

How United star tired of girls, glitz and glamour to become a Catholic priest

Philip Mulryne is a former Fergie fledgling who realised his life had greater purpose. He tells Alan Smith how he found contentment through religion

Philip Mulryne felt vacant, the pleasure derived from playing football anaesthetised by his hollow existence off the pitch. Having broken into Manchester United's first-team squad before forging a successful career with Norwich City and Northern Ireland, the midfielder reached his late 20s with a dissatisfaction that he could not displace. "I had no sense of fulfilment or contentment," he says. "I was empty inside."

Then, out of nowhere, his calling arrived. In 2009, unable to overcome a series of niggling injuries, Mulryne decided to take a year out, returning to west Belfast with the intention of finding a new club a season later. After that he had an eye on coaching...until his path dramatically altered course.

He had grown up in a "normal Catholic family", going to mass on Sunday and praying before bed, but drifted away from his faith when he joined United's academy at 14 years old. When he arrived home for that extended break, though, there was a "stirring feeling" that could not be suppressed. Priesthood beckoned. "It was a calling, not that I heard a voice in my head or anything," he says. "It came from nowhere, which is how I knew it was authentic in that it wasn't something coming from me."

Eight years later the recently ordained Mulryne is chaplain of Newbridge College, a school 40 minutes southwest of Dublin best known for a rugby team that has produced several players to represent the national team, including Jamie Heaslip. We meet on the school grounds, students greeting Father Philip as they shuffle to their next classes. "They think, 'How could you do that?'" Mulryne, now 39, says. "Not just becoming a priest but leaving behind that world and lifestyle."

It was that way of living, however, that led to him rekindling his faith. There had been issues: his Northern Ireland career ended in 2005 after he broke a curfew by drinking with his team-mate Jeff Whitley; there was excessive spending; and he trod the well-worn path of dating a glamour model. On the checklist of footballers' discrepancies they barely register but, amalgamated, made for an unhappy existence.

"I didn't like the trappings of being a footballer — the money, the nightclubs and the attention of women," he says. "While that was fine for a while, when I got to my late 20s I started to feel really dissatisfied. I loved the game, loved the training. The lifestyle was bringing me pleasure but nothing lasting. I was buying three or four cars a year because I was getting bored and always wanting more. It was the same with clothes and houses."

"I started asking myself, 'Why am I doing this?' And, basically, the answer

was that nothing was ever enough. I was constantly restless, born out of the fact that I thought this way of life was meant to make me happy. I found later on that I was empty inside and that led me to a process of asking some deeper questions about life and what makes me happy — "What am I missing?"

That void began to be filled after a trip to his local church with his family before, a couple of months later, he felt compelled to commit to something far greater than he could ever have imagined. He decided to enrol in the Dominican Order having researched their way of life after an invitation from the Bishop of Down and Connor, the Most Reverend Noel Treanor, who had recognised Mulryne's volunteer work at a homeless shelter, to join the priesthood in 2009.

He is now "halfway between a monk and a parish priest", praying five times a day and teaching religion at a school with more than 800 students. There are similarities between the regimented lifestyle of a priest and being a footballer, not least having a superior who decides where he works.

Before being ordained Mulryne declared bankruptcy, leading to dramatic headlines that were unfairly spun, considering it is a prerequisite of being a Dominican to live in poverty. "One of the characteristics of Dominicans is that we are free to move," he explains. "That's why we take vows of celibacy and poverty, which means we don't own anything or have anything to keep us in one place. There is also a need for obedience because we have a superior who can send us to India or Iran tomorrow, where we have missions. There's great spontaneity and I love that."

Mulryne had prayed occasionally when he joined United but, focused on fulfilling his childhood dream, it was no longer habitual. Three clubs had offered him a trial after he impressed at the 1992 Milk Cup (a youth tournament in Northern Ireland, now the Super Cup NI), however his decision was instant. "I grew up as a United fan, pictures of players plastered across my bedroom wall," he says. "My dad played a bit at home and he always spoke about George Best."

Southampton and Liverpool did not stand a chance.

At the end of his five-day trial he lined up outside Sir Alex Ferguson's office with his fellow hopefuls, a collection of teenagers learning one by one who would be offered an apprenticeship and who would be heading home. Mulryne can recall his heart pounding as he entered Ferguson's room at The Cliff, the club's old training ground.

"He was brilliant — telling me how well I had done, asking me about my background and at the end of our conversation he told me he wanted to offer me a two-year apprentice contract. It was the most unbelievable feeling ever." Arriving at The Cliff when United's vaunted youth system, under the guidance of Eric Harrison, was beginning to bear fruit made it a daunting experience, especially for a shy, working-class boy from west

Belfast. "That environment took a while to adjust to," Mulryne says. "When you saw the younger guys from London, they had an air of confidence. It took me a while to grow into it but eventually, after the first year when I was very homesick, I thought that I belonged there."

Despite a fear of going back to Belfast "as a failure", his development continued apace and Mulryne played a key role in the side that won the 1995 FA Youth Cup. He continued to prosper, performing well in the reserves and increasingly being called up to train with Ferguson's senior squad.

His first-team debut arrived in a League Cup defeat away to Ipswich Town in October 1997, but the highlight at United came in the first pre-season game of the Treble-winning season. David Beckham took an extended break because of the furor surrounding his infamous red card in the World Cup against Argentina, giving Mulryne the opportunity to start on the right of midfield away to Birmingham City. "We were beaten 4-3 but I scored a hat-trick and it was unbelievable," he recalls. "Then, when Beckham came back in, I was back on the bench."

'The lifestyle was bringing me pleasure but nothing lasting. I was buying three or four cars a year because I was bored and always wanting more'

That high also signalled the beginning of the end. In March 1999, with the realisation setting in that a regular first-team role was increasingly out of reach, Norwich put in a bid of £500,000. Mulryne had no hesitation.

"I was 20 but every week I was waiting to see if I was in the squad and then seeing if I had made the bench," he says. "I wanted to play every week. It was quite straightforward really — I made the decision and it was a great one because I loved my six years at Norwich."

He won promotion from the Championship and became a cult hero at Carrow Road before joining Cardiff City. There were also 27 international caps and a debut goal against Belgium, although his time with Northern Ireland ended in acrimony when Lawrie Sanchez, the manager, told him to leave the squad after breaking a curfew before World Cup qualifiers against Azerbaijan and England in September 2005.

Mulryne was flying to Belfast with Whitley, his Cardiff club-mate, who has since spoken of his battle with alcohol and drug addiction. Their plane was delayed and they were going to miss training, so a few pints were sunk at the airport before one thing led to another and a night out ensued when they finally reached Belfast. "They had to be punished," an irascible Sanchez said at the time. "There was no other option."

"There is a sense of regret that I didn't fulfil my potential," Mulryne says. "Maybe off the pitch I wasn't as dedicated as I possibly should have been." Yet his playing career was, on the whole, an "unbelievable privilege".

Some former team-mates, the majority of whom were disbelieving when they heard he was entering the Church, are still in contact, among them Malky Mackay and Craig Bellamy. His love of the game remains but he finds little time to watch matches, although he is taking a group of students to Old Trafford on Saturday for the visit of Newcastle United.

He tracks Norwich's results and is always willing to show off his touch — "you never lose



Mulryne, whose career started at United, left, has enjoyed the "self-discovery" he has undergone since joining the priesthood

it" — when coaching the school team. Telling students about his career is also an effective way to capture their drifting attentions, but he has moved on and is excited about his future, helping and educating.

"They'll ask me about what it takes to be a footballer and a lot of the things translate into the spiritual life," he says. "You need to discipline yourself. I talk to them about what it takes, my experience at United, nutrition, what was expected of you, looking after your body. I use my time as a footballer but I'm not using it to force spirituality on them."

Young footballers should also be educated better, he feels, especially when it comes to preparing them for later life. "I remember always being envious of players who were well read, educated footballers like Eric Cantona, who had depth to their conversation," he says. "Football lasts until you're 35 at best and for the

rest of your life, what are you going to do? I remember people coming into the training ground and giving talks on what to do afterwards. But we were dismissive of it. We thought we were invincible. Players need to start thinking about what comes after and start preparing for it in their mid-20s."

It was not until his epiphany that he escaped his identity issue. "The last seven years have been amazing because of the self-discovery of who I am and that I am more than a footballer. I don't think that's why I was created and brought into this world — it was a gift I was given for a time, but I've no doubt it's something that the Lord wanted me to use to bring to young people," he says.

"My life as a footballer had a purpose, but I'm a believer in the idea of having a body and the soul. I used my body to play football, my soul has led to this calling."

Live Premier League matches go head-to-head with Strictly

Martyn Ziegler Chief Sports Reporter

Premier League matches will be shown at prime time on Saturday nights after club chairmen agreed to include the new slot in the next broadcasting deal.

A meeting of the top-flight clubs in London yesterday gave the go-ahead for the move, which means matches will go head-to-head with popular shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The X Factor* as part of an increase in the number of live games.

The *Times* had previously revealed the league's plan for 7.45pm kick-offs on Saturdays, with the number of live TV games increasing from 168 to a maximum of 210. The new deal comes into force at the start of the 2019-20 season.

At the meeting, the clubs mandated Premier League executives to decide whether to take packages of 190, 200 or 210 matches to market when the tender for domestic rights from 2019 until 2022 is issued before the end of this year.

The Premier League has guaranteed to Ofcom, the communications regulator, that at least half of the 380 games will be available for live broadcast. It has also promised supporters' groups it will protect Saturday kick-offs at 3pm.

An increase to 210 matches could be achieved by the new Saturday-night slot — a package on its own of 28 games — with an extra 14 midweek or bank holiday fixtures, while some matches could be screened simultaneously.

The next rights deal is expected to be agreed by February with BT Sport, who are particularly keen on the Saturday-



Klopp out of hospital and straight back to work

Jürgen Klopp took charge of Liverpool training yesterday after he had been admitted to hospital on Wednesday. The 50-year-old was back preparing his side before tomorrow's Premier League match at home to Southampton.

night slot, and Sky thought to be the main bidders. Interest from Amazon or Facebook would increase competition but they are not expected to bid for more than a single package of domestic rights.

Club chairmen were told at the meeting that there was a confident expectation that the value of the existing deal,

£5.1 billion over three years, would be matched or exceeded for the next one.

More growth is expected in the sales of overseas TV rights, a situation that led to the "big six" — Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Tottenham and the two Manchester clubs — last month failing in their attempt to secure a greater share of that income.

Arsenal seek transfer negotiator

Paul Joyce, Jon West, Gary Jacob

Arsenal are set to recruit Sven Mislintat, Borussia Dortmund's highly regarded chief scout.

Discussions with Mislintat, who is credited with helping to bring Robert Lewandowski, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Ousmane Dembélé to the Bundesliga side, have already taken place. It is unlikely that he would move to the Emirates until next season, but it is understood that he is keen to work in England.

Dick Law, Arsenal's transfer guru, is no longer working full-time for the club after his contract officially expired in September, while the future of Steve Rowley, their chief scout, is uncertain.

Mislintat, 45, has previously been targeted by Chelsea, having once been assistant coach to José Morais — formerly a member of José Mourinho's backroom staff — at Westfalia Herne. Toby Alderweireld will not be back in

action for Tottenham Hotspur until after Christmas, but Harry Kane, Dele Alli, Hugo Lloris and Harry Winks are all set to be passed fit for tomorrow's derby with Arsenal.

Tottenham had not expected such a lay-off when a hamstring problem forced Alderweireld off after just 24 minutes against Real Madrid on November 1. "We need to assess him but we expect him to be out longer than we thought when it happened," Mauricio Pochettino said. "Maybe he will be back after Christmas. That's the expectation — but it may be longer."

Arsene Wenger, who has won 17 trophies as Arsenal manager, warned Pochettino that winning his first title would not be easy. "I don't know [how far from a trophy Pochettino is] and honestly it is not my main worry," Wenger said. "It is up to us to get over the line and win trophies and it is not easy. It is difficult in the game to win trophies. It is a quality, patience."

'Throat-slitting' at Fifa trial

The Fifa corruption trial took a sinister twist after a defendant was accused of making a throat-slashing gesture to a witness.

Prosecutors claimed that Manuel Burga, a former head of the Peru FA, twice motioned across his neck while staring at Alejandro Burzaco, a former sports marketing executive.

Burzaco had told the court of a corrupt TV deal finalised in London in 2013 involving Burga, José Maria Marin, the former Brazil FA chief, and Juan Angel Napout, the former Fifa vice-president. They have pleaded not guilty to using bribes to secure broadcasting rights. The US judge Pamela Chen said it "might have been an effort to intimidate". The defence said Burga was scratching his throat.

Clement to meet owners

Paul Clement will meet Swansea City's American owners this weekend as speculation mounts over his future.

The club, who are 19th in the league, do not want to make a change after employing four permanent or caretaker managers last season, but they may be forced to consider their options if poor results continue. "I am in regular contact with Steve [Kaplan] and Jason [Levien, the owners]," Clement said. "That has been the case ever since I have been at the club."

"When we meet and when we talk on the telephone, we discuss a wide range of issues. Win, lose or draw, whether we play well or badly, we always have a conversation every week."

CONTINUED FROM BACK

New Chelsea stadium to cost £1bn

by decorations to create a structure intended to resemble a temple. Demolition work on part of the existing site, starting with the Millennium & Copthorne hotels, is scheduled to begin in the third quarter of next year.

Chelsea are talking to several investment banks about financing the project rather than relying solely on funds provided by Roman Abramovich, the owner, as well as attempting to sell a naming-rights package that will retain Stamford Bridge in the title.

Chelsea declined to comment on the plans last night.



What the new stadium will look like

Neville on ITV for Russia

Gary Neville will swap Sky Sports for ITV next summer as one of the terrestrial broadcaster's pundits for the World Cup finals in Russia.

Peru secured the 32nd and final place at the finals when goals from Jefferson Farfán and Christian Ramos gave them a 2-0 win over New Zealand in the second leg of their play-off in Lima. The first leg had finished goalless. They last qualified in 1982.

"This is a dream come true and now it is time to celebrate," said Christian Cueva, the left winger who had a hand in creating both goals. Ricardo Gareca, Peru's Argentine coach, said: "We have managed something very important for the country. I am very emotional."