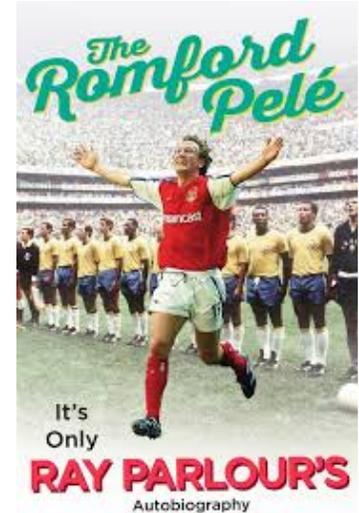


# the romford pelé

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In his autobiography, *The Romford Pelé*, Arsenal midfielder Ray Parlour, with the assistance of Invincible author Amy Lawrence, gives an interesting inside view of life at the Arsenal football club under two of the three legendary Arsenal managers, George Graham and Arsene Wenger (the third being Herbert Chapman, of course). Having appeared in more matches than any other Arsenal player in the Premier League era (12th all-time for the club in all matches) and having played on championship sides for both managers—including Wenger's Invincible squad of 2003-04—Parlour bridges nicely the era between the ending of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992) and Lawrence's own *Invincible*.



In his forward to Parlour's book, Arsene Wenger emphasizes the qualities that kept Parlour in his squads as attacking players such as Overmars, Pires and Henry joined the Gunners, for Ray "was a train who could go at a certain pace—not electric but he could maintain high energy for the whole game" (xi). When Arsenal had the likes of Henry, Bergkamp, and Ljungberg scoring brilliant goals, Parlour could be overlooked, as in the FA Cup Final in 2002 against Chelsea, when Fanzone commentator and Chelsea fan Tim Lovejoy famously commented, "He's put him through. Oh, it's all right. It's only Ray Parlour" (xiii) just as Parlour uncorks one of his career-best strikes to put Arsenal ahead. As Parlour describes,

Marcel Desailly turned his back a bit, he didn't dive at me or tackle me. He just let me shoot. I just hit it. There are times when it comes off your foot and you know it is going in. There is no doubt in your mind you have hit the sweet spot. It's perfect. The right height, the right trajectory, the right swerve. Carlo Cudicini just got fingertips to it. Unstoppable, though! It was probably the greatest moment of my life. (xv)

I enjoy such passages in *The Romford Pelé* which capture what it felt like from the athlete's perspective, a precise description of the moment with attention to detail and technique with no attempt to make the moment either journalistic or literary. Marc Overmars nicknamed Parlour "The Romford Pelé" after Ray juked a couple defenders and nutmegged Dennis Bergkamp before smashing the ball past David Seaman "in the top corner" in practice (107). But to make that kind of shot in the 2nd half of the FA Cup Final in the week Arsenal secured a double by winning the FA Cup and then clinching the league against Man United, to perform so well under pressure, in other words, is fantastic.

Periodically, Parlour will compare the club under Graham to the one under Wenger, and a number of his comments are not unusual, that defensive discipline and hard tackling were demanded of Graham's teams—then youth coach Pat Rice's mantra "make sure you win the first

tackle" (173), a paramount example. By contrast Wenger fostered creative flair and attacking mentality—in pre-season training "straight away the balls are out on the first day" (115) and the team concentrated on "pattern-play work. We practiced our movement—it wasn't luck" (117). Such has been Wenger's mantra for twenty years at Arsenal, and it has paid off in beautiful play if not always championships, but Parlour played on all three of Wenger's championship squads and on three of his six FA Cup champion teams as well. His behind-the-scenes stories about the Invincibles are worth the read, how Henry took over the Liverpool game in the second half with a hat-trick that included a goal "so brilliant you could almost feel Highbury shaking" (191), how they ignored the Tottenham stewards' warning not to celebrate clinching the title at White Hart Lane: "Thierry Henry led the charge and we bounded down to the Arsenal fans in the corner" (193). Such moments are a nice contrast to Parlour's Jim Boutonesque stories of booze-ups and practical jokes that sometimes threatened to send Ray and players such as Tony Adams off the rails—though the whole team coming out for practice with imitation ponytails to wind up goalie David Seaman's real one is hilarious.

Ironically, the season after the Invincibles, Parlour was playing for Middlesbrough against Arsenal when they were still on their 49-game unbeaten string which had carried over from the year before. With Middlesbrough up 3-1, it looked like the streak might end at Highbury, of all places, with a former Invincible helping to bring Arsenal down to earth, but late goals kept the streak going and left Parlour with understandable mixed feelings: "disappointed" at the loss for Middlesbrough but at the same time "pleased that Arsenal beat us" (218).

In the final chapter, "My Generation," Parlour names an all-time side of opponents he faced—e. g., Schmeichel, Cantona, Ronaldo, Giggs, Shearer—as well as an all-time Arsenal side he played with—Adams, Bould, Vieira, Bergkamp, Henry—and describes how each player fits into these fantasy squads. Of the Arsenal eleven, Parlour admits "I might not get in this team, but I wouldn't mind watching it, and I am proud to have played along such outstanding talent" (276). For the Arsenal fan, at least, this inside view of the Arsenal football club from the latter half of George Graham's tenure to the early years of Arsene Wenger's is well worth the read.

Parlour, Ray, with Amy Lawrence. *The Romford Pelé* (Penguin, 2016).

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