

MARTIN LAURSEN

Andy Evans talks with the Villa Legend about his career, his new movie *Me, Myself & Martin Laursen* and his love for Aston Villa

When Villa fans think about Martin Laursen, the image that immediately springs to mind is one of a brave, loyal defender, combining leadership and passion for the cause in a wholehearted, yet dignified way. It was these qualities that made the Dane one of the most popular players ever to pull on the claret and blue shirt, as well as helping him to gain 53 caps for his country. But another accolade can now be added to the list, for Martin Laursen has become a film-star.

Me, Myself and Martin Laursen was released in Scandinavia last November. The brainchild of director Anthony Tullberg, the 42 minute documentary was a long time in the making.

'It was in 2005 when I was in Bologna doing my rehab after a big knee operation that Anthony Tullberg contacted me,' explains Laursen. 'At that time there were a lot of negative things going around about football players and the football environment. There was [Adrian] Mutu who was taking drugs and it was about that time that Roy Keane made that book where he said he wanted to hurt that Norwegian player [Alf-Inge Haaland] on purpose. There were a lot of negative things about the football world so Tullberg said that he would like to make a movie about me because I was something positive. So he came to Bologna and we had a chat and just started recalling things. But it was over a long period.'

The resulting film was slightly different from the initial brief that was presented to Laursen, with Tullberg exploring why Laursen had made it as a footballer when he himself had failed to do so. However, the finished product was still to Laursen's liking.

'It wasn't exactly what I expected,' he says. 'In the beginning, it was just a story about my football career from when I was young, and he interviewed all my youth coaches and my

family. But it didn't turn out that well. I don't think they thought it was good enough. So it became another story – that Tullberg wanted to become a football player but didn't, and why was it me. At the end of the day I was pleased with the movie in that way. It was quite positive about me, so it didn't turn out exactly how I thought it should be, but at the end it was alright.'

'I was in the cinema watching it in Denmark and (laughs) it was great to sit there and watch myself in a movie. It was a strange feeling but a good experience.'

One of the standout moments of the film is when Laursen opens up about his time at AC Milan. After starting out at top Danish side Silkeborg IF, he enjoyed a successful time at Verona where he earned the nickname 'Lionheart Laursen' before moving to the San Siro in 2001. However, Laursen's time there was marred by a pattern of bullying and intimidation. His fellow players, including Messrs Pirlo and Shevchenko, made him the butt of the dressing room. His clothes were hidden, his talent questioned and his confidence shattered.

'I wasn't happy there. I didn't enjoy the dressing room. I didn't enjoy the environment there with a lot of world stars and their behaviour. The kind of person that I am, I don't like to fight and I thought that if I behaved well and didn't do anything nasty or hard to them they wouldn't do anything hard to me. But it wasn't so.'

'I think they liked me. It wasn't something where they wanted to hurt me but it was no fun in the dressing room, and because I didn't play a lot I was lowest in the rank. There were a lot of things going around, so I got fed up and instead of being angry, I closed myself and it was hard at the end.'

So when in 2004 Villa came in to take him away from his Italian nightmare, Laursen was delighted – at first anyway. But the actions of a certain ex-manager nearly ruined Laursen's Villa Park career before it had really begun.

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IN ACTION: Martin closing down Chelsea's Claudio Pizarro

But in January 2009, when everything seemed to finally be in place, Laursen suffered the injury that ended his career, at home to WBA.

away that the mentally and the culture and the way they play football in England was perfect for me. I enjoyed it very much. The problem was that only after three games, I got injured and had a lot of problems that year – injury wise and with David O'Leary, who could not understand my problems and didn't treat me that well. He couldn't understand my situation and didn't have any patience with me. You couldn't trust him. He could say something and mean something else and I don't think he was a good manager or a good person. So it was a difficult first season.'

'And then it wasn't good at the beginning of the next season as well. I only played the first game. I remember I took some pills to play and then I had a lot of pain after the game and I said, 'Stop!' I could feel that my knee needed help. So we contacted Richard Steadman in Colorado and we flew over there and had a consultation, and then we decided to make a microfracture, which is a big operation and a risky one as well, but he invented the technique so he was the best man to do it. I felt secure with the situation. He could only give me an 80% chance to come back, but it went well and it was just great from there.'

Laursen subsequently spent nine months rehabilitating in Bologna before returning to B6 in the summer of 2006. His return coincided with O'Leary's departure from Villa Park and Laursen has nothing but praise for his successor.

'When Martin O'Neill came to the club, I had a manager who understood me and my situation,' says Laursen. 'It was just so nice to work with a manager that told me that the most important thing was to play games. He said, "What you do from Monday to Friday, it interests me but it's not so important to me, as long as you play well on Saturday," and that was so good for me because then I could do my special training. He understood – because he was intelligent – that I couldn't train normally like the other players; that I had to do some different things because of my knee. He understood that from day one and I had a great relationship with him all through my time at Villa.'

O'Neill's man-management skills allowed Laursen to flourish and the next three seasons would be, in his words, 'the best period of my football life'.

'I played most of the last part of the third season, and from there it was just up. I enjoyed the best football of my career in England where I can see now I should have come before because it suited my game. It was just so perfect for me. In England they saw everything that I was good at and didn't see the things where I wasn't so good, so it suited my game perfectly. It was just amazing. It was so fantastic for me. I had two great seasons with Martin O'Neill and they were the best years of my life – a great, great time. I played every match and I was captain as well – something that made me very proud. I wanted to play well and pay back all the good words that everyone had said to me, especially Martin O'Neill, and also be someone you could trust when things didn't go so well on the pitch. I would try to help others and be a good example, and it was just very special for me to be named club captain and do all

the things that a captain does. Just to have that armband on my arm was a great honour.'

But in January 2009, when everything seemed to finally be in place, Laursen suffered the injury that ended his career, at home to West Bromwich Albion.

'It was a bit strange because I got injured with my other knee. It wasn't my bad knee, so to say. It was my other knee, my right knee,' explains Laursen. 'I had some problems throughout the Christmas period and had some minor surgery that took away part of the outside of the cartilage, and then I got those problems at the West Brom game. I did some rehab and when I was about to run, my knee flared up. So we contacted Richard Steadman again and he said that I needed a microfracture again, but because of the problem I had with the outside of my cartilage, he said it was going to be very difficult for me to come back and play football again. I had one year left on my contract and he said to me that I should think about retiring because of my future life as well. At the time I was only 31 and I hadn't hurt my knee so much that I couldn't play football with my kids or have a normal life, so my decision was that it was better for me to stop and I haven't regretted that. I stopped at the top, I have a good life now and it was a good decision.'

Following that decision to retire, Laursen appeared on the Villa Park pitch for one last time on the final day of the 2008/09 season. Before the game against Newcastle United, Laursen had the chance to say his final farewell to the fans.



Villa will always be my best club because of the relationship I got with them, and it was my last club. I experienced the best football of my career there, so it's always going to be special for me.'



Martin appears alot on Sport TV over in the UK and Denmark

'I had a meeting with the club beforehand and they said, "How would you like to say goodbye?" – they were willing to do everything for me – and I said that I would like to thank everyone. So they gave me that microphone and I was happy to say a few words. They knew how much I appreciated them and my time there.'

Since then, Laursen has moved back to the Danish town of Vedbaek where he lives with his fiancée and their three children. Media work has kept him in touch with the football world, as well as an eight month spell in charge of local team BK Sollerod-Vedbaek, which has given Laursen a taste for management.

'I enjoyed it very much. They play in the third best division in Denmark, semi-professionals, young kids, you know. But still it was a good start for me and we did well. They contacted me when they were bottom of the league and we managed to stay up and were second best in the league in the second half of the season. Then I stopped because of my family. It was difficult for me to leave in the evening – because at that level that's when they train – three to four times a week. But it was a very good experience for me that I would like to try again when the kids get older. So I'm just at home taking care of my family now and that's very nice for me at this moment.'

But when Laursen finally does decide to return to the dugout, there is one destination above all others where he would like to end up.

'If I have success here in Denmark, I would love to come to Villa obviously. It is the place and the club where I would love to coach. Villa will always be my best club because of the relationship I got with them, and it was my last club. I experienced the best football of my career there, so it's always going to be special for me.'



Martin in the movie Me, Myself & Martin Laursen