



## John Charles

Have you ever imagined moving to another country? Can you imagine how it would feel not knowing the language, the area or not having any friends? Now imagine it is the year 1957. Would you move? Would you stay? This was the decision faced by John Charles, a Welsh footballer.

John Charles was born in the year 1931 in Swansea, Wales. As a child, John loved playing football with his friends and his brother, Mel. Swansea Town Football Club spotted John and signed him up to play for the club's academy at a young age. John also worked as a groundskeeper for Swansea, looking after the stadium, the Vetch Field.

When he was 17 years old, Leeds United Football Club, who were based in Yorkshire, England, offered John a trial. John impressed the club and they decided to sign him because he was able to play in several different positions: right-back, centre-back and left-back.

On 19th April 1949, John Charles was selected to make his debut for Leeds United in a friendly match against Scottish team, Queen of the South. Charles amazed spectators with his performance, many of whom were shocked he was just 17. This led to John being picked to play in the first team for Leeds.

In 1950, John Charles was called up to join the army (this was the law in Britain at the time). He was allowed to keep playing for Leeds but for two years John had to balance playing football with training as a soldier.

In 1952, John was allowed to leave the army, and it was at this time he tried playing a new position for Leeds United. He moved to striker and started scoring goals immediately. In October 1952, he scored an amazing 11 goals in 6 games for Leeds, and people started to refer to the club by the nickname 'John Charles United'.

He played so well that Italian giants Juventus wanted to buy John Charles. In August 1957 they agreed to pay a British record transfer fee: £65,000, double the previous record. This was a big opportunity for Charles as he became just the second British player to ever play football in a foreign league.

John Charles would have to learn Italian, find a house and make new friends in a country he was unfamiliar with. The best way to settle in a new country was to score goals and that is exactly what John did in his first game. With the score at 2-2, John scored the winner to make it 3-2 and win the game for his new teammates. The Italian fans were delighted!

John Charles was a proud Welshman, and during his time at Juventus, he played in his first and only ever World Cup for Wales. In 1958, Sweden hosted the tournament as 16 countries from across the world joined together for a feast of football.

This was the first time Wales had ever qualified for a World Cup, and the



hopes of the nation rested on the shoulders of their star man, John Charles. Charles scored in their draw against Hungary, a result that helped Wales reach the quarter-finals against Brazil. Sadly, Charles picked up an injury and couldn't play in the big match. Without him, Wales lost 1-0 as Pelé scored the winner for Brazil. Wales were left wondering what would've happened if John Charles had been able to play.

After winning three league championships with Juventus, Leeds brought Charles back to Britain. They paid £53,000 to sign him again and he spent one more season at their ground, Elland Road. He finished his time at Leeds with a total of 160 league goals and is their second ever highest goal scorer, even today.

John Charles moved back to Italy in 1962, joining Roma, who played (and still do) in the Italian capital city of Rome. Following a short spell at Roma, he transferred back to his home country, Wales, to play for Cardiff City in 1963. Charles finally finished his amazing career with Hereford United and Merthyr Town, scoring over 370 goals in all the leagues he'd played football in.

Charles was a very popular footballer in Italy, and due to his height and his fair play, he was given the nickname 'Il Gigante Buono' (The Gentle Giant). In 1997, Charles received an honour from Juventus. He was voted their best ever foreign player by the fans of the club. Charles also has a statue and road in the city of Leeds named after him, called the 'John Charles Way'.

John Charles died in 2004 at the age of 72. Today, he is considered a legend in Wales, England and Italy. His decision to move to a different country, learn a new language and make new friends certainly paid off. Wouldn't you agree?

## RETRIEVAL FOCUS

| Look at the statements below. Tick the correct box for each row        | True | False |
|--|------|-------|
| John was the first English Player to play in a foreign league.         |      |       |
| John had to learn Spanish when he moved to Juventus.                   |      |       |
| John made his debut against Queen of the South when he was 17.         |      |       |
| John played for 3 Italian clubs.                                       |      |       |
| Wales were beaten 1 – 0 by Brazil in the 1958 World Cup Quarter Finals |      |       |

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**E**

Explain why the author uses rhetorical questions in paragraph 1.

**I**

Do you think that Juventus was a rich club? What makes you think this?

**V**

What does the word qualified mean in this context?

**V**

Which of these sentences is the correct definition of **transfer** in this context?

- to copy a drawing from one surface to another.
- to redirect a telephone call from one line to another.
- to move to another department, company or occupation for work.

**V**

Can you define foreign?

**E**

Why do you think the author has decided to use the word 'legend' in the last paragraph?

Answers:

1. False
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. True

E: The questions encourage the reader to imagine the things that John Charles had to deal with.

I: The answer should say that yes, they were a rich club. The evidence is that they paid a record amount to sign John Charles.

V: They have enough points, wins or achievements to play in the next round.

V: C

V: In or from a country that is not its own.

E: The use of the word legend confirms his status and using this in the last paragraph leaves this impression in the reader's mind even after they have finished.