

Just happy to be home

One of football's great showmen has no regrets rejecting Old Trafford

By Stanley Ho

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HE WILL forever be remembered as one of England's premier football entertainers. Alongside the likes of George Best, Frank Worthington, Rodney Marsh and Paul Gascoigne, former England and Southampton forward Matthew Le Tissier is billed as one of the most exciting players ever seen in the English game.

In fact, he's in a BBC video with all the previously mentioned names called "The Entertainers".

At his peak, Le Tissier was one of those who'd put "bums on seats", as they say. Fans would pay to watch his breathtaking technical ability, intoxicating dribbling skills and wondrous goals.

The Saints' fans almost thought he could walk on water. Since his debut in 1986, Le Tissier chalked up 541 appearances and 210 goals in a 14-year career that ended last year at the age of 33.

The enigma spent his entire playing career with the saints, first at the Dell, and later, at the club's current new home – St Mary's Stadium.

As his reputation grew, Le Tissier was frequently linked to bigger and more famous clubs like Tottenham, Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United. But the player remained loyal to the Saints, so much that critics labelled him as lacking in ambition.

"That's not correct," Le Tissier told TODAY in a telephone interview yesterday. "I've been capped eight times by my country. I could have won more caps if Gazza did not stand in my way."

"But seriously, I was happy where I was and that's more important than anything else. I enjoyed my football at Southampton, and no one can say it would have been the same if I had moved somewhere else."

But what about missing out on potentially an even more glittering career with more England caps and medals under his belt?

"I have no regrets," he insisted. "Yes, the big clubs were interested, but I had no reason to move away from Southampton. I was enjoying my football, playing in the best soccer league in the world, against some of the best players. Why should I have moved?"

"When I was an eight-year-old kid, my ambition was to play for Southampton and England. I accomplished both and I am proud of it. I am a Southampton lad through and through. This is where I was born and I still live here. This is my home. I never found a need to go away."

Even after hanging up his boots last year, Le Tissier is still actively involved with the club, helping out at the hospitality lounge during match days.



He spends his free time as a television pundit and playing golf, and is currently working on bringing his golf handicap down from five to scratch.

The former England man will get his chance to show off his golfing skills in Singapore, at the Caltex Cup Celebrity Challenge at the Laguna National Golf and Country Club from Jan 18-19.

Along with Le Tissier, former England striker David Hirst, ex-Philippines President Fidel Ramos, Australia's Olympic pole vaulter Tatiana Grigorieva and legendary Kenyan marathon champion Kip Keino will tee off for charity.

"I'm delighted to be able to play in Singapore," said Le Tissier. "This is great opportunity to work for charity and have some fun on the greens."

The Saints legend is over the moon at the team's current run in the Premiership. Southampton is one of the two teams – alongside Middlesbrough – unbeaten so far in the Premiership at home and it lies in fifth spot in the standings.

Said Le Tissier: "The manager, Gordon Strachan, has got the team physically stronger than any other Southampton team in my memory. They are one of the fittest teams in the Premiership, which coupled with the superb form of James Beattie helps to bring in good results."

Does he think Beattie should be given a chance with England?

"If a player is in good form, you've got to give him a chance," he said. "In my opinion, Beattie is the most in-form English striker right now."

Article featured in TODAY, January 15, 2003