

JOHAN THE THINKING FOOTBALLER

Arsenal's Johan Djourou was deeply moved by the death of Gary Speed. Here, he tells Sam Wallace about the unique pressures that afflict players and managers at the top

I may come as some surprise that Johan Djourou is the longest-serving member of Arsenal's current first-team squad, a seven-year career at the club that stretches back to his debut which was made when they were still Premier League champions of England.

He has been there through the departures of Patrick Vieira, Ashley Cole, Thierry Henry and Cesc Fabregas, and he has good and bad days himself although there have been many more of the former in the last two seasons as he finally established himself in the first team. But he has also developed into an eloquent spokesman on the wider of issues in football.

We met on Wednesday near his home in north London the day after Arsenal, with Djourou in the side, had lost to Manchester City in the Carling Cup quarter-finals. He had plenty to say on the roller-coaster season so far for Arsenal, and on the future of Arsène Wenger, but it was his thoughts on the death of Gary Speed and its wider implications for football that lingered longest in the mind.

Djourou had watched his Switzerland team-mates in their defeat to Speed's Wales team in October and been impressed by the changes the new manager had made. Like the rest of football he was shocked by the announcement of Speed's death on Sunday morning. Although there are no clear answers yet as to why Speed took his own life, it made Djourou ask the question: would he recognise a team-mate who had prob-

lems? And how would football in 2011 be expected to respond?

"I think, yes, I think a club would be receptive and listen and understand because today the world has become more open-minded," he says. "It is a human world. Football is a game that we are playing. I know we are under a lot of pressure but we are still human, we still have minds and hearts and we still understand that people could be ill.

"Personalities are very different. I could be totally different to you. You could be stronger than me in different things. It depends on the subject but [footballers] are under pressure a lot.

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Football is a thing that you play every three days. You have to win every game and you cannot perform badly because you want to win. If you perform badly you get criticised. There are always those kind of things but that is life.

"As footballers, we are still humans. I can see any body getting depressed and having doubts and troubles and thinking about things that he could have done better. It gets into his mind. That's a normal thing. The thing about football is that you have to be strong and react for the next game. What is always very important for me is that when you play football, mistakes happen. When you are a manager, mistakes happen. In life mistakes happen.

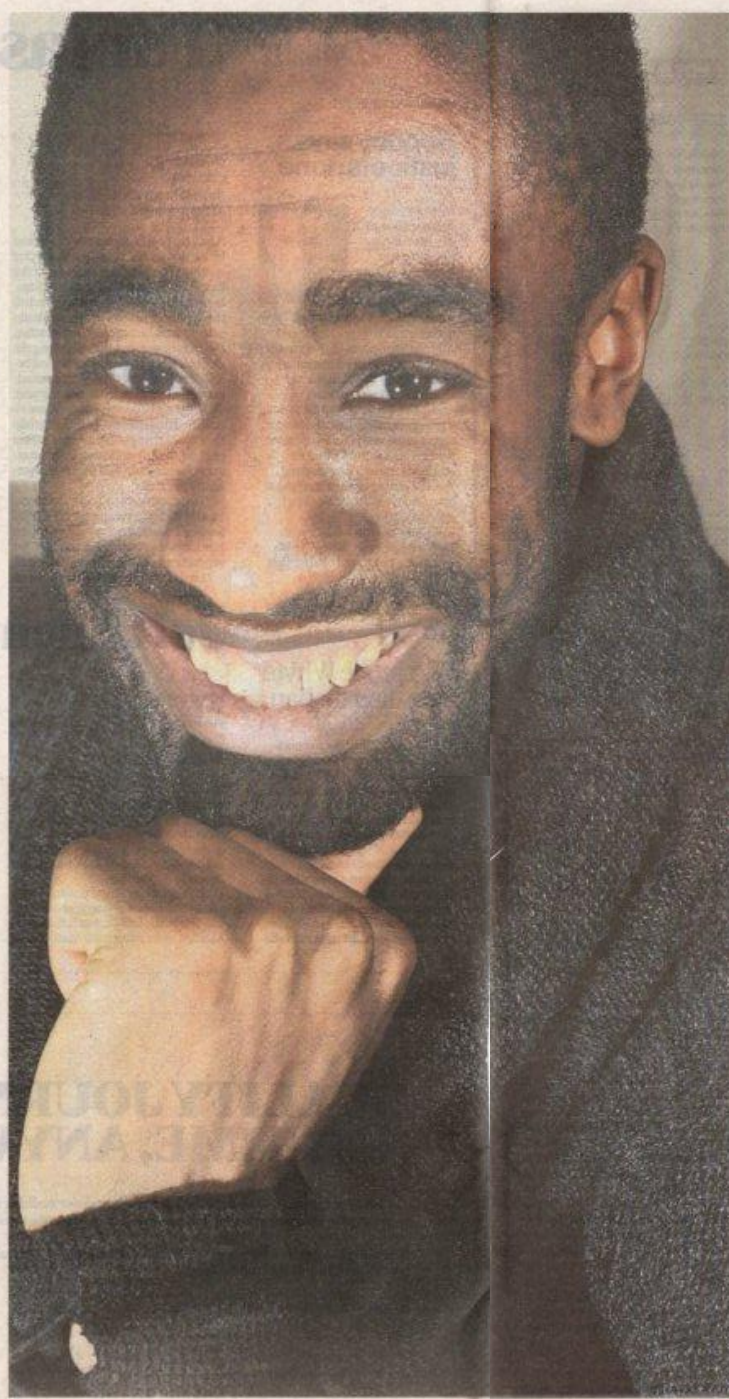
"The next thing is to get back up strong the next day. That is the challenge we have in football. To be under pressure? Yes. Making a mistake? Maybe. But be stronger next time. We always have this chance. But I understand that people get depression in football. It is a human world. Sometimes we forget that football is a job as well. And someone who is doing a normal job is under pressure because he wants to do well. Football is the same."

Born in the Ivory Coast, his father moved him to Switzerland when he was 17 months old and it was there in Geneva at the age of 18 that Djourou was scouted by Arsenal. He missed the entire 2009-2010 season - save the final game of the season - with a serious knee injury that also cost him a place in the Switzerland squad for the World Cup finals last year.

Last season he returned in the absence of the injured Thomas Vermaelen to play 37 games in all competitions and is currently deputising at right-back for the injured Florent Sinagra. It is still a long way from the Arsenal team that Djourou came into in October 2004. He made his debut in a Carling Cup win away at Manchester City (how things change) in the match that directly followed the defeat at Old Trafford which ended Arsenal's 49-game unbeaten run in the league.

The longevity at Arsenal certainly gives Djourou a perspective that few others at the club have. With a contract at Arsenal that expires in June 2013 it is fair to say he has divided opinion among supporters. The level of his

performances can vary radically. He was a key part of the defence in the home leg Champions League win over Barcelona last season but he also played in the 8-2 drubbing at Old Trafford in August when he was poor.



Johan Djourou and Laurent Koscielny up against Manchester City's Edin Dzeko this week. The pair were impressive against Barcelona last season but poor in this season's 8-2 defeat by Manchester United. **GETTY IMAGES**

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"Football comes with - and maybe people don't see it from the outside - a lot of pressures," Djourou continues. "Footballers and managers, sometimes they can't sleep because they have to think about the games, the training.

"For a player it is a bit different, you enjoy being on the pitch, playing. I'm not a manager but I am sure it must be hard to be under so much pressure all the time. For a manager like Gary Speed it is very sad. He was a legend here and Wales were doing so well. It is a massive shame."

It was Fabregas's departure that makes Djourou the longest serving inhabitant of the Emirates home dressing room - he is just 24 - and accordingly the player at the club whose connection with Wenger goes back the

furthest. What does he see in the future for his manager?

"I think he will stay there for a long time. I don't see him going. He has been there a long time and I can't see the club without him, to be honest. I can't see Arsenal without Arsène Wenger. It is something that doesn't really work in my mind. He has done so well for the club and that's because he has touched every part of the club.

"Everything is so different since he joined: The way we play, the attitude and philosophy of the team, the way he has developed. In other clubs, maybe not in England, someone else [other than the manager] has the power but he has it at Arsenal.

"Football today is like a business. I wish players would stay. Back in the day, players would stay at one club for life. For example, Paolo Maldini at Milan, what a great player, and played all those years at the one club. Of course we want football to be like that. I know that all of the players who left the club, like Samir [Nasri] and Cesc, I talked with them and they loved the club.

"Maybe they had better things on offer but I was talking to Kolo [Touré] the other night and even he was saying how much he loved the club. Kolo has been away for a long time and he misses it. Arsenal is such a great club. It's a family. We've been together for so long now."

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By his own admission, the transition that the team had to go through with the volume of departures and arrivals in the last days of the summer transfer window "was so quick" that it took time to adapt. By now, however, Arsenal have found their stride and despite drawing with Fulham last Saturday they go into tomorrow's game away at Wigan Athletic only three points behind Newcastle in fourth place.

Djourou has heard all the criticisms of Wenger and Arsenal before and he admits that those players, like himself, who were nurtured by the club's manager feel it most keenly. "He doesn't deserve it," Djourou says. "Maybe we wouldn't be here if he had another philosophy. If he was going to buy 230m players in every position then we wouldn't be here. It's a philosophy that's been great and we have to repay him for that.

"We want to do that on the pitch and we're going to try and win that silverware now. We came so close in the Carling Cup last season. If we'd won that then I believe there would have been a lot of glory after that.

"I'm saying that now, but there's no real point in saying it. It was a factor that was very important. We haven't won for a long time, we hadn't been in a final since the Carling Cup against Chelsea. The Champions League before that. It was a long time without being in a final and we were so close to winning it as well.

"It was a big disappointment. Then we play Barcelona in the Champions League, we lose that and then we're out. Then we lose to Man United and we're out the FA Cup. Then we had just the league. It was too many disappointments in too short a space of time and I think it was too much for the team to take."

When it is pointed out to him that Wenger looks so anguished much of the time, Djourou reflects that all the managers he sees "look stressed". A week ago that might have been the prelude to a joke about the histrionics of some individuals on the touchline but then a lot has changed in British football in the last week.

MY OTHER LIFE

I am reading the biography of Steve Jobs (right). He really was all about business. It is interesting to see how he changed the world. Music? It is Drake I am listening to at the moment.



DAVID J. PHILLIPS