Jody Craddock in his studio

Striking out on his own IN THE WORLD OF ART

NATALIE PRIOR MEETS FORMER FOOTBALLER TURNED PROFESSIONAL ARTIST JODY CRADDOCK, PICTURES BY MIRIAM BALFRY

Making the break from the competitive world of football to forge a new career in the, arguably, even more cut-throat world of art was a gamble which appears to be paying dividends for former Wolverhampton Wanderers defender Jody Craddock, writes Natalie Prior.

The 40-year-old married father-of-three, who played professionally for the best part of two decades, has had a life-long passion for painting but it was only when Wolves' management decided Jody was surplus to requirements in May 2013 that he finally had the opportunity to turn his hobby into a full-time job.

"I had always enjoyed art at school and studied it at both GCSE and A-level but it was just a hobby – I really wanted to be a footballer so I focused on that," said Redditch-born Jody.

After breaking into league football at Cambridge United in the mid-1990s, he spent six years at Sunderland AFC with whom he won promotion to the top flight. When they were relegated in 2003 he switched to newly promoted Wolverhampton Wanderers where he eventually became club captain and made 237 appearances over 10 years.

With his number six Wolves shirt

Jody puts the finishing touches to one of his paintings

Paintings from Jody's La Bellezza Della Fusione collection

At a time when things were going so well on the pitch, Jody was hit by a bolt from the blue when his youngest son Toby, then aged just two, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia in May 2012. The brave youngster, who is now in remission, had to endure daily chemotherapy sessions to fight the disease.

Jody, who lives in the Worcestershire village of Cookley, supported wife Shelley and their other sons Luke, aged nine, and 11-year-old Joseph, through Toby's three-year battle.

Eloquent and modest, the former footballer speaks as passionately about art as he does about his family and admits to having now drawn a line under his footballing career.

He said: "The club were very understanding when Toby was ill but, I was coming to the end of my career anyway, and Wolves had just signed a new manager, who didn't want me, so the time was right to call it a day.

"I miss the lads and the banter but I don't miss playing at all. I loved it at the time but it was a job and it was hard work. After 20 years I was able to draw a line under it. I was lucky that I had something to move onto. As it was, the management made my decision for me. Football and art aren't so different – they both require discipline and that you put the hours in."

Having been granted a testimonial as a reward for 10 years' service, in May 2014 Jody took the opportunity to donate more than £20,000 to a cancer ward at Birmingham Children's Hospital where Toby received treatment. Following the tragic cot death of Jody and Shelley's first-born four-month-old son Jake in 2002, Jody has raised money for the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) charity and has also taken part in charity football matches as part of the Wolves All Stars team.

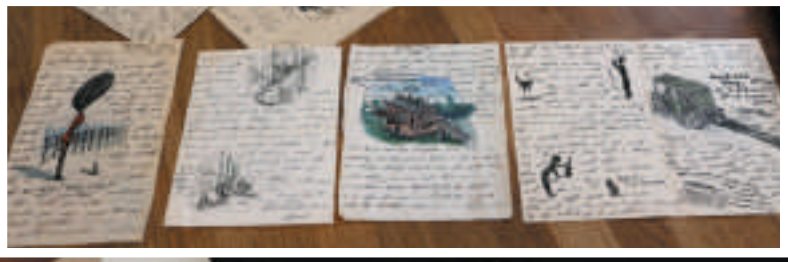
Many expected him to embark on a career as a football coach after hanging up his number six shirt – as a teenager he studied for a diploma in sports psychology and fitness and nutrition and later achieved a professional coaching licence. "A lot of people thought I would continue in football but I have always followed my heart rather than my head," he admitted.

During his footballing career, Jody enjoyed a lucrative art sideline as he was commissioned to paint portraits not only of his teammates and former Wolves owner Sir Jack Hayward but of other famous faces including former Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson and ex-England captains David Beckham and John Terry.

After his retirement, Jody began painting five days a week and experimented with different styles such as graffiti and photo realism. In November 2014, the Antidote Art Gallery in Lutterworth, Leicestershire, approached him with an offer to host an exhibition of his work having seen just one of his new-style paintings. The collection, unveiled in November 2015 and entitled La Bellezza Della Fusione, features eight paintings of classical Roman figures embellished with colourful graffiti. The pieces have already proved to be a hit with several original pieces being snapped up by art fans.

Jody, who is a fan of the 2014 Portrait Artist of the Year Christian Hook, said: "Each painting takes up to three weeks to complete, working around four hours a day. A lot of effort goes into each one. You have to be patient but there is a real sense of achievement with the completion of each painting. It doesn't feel like a job.

The drawings penned by Jody's great-grandfather from the battlefields of the First World War



"I start with an original concept and then put it all together – it's all planned. I am proud to be self-taught as I think it gives my work a more raw and natural look.

"I've always done portraits but I needed a proper identity as an artist and this is my new direction. I already have seven new paintings ready to go for a second exhibition."

As a child, Liverpool FC fan Jody loved drawing his comic book heroes like Batman and Spider-Man and his father and uncle both enjoyed drawing so an artistic streak clearly ran in the family. Later Jody was inspired by a series of letters sent home by his great-grandfather from the battlefields of the First World War which contained detailed sketches outlining his experiences.

As for the future, Jody, who still regularly watches Wolves play at home, is looking forward to spending more quality time with his family and developing his burgeoning art career.

He added: "I would like to be a household name and it would be brilliant if a publisher came along and snapped me up.

"I don't do it for the money – I love what I do. I will always do it whether I can sell my work or not but, one day, I would love to hear people say, 'That's a Jody Craddock on my wall'."

To find out more about Jody's work visit craddock-art.com or art-effect.com.

Jody with his great-grandfather's letters containing detailed battlefield sketches which inspired him