



“WE CAN’T  
GO BACK”

West Ham winger Michail Antonio on gangs,  
goals and grabbing life by the balls ☺

Words **Amit Katwala** Photography **Fred MacGregor**

**M**ichael Antonio's non-league career came to an abrupt end. Eight years ago, the powerful West Ham winger was a raw 18-year-old, playing for local side Tooting & Mitcham in the Isthmian League, part of the seventh tier of English football. His performances had caught the eye of Reading, however, and the Royals had signed Antonio and loaned him back to south London as a much-improved player.

Training daily with the Championship team, not just Tuesdays and Thursdays, worked wonders with his touch and decision-making. But the presence of a professional in the amateur and semi-pro ranks attracted some hostile attention.

"It was the last game I played," says Antonio, recalling a 2-2 draw with Hendon, and a sequence that plays out a bit like Cameroon's famous assault on Claudio Caniggia at the 1990 World Cup. He claps his hands together to mark out the beat of each missed tackle, his voice incredulous.

"I've picked it up in the middle, someone has chopped me in half, and then I've got it back again because, to be honest, I was used to those tackles anyway. Got it again - I've beat one, I've knocked it down the line. The ball is 10 yards ahead of me, the guy has come for me! He's tried to scissor me in half, so I've hurdled over him, run down the line, I've cut inside another person. The ball is two yards ahead of me, he's come for my body - I've hurdled him and scored.

"At the end of the game, I've got a phone call from Reading: 'You're coming back. One of our scouts was at the game, and we can't let you stay there. You're going to get seriously hurt.'"

They needn't have worried. Antonio had already demonstrated an instinct for staying out of trouble, and an aptitude for hurdling challenges as he sidestepped the teenage gangs of south London and picked out a winding path to the Premier League.

"It was the norm," says the 26-year-old, who remembers schoolmates with stab wounds, and uneasy coalitions and turf wars between rival groups. "People joining gangs, getting stabbed, going to prison. It was all I knew growing up."

#### LIFE-CHANGING CHOICES

When he was 15, Antonio lost two friends in a mass brawl between two gangs armed with knives and broken pieces of furniture.



**"PEOPLE JOINING GANGS, GETTING STABBED, GOING TO PRISON. IT WAS ALL I KNEW GROWING UP. LOADS OF MY FRIENDS MADE THAT CHOICE"**

"Loads of my friends made the other choice," he says. "I played football with one guy, and another went to my school. They were all good friends and then they fell out, so they met up, had a big fight. One of my friends got stabbed to death by another. So one died, one went to prison for seven years."

There had been an allure to the gangs - the girls, the money - but a settled family life helped Antonio steer clear. His mum was a carer for the elderly, his dad a mini-cab driver. Antonio says he was sheltered from the worst of it. The three-bed terraced house in Earlsfield, where his parents still live, is a 10-minute bike ride away from the estates of Battersea, Wandsworth and Tooting. "I could always escape and go home," he says. "I was lucky."

Instead, Antonio filled his time with football - at community programmes

and youth clubs all over south London. "I didn't support a team," he says. "I never watched football, I didn't go to the games - I always just wanted to play it. Any opportunity to play, I would play."

He played at Providence House - a youth club near Clapham Junction - on Thursdays and Saturday afternoons, for Tooting & Mitcham on Tuesdays, Saturday mornings and Sundays, and at Chelsea Kicks on Mondays. The latter landed him a trip to Moscow, paid for by Roman Abramovich, to play in a youth tournament.

We ask Antonio, who has now seen both sides of London's stark divide, whether people should be doing more to help steer kids in the right direction.

"People are trying," he says. "You can't stop it, full stop. And, to be honest, half the people in the gangs, they were coming to the youth centres. It's just Providence

House wasn't open every day - it hasn't got the manpower. Sometimes people can't change, and sometimes they've grown up in it, and they've adapted to it, and don't know anything different. For someone to change, for the cycle to be broken, you have to change the person's outlook on life and probably their environment."

#### INDIVIDUAL ROUTE

Tottenham offered Antonio a place in their academy when he was 14. His mum refused, fearful of the impact the long, nightly commute across London would have on her son's education.

"Devastating," he says. "As a young boy, all I wanted to do was become a footballer, and my mum said: 'No, education comes first.' 'It was probably the right thing, and I got over it eventually.'"

He laughs, an infectious chuckle that comes out a few times - particularly when we discuss his dislike for horror movies and his penchant for unusual celebrations such as the Homer Simpson-inspired spin on the ground that went viral.

"No one does crazy celebrations any more," Antonio laments. "I remember back in the day when Ian Wright scored, he used to do crazy things. People barely even do backflips any more." He has a couple of ideas, but is looking for suggestions should his fine form continue. "I scored two against Watford," he grins. "The first, I did the worm; the second one, I did nothing!"

His mum's decision meant he explored careers outside football - Antonio looked at becoming a PE teacher, and worked briefly as a lifeguard. It took outside persuasion to get his career started.

"My mum made me go to church, and because Tooting & Mitcham played on a Sunday, she's like: 'No - you're going to church.' So my manager had to come down and speak to my mum and say: 'Look, your son has something.'"

It meant he developed in a different way to how he might had he joined an academy: "Non-league made me physically stronger than a lot of others I've played against in the pro game. I knew how to use my body. Especially with some pro boys - when they go on loan and play against men, they're not used to the physical challenge."

He had his own adjustments to make when he started training with Reading.

"It is very difficult," he explains. "The first day I've come in, and they've put me straight with the first team - these boys are pushing for the Premier League at the time, they're in the playoffs. Even though I was quick over five or 10 yards, mentally

I wasn't quick. We used to play circles, boxes where we've just got to keep the ball. People were passing me the ball, I was taking a touch and by the time I've looked up someone's nicked the ball off me. I was one of those guys who no one really wanted on their team!"

It took four years, and loan spells at Cheltenham, Southampton, Colchester and Sheffield Wednesday in League One, before Antonio could hold his own in the boxes. After one full season at Nottingham Forest he signed for West Ham for £7m, five games into the 2015/16 campaign. He struggled for game time at first, but the turning point is etched in his memory.

"I got my opportunity on December 5," says Antonio. "It was Manchester United away - my first real minutes. I came on in the 37th minute and I've not looked back."

#### NO TURNING BACK

It's been a difficult start at their new home for West Ham, 17th in the league, but Antonio says: "I'd just put it down to individual mistakes. If you look at the stats, we've not been far off every game."

"It's just that each game, a different person is making a different mistake. I can't put it down to the pitch, you can't put it down to the tools, you've just got to put it down to people just not doing it right."

Antonio acknowledges that West Ham's switch to the Olympic Stadium means the atmosphere "is very different".

"At Upton Park you had the fans on top of you, and you felt the buzz from the fans constantly," he explains. "It seems like at the new stadium the fans have not really taken to it that well; they are quite far away. [But] we can't go back, and we've got to commit to it."

This season, Antonio has started every game aside from a League Cup win over Accrington Stanley, and is his club's top scorer with six goals - five with his head. He also scored the first Premier League goal at the new ground - which, as he is keen to point out, also has its benefits: "It's amazing, because you have double the fans, and the roar - the eruption - when the ball hits the back of the net. It's just being able to get the fans buzzing for the whole 90 minutes."

Antonio's form even earned him an England call-up, first under Sam Allardyce and then for Gareth Southgate's first two fixtures. He was, however, left out to face Scotland and Spain. "It just shows you've got to take life by its balls," he says. "Because anything could happen." ●

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## CAPITAL PUNISHMENT



**.82**  
Harry Kane has the best goals/game ratio (18 in 22) of players to have played in 10-plus Premier League London derbies

## THE WEEKEND'S FIXTURES

### SATURDAY

BURNLEY v MAN CITY  
BT SPORT 1, 12.30PM  
HULL CITY v WEST BROM, 3PM  
LEICESTER v MIDDLESBROUGH, 3PM **BT SPORT 2**  
LIVERPOOL v SUNDERLAND, 3PM  
SWANSEA v CRYSTAL PALACE, 3PM  
CHELSEA v TOTTENHAM  
BT SPORT 1, 5.30PM **BT SPORT 2**

### SUNDAY

WATFORD v STOKE CITY  
SKY SPORTS 1, 12PM  
ARSENAL v BOURNEMOUTH **BT SPORT 2**  
SKY SPORTS 1, 2.15PM  
MAN UTD v WEST HAM, 4.30PM  
SOUTHAMPTON v EVERTON  
SKY SPORTS 1, 4.30PM

sky SPORTS

Arsenal v Bournemouth Sunday 2pm



sky SPORTS

Southampton v Everton Sunday 4.15pm

