

BOYBAND STAR'S READY FOR A REMATCH

FLASHBACK to Old Trafford, Manchester, the night of Sunday, June 6, 2010.

The match is less than 10 minutes old when Nicky Byrne from Westlife wins a penalty.

Supremely confident, he gets up to take it himself. The keeper he's facing is 45 years old. In his head, Nicky is already visualising his celebration, going mental in front of the Stretford End.

And why not? He's been a Manchester United fan all his life.

There's just one snag. That old keeper is England legend David Seaman. "And suddenly," Nicky recalls now with a wry smile, "he looks seven foot nine. That, and the goal looks tiny, like a five-a-side goal."

You can guess the rest. Nicky slips, Seaman saves. It's embarrassing. And there's little mercy from the 65,000 crowd. "I feel like an absolute idiot."

It's a feeling only worsened when Nicky muffs another in the shoot-out, this time against Jamie Theakston.

"What'll my mates at home be thinking?" That's what haunts him. "They'll never let me forget this!"

Still, it's only a charity match, right? One of Unicef's Soccer Aid fundraisers. There'll be others.

In fact, there's another this Sunday, live on ITV, with ex-pros once again lining up alongside big names from beyond the football universe. Usain Bolt and Brendan Cole, for example, will be on the same side. So will Sir Mo Farah and Lee Mack.

Which is why Nicky and I are sat chatting about it now.

The results shouldn't matter, of course. It's all about raising money for Unicef, helping children in danger. Over the years, Soccer Aid has brought in more than £24million.

Step

"Many of us taking part have very privileged lives," Nicky acknowledges. "So when the opportunity arises, you do your best to help."

But that's not to say things don't get competitive. "There's always a bit of needle," he admits. "I've had a few run-ins, with Jamie Redknapp, for example, and Jonathan Wilkes. And last time Ben Shephard got sent off."

Adding to Nicky's desire to win is the fact he could have made it as a pro. He played for Ireland, as a keeper (where he'll play again on Sunday), to under-18 level.

He was also part of the Leeds United squad that won the FA Youth Cup in 1997, with future stars Harry Kewell and Jonathan Woodgate.

When Leeds let him go, he says: "I felt like a failure." But then he'd hardly had the happiest time. "You feel like it's the first step to everything you've dreamed of," he recalls of signing up, "but you need real mental toughness to become a Premier League player. You literally sacrifice everything."

"At 16, I left my family, my friends and my girlfriend to go to England. All my mates were starting to go to pubs, and it was like I'd joined the Army or started a prison sentence."

The money helped, but it also felt disorientating. "I was on £300 a week in '95, which was probably what my dad was earning as a painter and decorator. I had no expenses because my digs were included, so I felt rich."

"Suddenly, I was buying Dolce & Gabbana, I was in Gucci, while my mates back home were wearing Primark and having to scrape to buy a drink."

When it all went pear-shaped, Nicky headed home, "feeling like the rug had been pulled from underneath me. Where would I go from here?"

The answer involved buying a karaoke machine and going out on the cabaret circuit with his dad.

"Then an audition came up with Louis Walsh's new band, and I thought: 'Well, what've I got to lose...?'"

Westlife became Nicky's life for 14 years. They had 26 UK Top 10 singles, sold 11million albums. They did OK. "But not everybody can become

When the chance comes you do your best to help



FOOTIE FAIL: Nicky misses the penalty in 2010. Left, keeper Seaman. Below, with his Westlife bandmates and tackling Robbie Fowler



Nicky Byrne Soccer Aid
MIKE WARD INTERVIEW

Robbie Williams after the boyband world ends..."

TV and radio work keeps Nicky more than busy these days, but he can't resist a challenge. In 2016 he fancied a crack at Eurovision. It proved scary.

"Suddenly I was out on my own, representing my country, thinking: 'Don't f*** this up!'" When he failed to make the final, he admits: "I had egg on my face. But I've no regrets."

Hosting Ireland's Dancing With The Stars with Amanda Byram also brings back fond memories of Strictly.

Well, fond-ish. "Craig Revel Horwood lambasted me every week," he recalls. "You put your heart and soul into it,

then you go live on a Saturday night and you're told you're s***, basically."

Still, Nicky's no quitter. He proved that at Soccer Aid 2014, putting that double penalty nightmare behind him to score a peach from the edge of the box into the top left corner.

"I thought: 'I've made it now, I've done everything! Never mind who wins, I've scored in Soccer Aid against England, Stretford End, live on telly."

"My mates can go and shove it!"

● **SOCCER Aid For Unicef 2018**, hosted by Kirsty Gallacher and Dermot O'Leary, is on ITV on Sunday at 6.30pm. Kick-off 8pm. More details at socceraid.org.uk



SOCCER AID FOR UNICEF 2018, OLD TRAFFORD, 8PM SUNDAY