being a man is how you deal with things; how you give your kids the tools that I've now got without them making the mistakes I made. Obviously they'll fuck up, but that's human nature." ❧

ON THE UP:
NOW TEE-TOTAL
JOEY BARTON
HOPES HE HAS PUT
HIS TURBULENT
DAYS BEHIND HIM