

## Milan Baroš - Největší číslo 5

The year is 2002 and I'm just finding my feet as an avid football supporter. I've packed away (most) of my wrestling figures and replaced them with football stickers and magazines. A quick flip through the latest edition of MATCH! Mag exhibits the world's most talented footballers and posters to suit. Ruud, Henry, Beattie. They had them all but none of those immensely talented men captured my heart like Milan Baros. I'm not sure what drew me to him originally. Maybe it was Milan's beautiful Czech barnet, maybe it was his appetite for a tap-in or maybe it was that he outrageously wore the number 5 shirt outside of the back four. A culmination of all these things perhaps but I loved him and even now I remember my will and desire for him to do well and succeed at the club I loved. I was a Milan Baros hype man and proud of it.

2002 was hardly the golden age of Liverpool strikers. The team, on the whole, felt like it was a decade away from any major trophy and the squad list showed that. Remember that time Alan Hansen said you can't we anything with kids? Well, you definitely can't win anything with Chris Kirkland and Ritchie Partridge. We were crying out for another Fowler, another Rush. We had Owen, but he had chocolate hamstrings. We had Diouf, but he had issues with keeping his saliva inside of his mouth. We needed a striker. We needed a poster boy. We needed a man the whole city could get behind. We needed Milan.

Milan hit the ground running. A brace on his debut had Liverpool fans singing his praises. I remember watching The Premiership and seeing Robbie Earle analyse Milan's movement and touches and thinking this is it, we've got a world beater. An average season in an average team followed for Milan before an injury-plagued the season after. It takes a certain man to bounce back from a suspected broken ankle away at Blackburn Rovers but with Milan, there was no doubt. Boy, did he bounce back. He bounced back all the way into Euro 2004.

The world cup was two years behind us and major tournament euphoria had gripped the nation once more. The image of Ronaldinho lobbing Seaman served only as a memory to push us forward and we thought this year, much like every year before and after, was our year. In a Porto hotel room, surrounded by the finest footballers the Czech Republic had to offer, there was someone having the same conversation with himself. Having been drawn into the perceived group of death but Milan saw it as the group of opportunity. Opportunity to show the world what he can do. Opportunity to get a few

more quid out of Liverpool. Opportunity to write his name in folklore on the Euro 2004 Wikipedia page.

He began the tournament as he intended to progress throughout; with goals. Equalisers against Latvia and the Netherlands set up an affair against tournament favourites, Germany. Germany needed a win. Milan needed more goals. With 10 minutes to go, Milan accidentally played a perfect one-two with German goalkeeper Oliver Kahn and inflicted a tournament-ending defeat to Die Mannschaft. 2 goals in as many minutes against Denmark sent this exciting Czech team into the semis where they came up against a beast too strong even for Milan to tame, the 'boring' and eventual tournament winning Greece team of Euro 2004.

Ask anyone their resounding memory of that tournament and they may say Darius Vassell missing the all-important penalty in a cruel defeat to Portugal or maybe they'll say Angelos Charisteas' winner in the final but for me, it's my Milan bagging the golden boot outscoring the likes of Zinedine Zidane, Henrik Larsson and Jesper Gronkjaer. A whopping 6.5% of the entire tournament's goals came from our Milan. The stats don't lie.

Milan bounced back to Merseyside as the king of the Czech Republic which perhaps didn't carry as much weight as he had hoped. With Owen and Heskey gone and Liverpool's record signing Djibril Cisse out with a broken leg, Milan's chance to shine was upon him. Imagine my surprise when he was outshone by an ageing Fernando Morientes. Sometime's football makes little sense. What followed was a forgettable season in an unforgettable year for Liverpool as they went on the lift to European cup in the most dramatic fashion. Amid the celebrations, Milan found a way back into the spotlight by dropping Big Ears causing a large, very recognisable dent someone later described as "adding character". I think in a way that is a perfect metaphor for Milan's short career at Liverpool.

He left Liverpool shortly after and had a brief spell at Lyon where he was dubbed the fastest man in France. Nothing to do with his pace on the ball but for travelling 168 mph in an 81 mph zone. That was our Milan, always at 100% or in this case, almost 200%. He eventually returned to his homeland where he still plays to this day. With recent clubs that sound more like an independent financial consortium than football teams, I assume he's found happiness. Milan was one of my first football loves and those are always the hardest to forget. Sure my heart has longed for others but never with the passion and will to succeed I felt for Milan. He was Milan Baros, the greatest number 5.