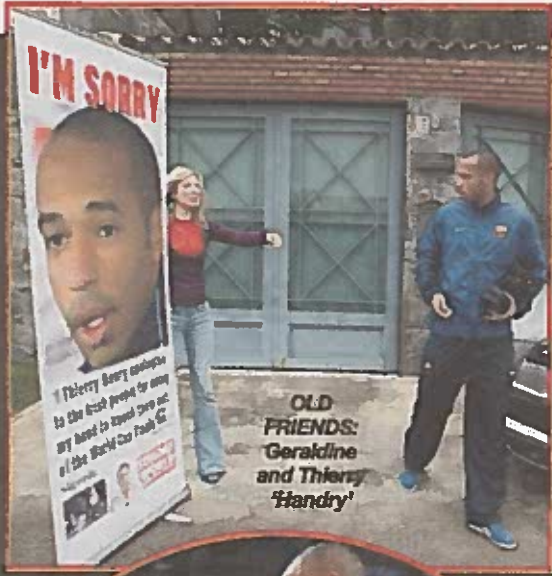


EXCLUSIVE GRAY TELLS OUR GIRL HOW HE

'I wouldn't criticise a lad like Wayne who goes out and has a little too much to drink the odd time'



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HE'S football's biggest motormouth.

Indeed, Irish soccer fans often describe him as Britain's answer to our Eamon Dunphy.

But when Sky Sports pundit Andy Gray came face to face with yours truly, he was a bit tongue-tied.

Maybe it was because he heard I had confronted soccer cheat Thierry Henry in his own backyard in Barcelona.

Or maybe it was because I had the nerve to touch the Premiership Trophy.

Well, I like a big hunk of bling as much as any girl – and some of the most famous lips in football have sipped bubbly from this. It was the closest I'd ever been to David Beckham and Jose Mourinho.

The trophy has been won by just four teams – Man United, Chelsea, Arsenal and Blackburn.

Bury

So I could see why Andy was so protective of it when I begged him to let me hold it for a photo. "Don't drop it," he warned, adding that it was heavy.

Andy and his fellow Sky pundit Richard Keys were showing off the trophy to remind us just why we should tune into their coverage of the upcoming Premier League season which begins on August 14.

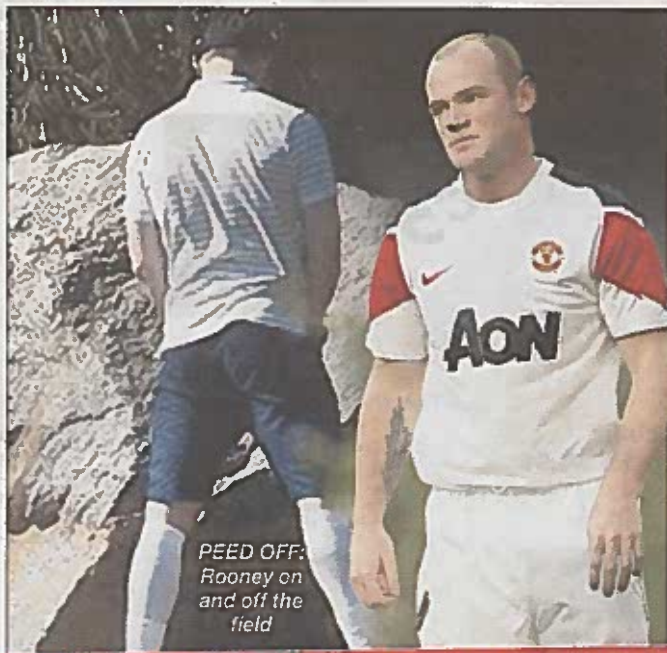
I hope Andy will be back to his motormouth self by then – because his new Mr Bland image doesn't suit him.

The big, burly Scot, who has spent 37 years living and breathing soccer, couldn't come up with one anecdote to tell me. "Anecdotes? Cor blimey," he said. He said he couldn't pick one because there were "too many."

I thought he'd have something to say on soccer's colourful characters. But, having put his foot in his mouth many times in his career as a pundit, he wasn't playing ball this time.

Cristiano Ronaldo might look like a bit of a diva to the rest of the world. His legendary "wink" was right up there with Thierry Henry's handball at one stage.

But when asked for an opinion on the world's highest-earning soccer player, the world's best-paid soccer pundit could only



PUNDIT ANDY ON MODERN GAME AND WAYNE'S WORLD

By GERALDINE COMISKEY

mumble: "I wouldn't say he's a prima donna. If you're the best player in the world, then you have to cope with the attention."

Still, I caught a brief glimpse of the old hellraising Andy when I mentioned Wayne Rooney's recent antics. The Man United striker was caught urinating against a wall on a lads' night out – he was also pictured relieving himself on a golf course. Andy was full of sympathy. "If a young lad goes out occasionally and has a little too much to drink, I certainly wouldn't be criticising him too much for that."

"He needs to let his hair down after the World Cup."

But Andy was keeping mum on the subject of WAGS.

The twice-married Glaswegian is known as a ladies' man. After all, he has had five kids by four different women and has dated a bevy of beauties including former

Olympic gymnast Suzanne Dando – who he met while they both worked for Sky Sports.

He famously told reporters after hooking up with Dando: "With age, I hope, comes maturity. I certainly don't see myself with anyone else." Days later he was playing footsie with another blonde.

Magazine

But when I asked Andy what he thought of whole WAG phenomenon, he gave me the kind of answer I'd expect from a monk. "If they want to get involved in designing things or magazine shoots then that's completely up to them. It's not for me."

He added: "I think if they get involved in the football, and affect the football the way the England WAGS did in 2006 in Germany, than that's going beyond being a footballer's wife."

But he and Richard were glad one WAG went beyond the call of

duty this week. Niall Quinn's glamorous wife Gillian organised a slap-up meal for them at Dublin's posh Unicorn restaurant. Richard joked: "We had this very impressive secretary booking us our table. What's her name – Geraldine or Gillian?"

The Sunderland manager and his wife couldn't join them for the meal as they were in England.

A macho bloke like Andy might be expected to do a Jeremy Clarkson when asked for his views on women actually playing the Beautiful Game. After all, most blokes are all for it – as long as the ladies dress like the Hunky Dory girls.

Mixed

But the new right-on Andy shrugged: "I've no reason to doubt why women should play football. I don't think it should be a closed shop."

Though he added: "I don't think it should be mixed football, because males are stronger and more powerful."

Andy insists he does not hanker after the lifestyle of a modern footballer, and would not like to be followed around by paparazzi.

"I'd hate it. That's why I quite liked playing when I did."

Andy says being a pundit is "much easier" than being a player. "You only have to use your mouth. As a footballer, you have to use your feet, legs, brain."

Andy may shy away from controversy these days – but he can never escape it. He admitted he gets a tongue-lashing from footie fans every where he goes.

He had been in Dublin less than 12 hours when he got a roasting from two Man U fans on the street. "I don't support Manchester United but I admire them and I'm fair to them."

Andy and Richard weren't tempted to go clubbing in Dublin. "I'm too old for it," Andy (55) admitted.

Richard clearly isn't, but with just Andy for company the nearest he got to having a swinging time in Dublin was on the golf course. Andy got to show off his skills at Old Portmarnock Golf Club – and trounced Richard.

"I'm better than him," he said.

And for a moment I saw a flash of the fighting spirit that once made him a soccer superstar.

geraldine.comiskey@sundayworld.com