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COVER



Strike it lucky

England football legend Gary Lineker reveals his tricky transition from playing to presenting, and why he's envious of the modern game

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A SAN ENGLISH person, meeting Gary Lineker in the flesh may prove an oddly familiar experience.

The 53-year-old is arguably his homeland's best-known footballing face. Following a stellar career – in which he scored 48 goals for England (second only to Sir Bobby Charlton) and played for clubs including Barcelona and Tottenham Hotspur – Lineker hung up his boots in 1994.

Five years later, he began presenting BBC One's flagship Saturday night football show *Match of the Day* – where he continues to reach millions of British homes on a weekly basis.

"I always say I was born to be in the box, not on the box," says Lineker, sat in the JW Marriott Marquis Dubai hotel last week during a brief promotional visit with British Airways.

"Whereas football came naturally, TV was a lot more alien to me when I first started. I always wanted to try to crack the presenting side

because I thought there was a niche there, and perhaps some longevity."

However, he admits his transition from the pitch to the studio proved a "steep learning curve".

"There were times in the first couple of years when I'd go home after presenting (BBC One's Saturday lunch-time show) *Football Focus*, when it went a bit wrong and I got lost, and I thought, 'I just can't do it,'" he concedes.

But Lineker ploughed on, gradually growing in confidence while also becoming renowned for his amiable and self-deprecating style.

"It took a while," recalls the father-of-four. "Eventually you become comfortable in the environment, then you become yourself, and then people decide whether they like you or not."

THE CHANGING FACE OF FOOTBALL

The Premier League today is a far different proposition to the English top-flight in which Lineker plied his trade for seven seasons in total, beginning with his hometown club Leicester City in



Gary Lineker scores against Paraguay at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, where he won the Golden Boot award for his six-goal haul

the early 1980s.
“Diet-wise, we didn’t have a clue in the early days,” he says. “And in terms of fitness, we were told when as youngsters not to do any upper body strengthening at all because we’d ruin our movement.”
“Absolute nonsense! Every

player now is ripped – but in our days it was all bottom-heavy, so you’d see lots of players with big chunky thighs but really puny bodies.”
Another drastic improvement has come in the quality of the pitches.
“If there’s one thing I feel a

bit envious of in the modern day, it’s not really the money, it’s the playing surfaces,” he says. “We’d play on a decent pitch till maybe October, then it would get muddy and horrible, then frosty and hard, then in March it dried up and got all bumpy and bobbly.

“Nowadays, they’re pure pretty much universally all year round. So if someone knocks a ball in, you can actually trust you’re going to get it without it bouncing all over the place.”

While the Premier League remains a juggernaut force in world football, the same can’t be said of Leicester City. Promoted to the top flight after winning last season’s Championship, the team have struggled to compete and currently languish in the relegation zone.

Asked whether he thinks Leicester will avoid the drop, the response is uncertain.

“I’m not overly confident,” replies Lineker, who has a road named after him near the club’s Filbert Street stadium and is an honorary vice-president thanks to his support over the years.

“They started so well (including a 5-3 victory over Manchester United in September), but I think a lot of teams underestimate the gulf between the Championship and the Premier League – both financially and in terms of players.

“Leicester have played a little naively at times, but we

shall see. I think all fans are a bit pessimistic when it comes to their team.”

In terms of the new batch of former players trying their hand at punditry, Lineker professes himself a fan of Manchester United and England legend Gary Neville (“excellent”) and ex-Fulham captain Danny Murphy (“he’s going to be really good”).

When pressed about the polarising figure of Robbie

Savage – who segued from a career as a controversial midfielder to one as a controversial BBC pundit – Lineker defends his colleague.

“Robbie is very opinionated. He wasn’t necessarily of the stature of a lot of the ex-players we have, like Alan Shearer, but he’s very enthusiastic and he will completely say what he thinks. It’s actually quite hard to do that if you’ve been in the game.”

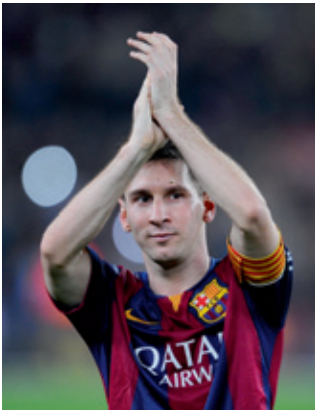


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Gary Lineker



Lineker and wife Danielle Bux, whom he married in 2009



Lineker on the Messi vs. Ronaldo rivalry:

“Ronaldo is probably marginally more selfish than Messi – who creates a lot more – but he’s brilliant in the air, he’s quick, he’s unbelievably skilful and he scores a multitude of goals. The numbers that the pair of them are putting up at the moment are beyond comprehension.

“To be perfectly honest, I think we’re blessed to be in a time where we can see quite possibly the two best players that have ever lived. They’re both incredible talents.”