

# tanking it to the limit

**THE BEAST** Words ADAM THORN Photography NAKI

**Meet The Beast:** The Nando's-chomping Northampton striker who weighs in at 16 stone. But whatever you do, don't you dare tell him that he looks like a fat Eddie Murphy...

It's Saturday October 13 and, on a chilly afternoon in Northampton's Sixfields stadium, Exeter City are attempting to somehow clear their lines against a relentless barrage of crosses from the home team, who are marauding further and further into their area. They manage to thump the ball 10 yards from their defensive line, before their right back, 32-year-old Steve Tully, decides to take some responsibility for this mess and go hurtling towards the ball to attempt to boot it upfield and give their now knackered back line some respite. Big mistake. Because heading directly towards him, eyes possessed and mouth snarling, is Northampton's 16 stone tank of a striker, Adebayo Akinfenwa. A man the fans simply call 'The Beast'.



And as he gallops forward, both sets of supporters wince – they know there is only going to be one man coming out of this with the ball, and Tully, mate, it isn't you. The pair launch off the ground head first, before The Beast controls the ball down to the grass with his chest. What they didn't see coming though, was how the Nigerian born player rapidly spun his body 180 degrees, glanced up, before cracking the ball past the helpless keeper from a good 20 yards out.

### faster, stronger, bigger

This then, was just another typical day for Northampton's very untypical cult hero Adebayo Akinfenwa. As *loaded* goes to press, he is currently the league's third highest goal scorer and helping drag his team towards the play offs despite their limited budget. Not surprisingly, given his strike rate and enormous size, he's attracted quite a bit of attention nationwide.

"Whatever team I have played for I have been taken to by the home fans, but I also get some stick from every away ground I go to," he tells *loaded* when we ask what kind of reaction he gets on tough away trips. "I totally enjoy it, but they can get at me; abuse me really badly. I keep saying my favourite chant is 'He's just a fat Eddie Murphy'. That whole 'Who ate all the pies' banter I enjoy. The best way to shut them up is to score goals. If I'm not getting stick I am not affecting the game as I should be. I thank the almighty that the fans like me."

But how on earth does a young Akinfenwa break into football at a time when lighter, nippy wingers are the fashion? "I was always bigger than everyone else but not drastically as a youngster," he explains. "I was quick and big. Football is what I wanted to do – nothing came close. I set my heart and mind to it. Growing up I was that much faster and stronger than everyone else."

### beast mode

It's been a career that has, amazingly, seen him play in European's top tier competitions. From starting as a youngster playing for his team at Highbury Grove school in North London, he went on to gain a youth team contract at Watford. "The club didn't offer me a long-term deal so I went to play for a Lithuanian team, FK Atlantas, who I played against while at Watford. They asked me to come for a trial for two weeks and signed me after three days. They had the allure of Champions League and UEFA cup football." After two years there, he came back to the UK to play for clubs including Torquay United, Swansea City – where he scored the winning goal in the 2006 Football League Trophy final – Millwall and Gillingham before his second of two stints at Northampton.

He insists that his huge size has actually benefitted his stellar career. "I weigh 16 and a half stone. I do work hard, I do extra cardio before training, but I also enjoy the gym and try to go three or four times a week. But I need to be mobile enough to get around the pitch. I have to maintain cardio and watch what I eat. People think I love fast food, but – being of Nigerian descent – I love my home cooked meals – full food. I don't do KFC or McDonald's. Nando's is the only taste I like. I'm a home

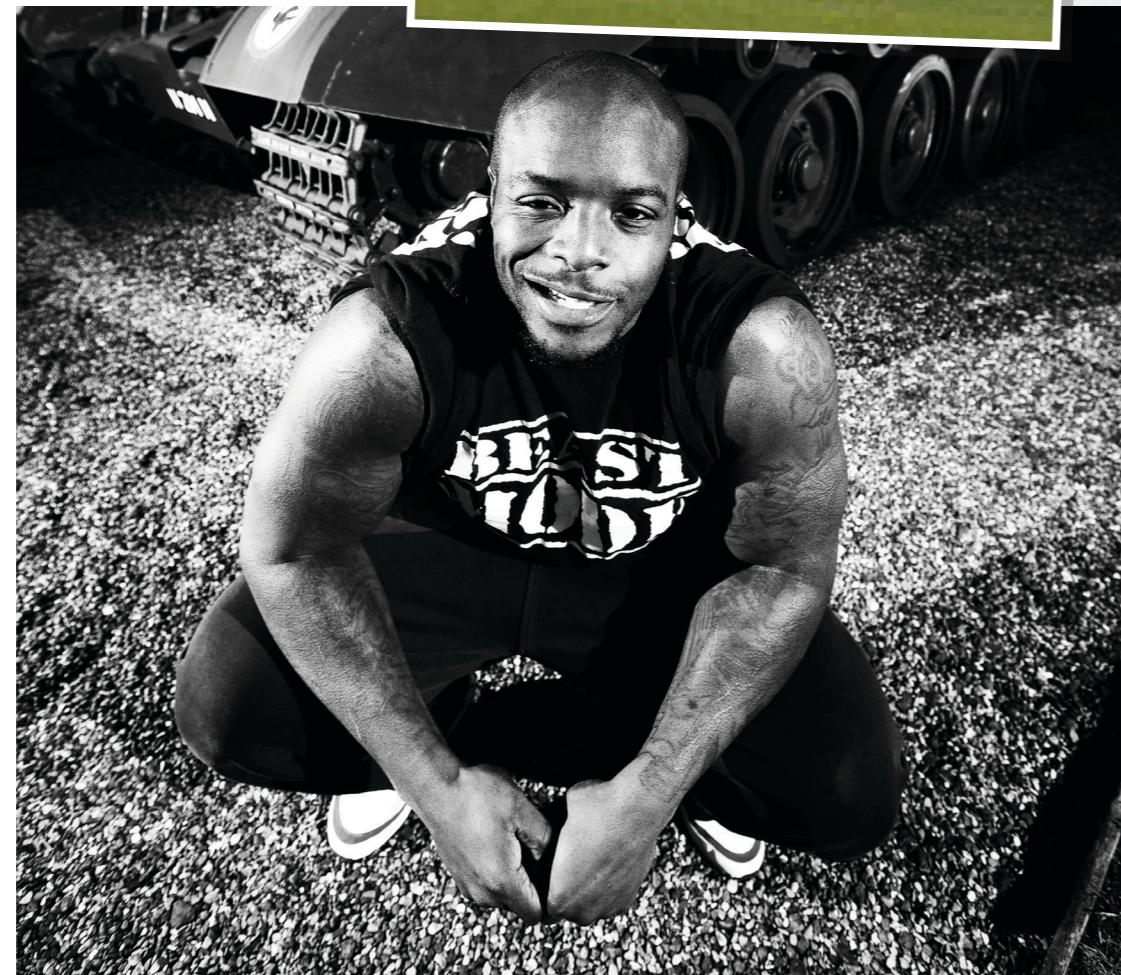
buddy. It helps me maintain my edge."

Actually he is downplaying the whole Nando's thing – because you don't become an absolute tank of a man without consuming an ungodly amount of the stuff.

"I cook a lot. But beforehand, I like to train on an empty stomach – toast and juice will do me before a session. After I will have rice or chicken, or a Nando's. I enjoy my meat. I like to train hard and go hard so I can treat myself to a big meal. The fans don't just chant 'Adebayo for England' but also 'Give him a Nando's'."

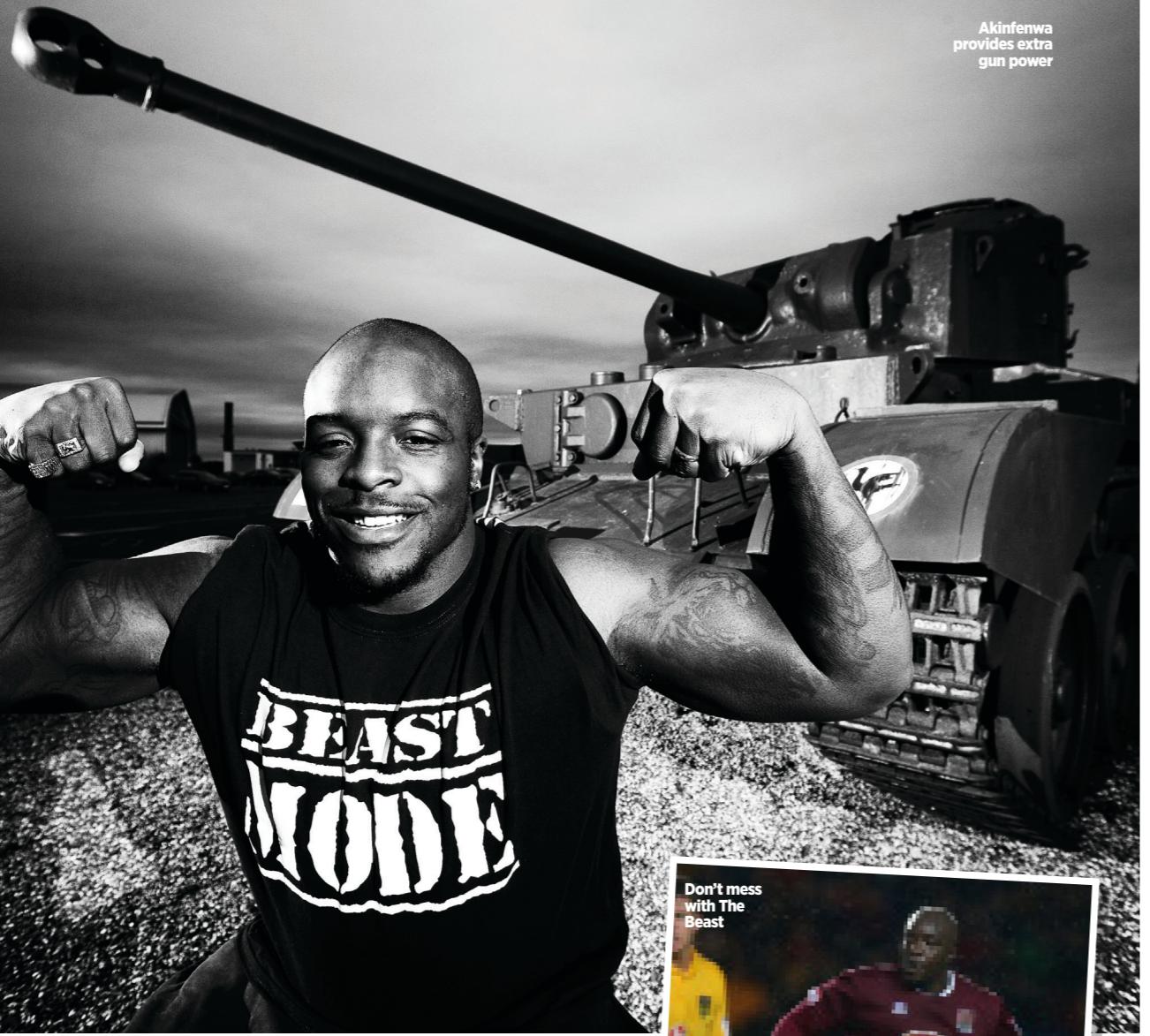
And perhaps it's all this meat and intense workouts that allows him to switch into – what he calls anyway – Beast Mode. This bonkers self-created slogan is what he terms the process by which he raises his performance level to help him out-run, out-think and out-score the opposition. We think it sounds like a rather bad episode of *Transformers*.

"I have a clothes line called Beast Mode with the Haha brand, but the slogan came about because I was too big to play football," he explains, when we ask just what is going



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You've got no chance mate!



on. "But now I think, 100 goals later, I have done it and proved them wrong. Beast Mode is putting your all in no matter your appearance."

All very well and good, except we don't really think going primeval is for us. "But you can be a writer or a doctor and still go into Beast Mode," he adds. "It is about applying yourself to the best of your ability. I admired John Barnes but as you get older you realise you aren't built the same so you learn to utilise your body. I target the game to be the best at what I bring. Professionals are just amateurs that didn't quit. You won't always succeed but you will never know if you don't try." Blimey.

#### fifa's strongest

We can't imagine how tough it is for the centrebacks who have the misfortune of having to tame The Beast. "I think it's like anything, 80 percent are wary that I'm a big guy," he adds, now in full flow. "I'm aggressive on the pitch. Most don't want to incur the wrath of the angry Beast. Then there the others who want to test themselves and get stuck in. Personally, I prefer the fight. You can only get better if you test yourself; I want to go strength to strength with them. As you get higher up the leagues they don't want to get into a scuffle. There are not many players pound for pound stronger than me. Most games people try to come in and tackle me but come out worse."

**"MOST GAMES PEOPLE TRY TO TACKLE ME BUT COME OUT WORSE"**



The reason he has such a cult following despite his humble League Two career is that he is officially the strongest player in the world - on Fifa (which is all that matters). And if you search him on YouTube, you'll see countless videos showing the virtual man in action, scoring astonishing goals and hurling GBH at poor Premier League defenders. "I want to shout out to EA sports because I have been rated the strongest in the game for the last two versions. There aren't as many as strong as me. It would be arrogant to say I am the strongest, but it's nice to get the recognition." Well you'd be a brave man to tell him otherwise. ■ **loaded**  
Thanks to the Imperial War Museum in Duxford