

Spurring The World On

Diabetic Society of Singapore President Yong Chiang Boon met Tottenham Hotspur legend Gary Mabbutt at Jalan Besar Stadium 2009. Mabbutt was in town last year for a football camp organised by Football Asia. The approachable father of two is a fervent advocate of diabetes education and is actively involved in the work of Diabetes UK. Charlotte Lim reports.



Gary Mabbutt is best remembered by football fans around the world as the captain of England's Tottenham Hotspur and the longest-serving player of the club, before retiring after 16 illustrious years.

His football career, which began in the 1980s when he played for Bristol Rovers, was almost short-lived.

According to Mabbutt, his team had been playing against Leicester when he felt sluggish and was extremely thirsty during the match.

He was sent to the club doctor who told him within five minutes that he had type 1 diabetes.

At only 17, Mabbutt saw his lifelong dream of becoming a professional footballer shatter to pieces. The initial shock gave way to steely resolve.

He refused to take his illness lying down, literally. Mabbutt remembers his family around him while he lay on a hospital bed.

He told his father then that he was going to be the first diabetic footballer to play for England. It was a pretty ambitious goal for a teenager who had only just started out. But in just about four years, that dream became a reality.

The road to Wembley was far from smooth. However, Mabbutt never let his condition disrupt his training or affect his game.

Even though he had to lug needles around everywhere and inject himself with insulin four times a day. Match days meant up to eight blood tests, usually before and after the game, and at half-time. All of that was worth the trouble when he lifted up the glorious FA Cup for Tottenham in 1991.

There were some close calls during his career, fortunately never during a match. Once, before a game, he had a hypoglycaemic episode in his sleep and went into a coma. He awoke to find himself in hospital. His first few 'hypos' during training sent his team-mates into a frenzy to get medical help. After a few scares, they could spot the tell-tale signs and would rush some sugar to him whenever he started to act oddly!

These days, the 48-year-old football legend, who is known for his versatility and leadership on the field, is adapting well to his role as a spokesperson for Diabetes UK and its campaign to encourage better diabetes control through education. He is somewhat of a hero to children with diabetes and has even made a television appearance on a BBC programme called Blue Peter to show kids how he deals with diabetes every day.

The passion for football still runs through Mabbutt's veins, but not just as a game. He keenly promotes football as a sport for youths to stay healthy and keep away from drugs, alcohol and smoking. You will see more of him in the soccer scene this year. He currently serves as an ambassador for the 2010 World Cup Finals in South Africa and hopes that football will help South Africa move forward as a country. For Gary Mabbutt, spurring others, country and people, seems to be in his blood too. Once a Hotspur, always a hotspur.