

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY *with Thomas Hitzlsperger*

1. The start of it all – debut against Liverpool – January 2001

My journey to Villa all began when I went to the U17 World Cup with Germany in New Zealand. I got a trial for Villa after that and because I didn't have a contract with Bayern Munich at the time, I thought 'yeah.' I fancied my chances.

I trained with the reserves and then the first team. The coaches were impressed and they offered me a contract.

They showed real interest. They showed they really wanted me. Other clubs who found out I was thinking about moving weren't as clear. Villa said 'we want you eventually for our first team.'

I thought it was the right move and I could have a good career there. I was right!

It was hard at the beginning but it made me stronger. I was proud that I didn't just throw in the towel and say 'it's not going to work out, I'm going home.'

As you can see from this picture, my debut was against Liverpool in the 2000/01 season but only for a few minutes.

We were 3-0 down at Villa Park and John Gregory put me on for the final five. It wasn't the best result but a great moment in my career nonetheless.

2. Fox outside the Box – first goal against Leicester – April 2002

You never forget your first senior goal and mine came during a 2-2 draw at Leicester City.

I just remember it was with my right foot – that must be a collector's item!

Darius Vassell opened the scoring, Muzzy Izzet equalised a minute later and then I scored two minutes after that to make it 2-1 for us. It was an



amazing few moments and John Stevenson levelled things up just past the hour mark at Filbert Street.

Steve Staunton played it into me. I ghosted past two opponents and then fired in low and hard into the bottom corner.

As you can see I decided to lie down after scoring – it wasn't a planned celebration it's just what came into my head at the time.

What made it really special is my dad and brother came to the game and to score my first goal at a match they were attending made it a memorable moment.

3. Bagging a winner – West Brom derby screamer – December 2002

I have to say the derby goals against

West Brom and Birmingham City stand out above the others.

The one against the Baggies was very important. It was a last minute winner and I remember it like it was yesterday.

You had fans jumping around everywhere, leaping out of their seats and screaming with joy. The noise when I scored that one was truly incredible. It still gives me goosebumps when I see it.

Like many players, I'd been dreaming of scoring a late winner in an important match. Scoring in a derby is definitely special!

4. Different class – playing alongside Gareth Barry – 2001-2005

Gareth Barry was simply a class act and it was a pleasure and privilege to play football alongside him in the claret and blue of Villa.

There have been many great players in the history of this club and he must be up there as one of the best.

I remember he started as a left back and he went on to play in a host of different places on the pitch – centre-half, left midfield too before finally slotting in at centre midfield.

In my mind, there was never any doubt that he would have a great career.

I admired him greatly – particularly for his professionalism and his consistency.

To have such a long career with so

many games - it takes a lot.

Most importantly, in terms of giving something back, he was a true role model for the young players at the club.

5. Taylor-made with GT – Working with Graham Taylor – 2002-03

Graham changed everything. He changed my career.

He watched me in the reserves before he was appointed and he had confidence in my abilities and I played at Man Utd soon after. I came on. I thought 'this is good' I was excited.

I had obviously made my debut the previous season but I always remember the game at Man Utd fondly during Graham's time in charge.

When he told me to warm-up at Man Utd, I wasn't convinced I would be coming on.

He called me back and said 'you're going on.' I thought 'wow, this is going to be interesting.'

I was so, so nervous when he was giving me instructions before I went on. But when I came on, all that pressure fell off me.

The following season – 2002/03 – was my first full campaign and Graham's solitary one on his return to the club. I had several starts and came off the bench quite a bit too. It was a great experience.

Overall with Graham, I am immensely grateful that he believed in my abilities and gave me the chance to play in the first team. I had a lot of respect for him because of his experience and past success, too. I learned a lot from him.

6. Mixed emotions – Villa v Blues goal – February 2004

My goal against Birmingham City was amazing. Scoring in that derby match is a phenomenal feeling. It was in front of the Holte End - it was a dream come true!

There's so much adrenaline going through your body that I had to be careful with the celebration. Those were the moments when I was most likely to embarrass myself with a silly celebration...

We didn't win the game. But my goal put us 2-0 up so I was feeling on top of the world at that moment. It was incredible.

We went close in this game! Stern John scored right at the end to spoil the party. I was so gutted.

We played really well in the first half and then wanted to hold on to the lead rather than smash them.

When you talk about overall regrets

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though, the only one I have is not having beaten Birmingham City. When I left and saw us beat them a couple of times. I was so happy. It was a great feeling.

7. Hitz in his Pomp-ey – Winner against Portsmouth – February 2005

People seem to remember my goals against Bolton and Portsmouth in that same season – 2005-06. They were great goals but the key is that they were winning goals! That adds a lot.

The Portsmouth one was goal of the season if I remember right. I'm not sure if it was the best goal but to get a reward for it at the end of the season put a big smile on my face.

Bolton was late in the game and Portsmouth too. I took both well technically. They weren't easy. They sat up nicely for me.

You go home and watch them again on Match of the Day in the evening. Those are the moments you live for in football.

8. Don't shoot! – relationship with David O'Leary – 2003-2005

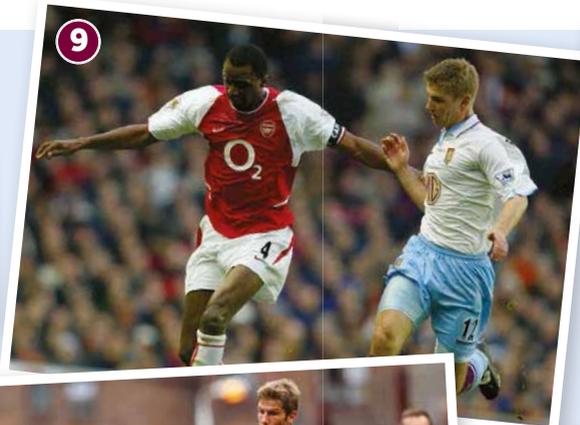
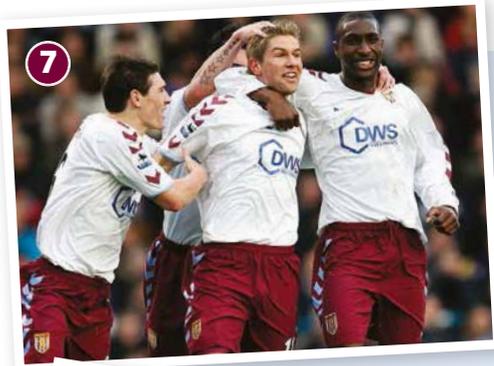
We had a good relationship. It started really well.

We also went through more difficult periods, as one does.

The fans coined that phrase 'Der Hammer'. So many people still call me 'Der Hammer' now because of my strong shot. The fans and the players at Villa used to call me it and it just stuck. It's great.

It all started at Villa. I don't know who came up with it – the person who first used it – but I'd like to thank him or her now.

It worked against me a bit when David O'Leary was in charge. I wasn't in the team and so went



to see him and ask if there was anything I could do differently.

He was aware that the fans always shouted 'Shoot' and his opinion was that this affected me.

He said 'don't do that, don't follow that advice because sometimes it's better to pass.'

I tried to tell him that I wasn't doing it all the time. I said that whenever I get a good position I will shoot because that's my strength.

He told me to keep my head up and make more passes and not always to go for the shot every time.

Overall, I have good memories of my time under his management.

9. Midfielder marvels – battling with Patrick Vieira and Roy Keane

Patrick Vieira and Roy Keane were the two best central midfielders at that time – and it's great to look back and say I've played against both of them.

They were always tough encounters and you knew afterwards that you'd been in a battle.

I must admit that I preferred playing against Arsenal and Vieira.

Their passing game was not always easy to pick out but it was easier to cope with than Man Utd and Keane.

Man Utd were clever and had a physical edge to their game. They were ruthless.

10. Getting hammered – losing to Villa and eventual West Ham

relegation – April 2011

It was a terrible season at West Ham.

I was out injured for six months and at the end we got relegated. It was a frustrating and disappointing season for the club and for me personally.

The game against Villa was another big one for us and we knew it was vital that we picked up three points to keep our challenge alive.

Unfortunately, as we did a lot that season, we ended up on the losing side and went down 2-1 – three Villans scored that day – Darren Bent and Gabby Agbonlahor for Villa and Robbie Keane for West Ham.

Of course, I was happy for Villa to stay up but, first of all, as a Hammer

at the time I was absolutely gutted that we had lost and eventually dropped out of the division.

11. Title winners – Bundesliga triumph with Stuttgart – 2007

My contract was up at the end of the 2004-05 season. I had a feeling that I wanted to go back to Germany. I was German but had never played in the Bundesliga.

I wanted to try that out. Stuttgart were keen. So I decided to move.

But it wasn't easy, I have to tell you. After five years at Villa, I had made a lot of friends and enjoyed life at the club immensely.

It wasn't a decision I took lightly. But it paid off because it was a successful spell at Stuttgart.

I also felt, from a football perspective, that with Stuttgart I had a better chance of winning trophies.

And we won the Bundesliga title. We weren't favourites but we had a good group of players that all stuck together and enjoyed their football.

12. On top of the world – being in German World Cup squad – 2006

When I was a young boy growing up, I couldn't have imagined that I would one day play for the national team.

But when I got into Villa's first team, I simply continued to work hard and see how far it would take me.

To spend five years in the national team was a great experience.

To have played with the best players of that time – and there were plenty of them like Michael Ballack, Jens Lehmann, Miroslav Klose, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Philippe Lahm – was amazing.

And to be part of the World Cup squad of 2006 in my home country of Germany meant that I'd exceeded all my expectations.

13. On the mic – new life as a media pundit – 2013 onwards

Towards the end of my career I definitely sensed that working as a media pundit would be a good option.

I had done interviews for AVTV HD and press conferences with the German national side and felt very comfortable in that environment.

I love the game and found I enjoyed talking about it too.

Some players aren't too keen on doing interviews but I never found it a chore or a difficult task.

At a certain point, I ruled out coaching and felt it was clear that I should take my first steps in the media.