In conversation with Michael Gray

It rarely happens these days in top flight football...local youngster, grows up supporting their local team....ends up playing for them...and becomes a legend with the supporters in the stands where they once sat, or stood as is more likely.

That's what happened to Michael 'Micky' Gray.

Although it might not have happened because while he was playing schoolboy football, he was taken on by Manchester Utd and signed schoolboy forms. However, the lure of playing for his home town club was too strong and he returned to Wearside. He continued playing for Fatfield Juniors F.C. in the Hetton Youth League until, when he was 16, he joined Sunderland.

On the 21st November 1992, Michael made his debut for Sunderland at Derby. Sunderland won 1-nil...Don Goodman got the goal.

By 1996 he was a regular and had the experience of not only being in the side that won promotion into the newly formed Premier League, he also scored Sunderland's first goal in the top flight. He scored the opener in a 4-1 win at Nottingham Forest.

In the following seasons he would win three England gaps after being picked by Kevin Keegan. He would rack-up a total of over 550 games in a career which took him from Sunderland to Celtic, Blackburn Rovers, Leeds Utd, Wolves and Sheffield Wednesday.

Nowadays, Michael talks about football. He's frequently seen on TV with BT Sport, ITV and beIN sports who're based in Doha, and can be found on a regular basis covering football matches and appearing as a studio guest on talkSPORT radio.

He still plays on a regular basis in various 'Legends' tournaments. He's also a regular at the Great North Run.

But, what about another of his passions away from football. Cars. We caught up with Michael and fired a few motoring questions in his direction.

What is the first car you can remember?

I can clearly remember my parents Datsun Sunny. It was brilliant white and I thought it was wonderful. I used to sit in it while parked outside our house pretending to drive it thinking I'm gonna own one of these someday. To a young lad it looked so cool and I can still remember what it smelt like inside.

What was the first car you owned?

The first car I actually paid my own money for was a Ford XR2. It had extra driving lights at the front and natty white alloy wheels. I was only 17 years old when I bought it and I think the insurance was more than the cost of the car. I suppose I wasn't a very good risk....young lad, footballer, sporty car...not a good mix. And I think the XR2 had a reputation of being nicked too easily. Anyway, I thought it looked great and fitted loads of extra loudspeakers so that I could blast the music. Good God... what was I thinking?

Smart car or a mobile skip?

Don't tell my parents this one...they were really proud of their cars (still are) and keep them in immaculate condition. I have to confess that my car interior is a bit of an embarrassment. You should see the look on people's faces when I offer to give them a lift. They have to shovel a load of junk off the seat. To say it's a messy car is being polite. Here's my excuse. Working in the media means you spend a lot of time driving to grounds so everything just gets thrown in the back...coffee cups are the main culprit. It's not a good look.

And motoring embarrassments?

On the very first day I'd picked up my XR2, I collected my mates and went out driving. Obviously I wanted to show them how quick it was. I drove up to a roundabout going far too quickly and left the braking too late. You won't be surprised to know that the outcome was inevitable. We went straight on and hurtled over the top of it and back onto the road on the other side. A lesson learned.

What's your favourite road trip?

I'm not really a road trip person...I wouldn't go on a driving holiday abroad. It doesn't appeal. I tend to see a car as a means of getting from A to B as quickly and as comfortably as possible. Having said that, I've driven in a few foreign countries not knowing where I'm going and got horribly lost without being able to speak a word of the local lingo. I have to admit though on a gloriously sunny day.... shorts on...roof down... and I'll drive until the petrol light comes on.

Steady Eddy or a bit of a speedster?

I've always been a bit of a speed junky... still am. Give me an open road and my foot gets heavier. All of this probably explains why I'm sitting on 9 points right now and have had to ease off.

Favourite road in the North East?

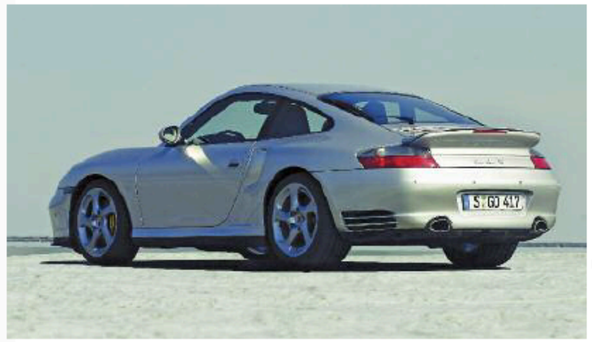
Got to be the A19, except at peak times. It's not really the road itself, it's more of the occasion. When I'm on it, it invariably means I've been back home on Wearside. And I know it sounds naff, but you can't beat winding down the window and breathing in some good North East fresh air.

What have been your favourite cars?

My favourite car has to be the Range Rover. I've had about 6 of them. They're the best car on the road by day. You've got a commanding driving position, plenty of oomph and loads of space. Brilliant. In my younger days I had plenty of sports cars such as the Aston Martin Vanquish, 4 Ferraris, a Porsche 911 Turbo but I have to confess that I'd probably need a crowbar to get me out of them these days. Which is another reason why I like the Range Rovers.

Worst Car?

I had an old BMW 325 Cabriolet. It looked great on the day I bought it. Somehow, before I knew it, it was just a heap of rust. Huge mistake. It got scrapped.

And finally....your dream car?

Right now it'd have to be the Mercedes AMG G63 in white. Massive presence and they sound fantastic. I love them.