

ALAN SHEARER DCL

Mr Chancellor,

On the 4th of February 2006 Alan Shearer scored a goal in front of a capacity crowd in St James' Park. Nothing new in that, you might think. Yet, while Newcastle United's fans never greeted any Shearer goal with anything short of rapture, on this occasion they truly excelled themselves: when the back of the Portsmouth net shook, the stadium itself also shook, as there erupted from the crowd a roar of appreciation so loud that it could be heard ten miles away at sea. The frenzy of appreciation continued for ten minutes. For what every fan in that stadium knew was that this was not just any old Shearer goal, but his 201st goal for Newcastle; as such, it was the goal which clinched for him the record of the highest-scoring player in Newcastle's long history of regular League and Cup games. That record had stood for forty-nine years since it was set by Alan's great hero, Wor Jackie Milburn, a pitman prodigy from Ashington. Jackie's widow wrote to Alan immediately afterwards expressing her delight.

Averaging more than one goal every other match, Alan Shearer scored 422 goals in his senior playing career. 260 of these goals sealed his place as the highest goal-scorer in the history of the Premier League. Even if we count the old English First Division all

the way back to 1892, Alan remains one of the top five English League goal-scorers of all time. He was capped for England on 63 occasions, 42 times as Captain. I had better curtail the statistical digest at this point, Mr Chancellor, if you are ever to fulfil the other duties which await you this afternoon. But it's just as difficult to be brief if you try to describe Alan Shearer's performance using adjectives rather than statistics: how about, prolific, for instance? or outstanding? or unique? or legendary?

Revealingly, those close to Alan Shearer describe him using nouns rather than adjectives: character; substance; intelligence; humour; passion; determination; bravery; loyalty; trust; compassion. One of Alan's closest friends says: "No pun intended, like, but Alan really is the most 'black-and-white' person I've ever met. I mean he always speaks his mind. And when Alan sets his mind to do something, failure is not an option".

Alan clearly knew his own mind from a very early age. The first time he was asked to write down his career ambition at school, Alan knew he wanted to write 'footballer'; but guessing the teacher would reject this with scorn, Alan put 'binman' instead – until his Dad saw the form and made him change it to 'joiner'. But Alan's Dad – Alan Senior – knew his son better than anyone. One day, Alan Senior was standing on the touchline watching his 12-year old son playing for Wallsend Boys' Club when he was approached by Jack Hixon, who turned out to be a scout for Southampton Football Club. When Jack

asked Alan Senior whether his son might like to go to Southampton for a trial, he was told “Ask him yourself; he’s old enough to make up his own mind”.

Alan’s Southampton years provide numerous illustrations of his personal code of loyalty. Firstly, Alan and Jack Hixon became lifelong friends. Years later when Alan heard that Jack had been rushed into hospital, he immediately left the England training camp and took a helicopter to be at Jack’s side. Secondly, it was in Southampton that Alan met his future wife Lainya. Seventeen years after their wedding, Alan still finds his greatest contentment with Lainya and their children Chloe, Hollie and Will. Thirdly, back in his teenage years, Alan wrote to Umbro asking if they would sponsor him. They sent him a pair of football boots. It was the best fifty quid Umbro ever invested: Alan retained Umbro as his kit supplier throughout his playing career, declining enormous inducements to defect to other firms, and he remains an ambassador for Umbro to this day.

By the time Alan scored his first goal for Blackburn Rovers in August 1992, he’d already scored his first for England, and was well on his way to becoming a household name. He was soon in demand from the greatest teams in the game: he declined moves to Juventus, Inter Milan and Barcelona out of consideration for his family. Sir Alex Ferguson repeatedly invited Alan to join Manchester United. In the end, Alan’s heart over-ruled his head, and he forsook all other offers to return home, fulfilling his boyhood dream of wearing the Number

9 black and white shirt. 15,000 Geordies dropped everything and rushed to the stadium the day he arrived. Alan told them “The money and the attention have not changed me. I am still just a sheet metal worker’s son from Gosforth”. The only thing anyone might question in this heartfelt statement is the word “just”. We Geordies are delighted Alan’s still one of us, but we want it clearly understood that he’s also a legend, our true ‘local hero’.

Some local heroes are only heroes locally; others might be locals who become national heroes then never come home. Alan Shearer is the most precious type of local hero: an international superstar who is still at his happiest amongst his own folk on Tyneside. He’s the real thing: a Geordie lad who still goes to his Mam’s for Sunday dinner; just another one of the lads having a daft laugh in the pub; a deft exponent of the Geordie sense of humour – sharp as a rapier digging you in the ribs; or at the end of really special nights, giving his renowned rendition of Lionel Ritchie’s anthem “All Night Long” standing on a table!

Since hanging up his boots, Alan has become one of the BBC’s most respected football commentators. But he’s still an active sportsman, with a golf handicap of seven to attend to, and with delights such as skiing and cycling to indulge, which he simply could not risk whilst still playing professional football. In March 2008, he undertook a 320 mile bike ride for charity, covering the distance in far less time than would be expected on the Tour de France! This is only one of many

charitable activities to which Alan contributes his time, energy and money. Just two weeks ago Alan received a special award from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for the vigorous support he has given that charity since the mid-1990s. In 2006, Alan divided the entire proceeds of his testimonial match - one million six hundred and forty thousand pounds - between fourteen charities. This included a donation of £320,000 to fund the completion of a respite care facility for disabled children in the west end of Newcastle, which has since been named the "Alan Shearer Centre".

This summer, Alan donned his boots once more. He was joined by a team of stars to play the Sir Bobby Robson Trophy match, which served both as a tribute to his late boss, and as a fund-raiser for the cancer research Foundation which Sir Bobby established during the last years of his life. This now funds life-saving work underway in our University. Two months ago, Alan became the new Patron of the Sir Bobby Robson Foundation. This is particularly fitting given the great esteem in which Sir Bobby held Alan, calling him “a phenomenal player ... a true professional on and off the field ... [and] a perfect role model to his team-mates and ‘his people’, the Geordie nation”. Amen to that.

Anyone who sings Alan’s praises is in good company, following his Player of the Year awards in 1994 and 95, his award of an OBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours in 2001, his Honorary Doctorate from

our sister University of Northumbria in 2006, and his appointment as a Deputy Lieutenant for the County of Northumberland in September this year. Mr Chancellor, as a lifelong Newcastle United fan yourself, I am sure you need no further encouragement to add our University's benediction to this litany of esteem. In recognition of Alan Shearer's intelligence, wisdom, diligence and integrity, I now ask you to bestow upon him the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger