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SING WHEN YOU'RE WINNING

RAY VAN BARNEVELD

He's Dutch, so it's no surprise that the world's best darts player loves the *Oranje* and Cruyff. But which club side did young Barney choose to follow? Ajax? PSV? Feyenoord? Keep trying...

Words Louis Massarella Portrait Giles Park

It's not every day you meet somebody who only 24 hours earlier was having lunch with the Royal Family. Then again, it's not every day you meet somebody who is as popular in his homeland as Holland's five-time world darts champion Raymond van Barneveld. "What you have to understand is, five million people watched my 2006 World Final against [fellow Dutchman] Jelle Klaasen – that's a third of the population," explains the man universally known as 'Barney'. "It was the same when I beat Phil Taylor in this year's final. And when I won my first world title in 1998, I even got a handwritten fax from Marco van Basten saying 'YABBA DABBA DO!' I couldn't believe it. He's one of my heroes, but I've never even met him. It just goes to show how popular darts is in Holland."

But despite single-handedly putting 'arrows' on the map in the Netherlands, football remains Barney's first love. "It was my biggest dream to be a footballer," he says. "Even now, I would rather be a footballer than a darts player – and not because of the money. The former Barcelona goalkeeping coach Frans Hoek coach took me onto the pitch at the Nou Camp a few years ago. It was empty but imagine what it must feel like to score when it's full..."

So why did he choose tungsten over turf? Quite simple, really: "I was terrible at football! I played in the schoolyard and in the street as a striker, but it was never going to be Van Basten and Van Barneveld up front for Holland."

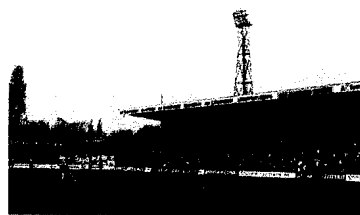
Instead, the Hague-born Barney rebelled against his Ajax- and Feyenoord-supporting friends and took to following his local team. "I grew up in the neighbourhood of ADO Den Haag's Zuiderpark Stadion and when I was old enough I started going to games. We won the KNVB [Dutch FA] Cup in 1975, but my earliest memory of Den Haag is going to see them play West Ham in the first leg of the European Cup Winners' Cup quarter-final a year later. We won 4-2 and the atmosphere was fantastic. Unfortunately we lost the return leg 3-1 so we went out on the away goals rule."

Barney's first footballing memory was even more painful. "It was the 1974

World Cup Final, Holland against West Germany. I watched it on a black and white television with my mum and dad. I was only seven years of age and I cried like a puppy. Even though we lost (to Germany of all people!) that was the best ever Dutch national team."

A Cruyffless Holland again fell at the final hurdle in 1978 and Den Haag dropped out of the Dutch Eredivisie soon after, so it wasn't until the late-'80s that Barney the football fan had something to cheer again – namely Holland's debut tournament triumph at the 1988 European Championships.

Only a year earlier Den Haag had suffered an agonising extra-time defeat to Ajax in the KNVB Cup Final. In the ADO ranks that day was the newly-crowned Dutch Footballer of the Year, one Martin Jol. Twenty years later, the two have become acquainted. "I've met him once or twice and he's invited me to White Hart Lane to watch a game," says Barney. "I'll probably take him up on it pretty soon, but I have to be careful when I'm in England. In Holland, it's OK because people think, 'Yeah, he's from The Hague so he supports his



Top ADO Den Haag's Zuiderpark Stadion Above A cup win for ADO (and their biggest fan)

local team – which is fair enough'. But if I start supporting Liverpool, all the Manchester United fans are gonna boo me when I play darts. It's the same with Chelsea, Arsenal or anybody else. So I don't have one particular team;

instead I like to follow teams when the Dutch are involved. I want Martin Jol to do well for Spurs, just like I want Dirk Kuyt to score for Liverpool."

He does, however, admit to following the fortunes of one Dutch footballer particularly closely. "During the 2005 Embassy World Final, I looked round at the crowd and there was Arjen Robben cheering me on. We spoke afterwards and he's actually a fantastic guy. He'll text me when I win a match and I'll text him when he scores a goal."

Despite his reluctance, *FourFourTwo* suggests Barney still needs to 'have' an English team, given the amount of time he spends on these shores. If not one of the big boys, how about a team in League One? Then he and Port Vale-supporting friend Phil Taylor could continue their rivalry away from the oche... "I thought he supported Stoke City? That's where he's from, no? I didn't realise they had two teams!"

With this in mind, it's perhaps best he turns his attention away from the Potteries and to another League One side, one with which he perhaps has more in common with. "The Den Haag supporters have a similar reputation to Millwall's in this country – a lot of troublemakers," he explains ruefully, before offering some hope for the future. "We're moving to a new stadium next year, though. Things changed for me when I joined the PDC [Professional Darts Corporation, a breakaway from darts' other organising body, the BDO] – new venue, new people, new challenges – so maybe a change will do my football team good too." ☺

Raymond van Barneveld will be defending his Blue Square UK Open title at the Reebok Stadium from 7-10 June. Telephone 0871 871 2932 for tickets

QUICK QUESTIONS

Best moment? Well, I was only a year old when Den Haag won the Dutch Cup in 1968 so I would have to say Holland winning the European Championships in 1988. It was great for the whole country – there was a street party that lasted about three weeks!

Worst moment? When we played England at Euro 96. I remember sitting there thinking "we're going to lose 12-0". I'm just glad I was watching it on TV at home back in Holland, because I was just starting to make a name for myself over here – and the stick I would have got...

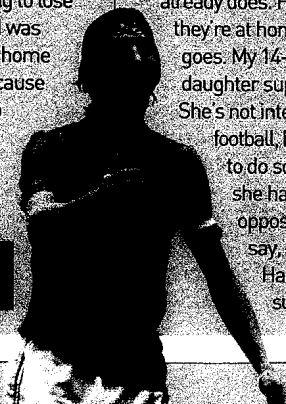
Cruyff: could've been a winner

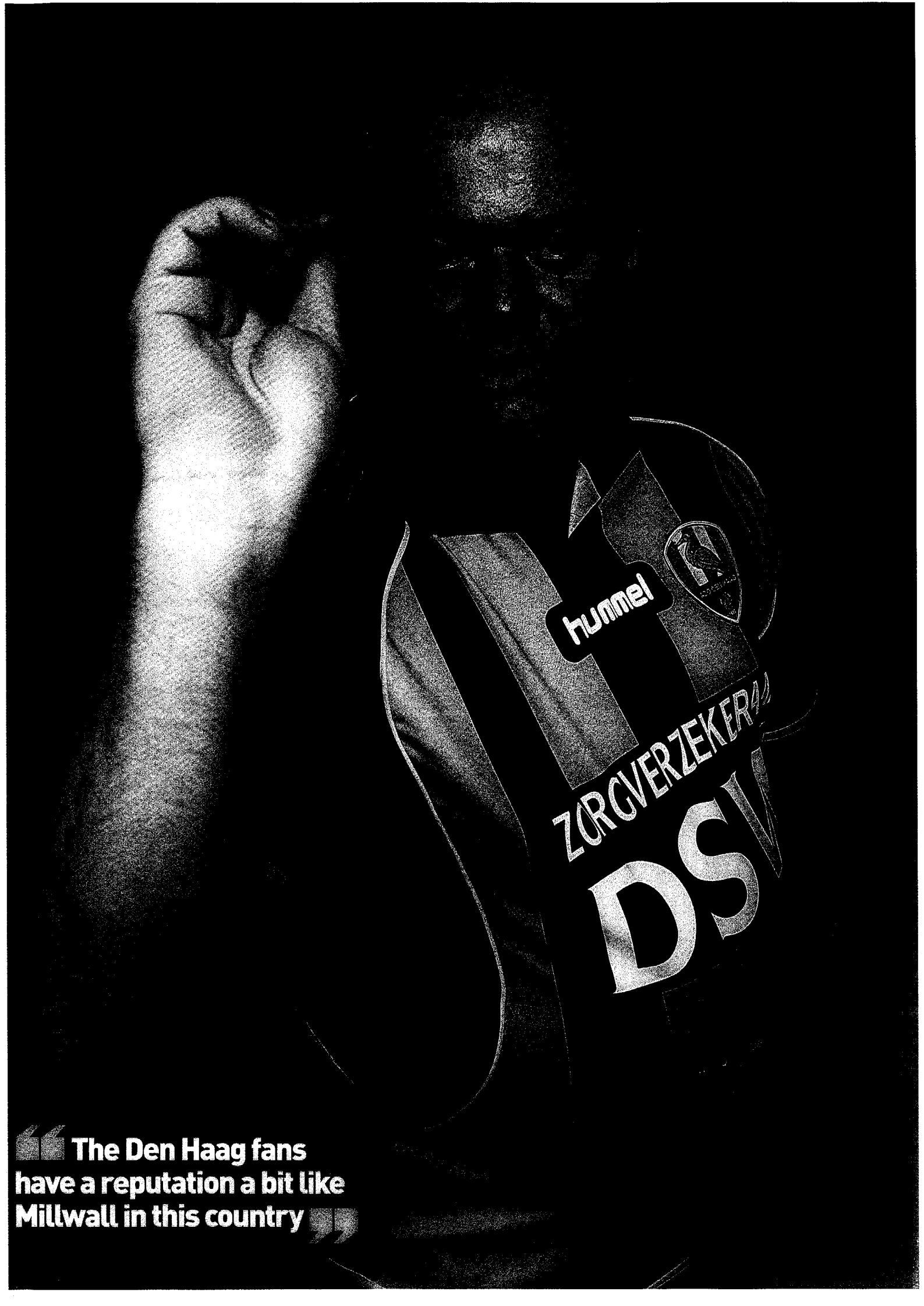
Stand up if you hate... Den Haag don't like Ajax, but then nobody likes Ajax in Holland. The perception is that people from Amsterdam have too much to say for themselves.

All-time hero? Johan Cruyff. If he'd been playing in 1978 I think we would have won the World Cup in Argentina.

Would you make your children support Den Haag? My son

already does. He's 17 and if they're at home he always goes. My 14-year-old daughter supports Ajax! She's not interested in football, but if I tell her to do something, she has to do the opposite. So if I say, 'support Den Haag', she supports Ajax!





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