

There's no secret to Newcastle Utd player Gael Bigirimana's faith, as he tells Emily Liles

Playing for God's glory

FOOTBALLER Gael Bigirimana has experienced more than most in his 20 years.

His star performances in a turbulent season for Coventry City in 2011/2012 earned him a move to Premier League Newcastle United.

This summer, the midfielder was part of the England under-20 squad that travelled to Turkey to compete in the Word Cup, which he cites as his biggest honour to date.

But, the most fascinating and famous tale of Burundi-born Bigirimana's life so far remains the day he was awarded a trial at Coventry City.

"It's crazy – every form of media has a different take on the story," he laughs.

"When I first moved to England as a refugee my family lived in Coventry.

I went to an ASDA near City's training ground and I didn't even know who the Sky Blues were!

"On the way back a voice in my head told me to ask if I could play.

"They asked if I played for a team but I'd only just arrived in England. I gave them my primary school name and

they said they'd come and watch me.

"When I left that day, I went towards the exit. They thought I was running but I was just jogging – one of them called me back, shouting 'young'un' and told me to come training. It must've been a miracle."

'Bigi', as he is affectionately known was brought up in a Christian family and his parents set a foundation for his faith.

At the age of 12, he realised he needed his own relationship with God, and many of his teenage years were spent at Mosaic Church in Coventry.

He believes his time at his 'spiritual home' helped him grow in his faith and taught him essential life skills for his future career.

There is always a hole that needs to be filled by the Spirit of God

Although there is a clear football gulf between the Championship and Premier League, Gael has also noticed a difference in the pastoral staff on Tyneside.

At Newcastle, the chaplain comes in twice a month to talk to the players.

Yet at Coventry, the club did not employ a chaplain and the mature Bigirimana took on the unofficial role.

"The players at Coventry used to open themselves to me and talk about the struggles they were going through.

"As much as they have this desirable life and wealth, there is always a hole that needs to be filled with the spirit of God," he explained.

Following his move, many people believed he would spend last season in Newcastle's under-21 squad but Gael was soon thrown into the deep end of the Premier League cauldron.

Despite a host of impressive appearances, Bigi is just as proud to discuss the relationships he has developed within the squad.

"I didn't expect to have such an impact. I was

playing against Manchester United and Arsenal!

"I have great Christian conversations with Shola Ameobi and Adam Campbell and the Muslim boys. Sometimes it's good to hear their side of the story."

His first Premier League goal was certainly one for the archives but his celebration and acknowledgment of God in this special moment will live long in the memory.

It is not uncommon for footballers to celebrate a goal in this manner, with some of the highest profile players even praying in public before matches.

But the 19-year-old acknowledges some players prefer to pray in the changing room.

"The Bible says it's better to close the door and worship in secret if you prefer," adds Bigirimana. "But players like Kaka, Hernandez and I are not private.

"I always live by the verse in Matthew, 'you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.'

"None of us are trying to hide our lamp so people can see the power of the Lord which in turn gives us the power to play in God's will."

Bigirimana now attends Newcastle's Hillsong church where the slogan is 'welcome home' and he believes this is his new spiritual home.

A stone's throw away at St James', the crowd are renowned for their ferocious vocal support but this does not faze the mature midfielder.

"The young boys ask, don't you get nervous when facing 50,000 fans? I say my strength is in Jesus. The way I see it is all of them are not only coming to see and enjoy our talent but also the glory of God – and that takes the pressure away for me."