

Wycombe's Luke O'Nien: Juggling a tennis ball makes your touch really sensitive

Midfielder O'Nien's ball-juggling skills have gone viral but he will take a more traditional approach against Tottenham in the FA Cup fourth round



[Wycombe's Luke O'Nien takes on our keepie-uppie challenge](#)

The video of Wycombe Wanderers watching their name come out of the hat [to play Tottenham in the FA Cup](#) is quite something. Sitting in a conference room the players, half of them glued to their phones, let out an “oooooh” when Spurs’ number is called out. When Martin Keown announces the opposition will be Wycombe they, to use the technical term, go totally tonto.

“You saw the reaction,” says the [Wycombe](#) midfielder Luke O'Nien. “Everybody’s looking forward to the game. Spurs are a great team to watch, their manager has a real influence on the way they play. I always try to learn from players and Mousa Dembélé is one I like to watch. He’s a very strong midfielder. Hopefully I’ll be ready when he comes around.” He pauses, then adds: “I hope to put in a good performance.”

O'Nien, 22, has been at the heart of the Wycombe side on a 16-match unbeaten run that has taken them to the League Two play-off places, the semi-finals of the Checkatrade Trophy and Saturday’s [moneyspinner of an FA Cup tie](#). Before being introduced to O'Nien there comes a warning that he is fluent in footballese. In fact he is not only polite and charming but thoughtful and engaged. In a short time he has experienced highs and lows that a footballer might expect to face over the course of a career. In the way he has dealt with those challenges, O'Nien comes across as a model of how a professional must approach the game.

Born and raised in Hemel Hempstead, O'Nien started attending Watford’s academy from the age of six, tagging along with his elder brother. Officially inducted aged eight, it was training on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and games on Saturdays. “Yeah, football was my childhood,” says O'Nien. “And different sports in the off-season.”

He may have been hothoused by the football industry but it was O’Nien’s father, Terry, who was driving the youngster’s development. Terry, a professional golfer, would train with his son in the field at the back of the family home. “I think I caused him a few knee operations,” says O’Nien, before recalling the winter when, snowed out of school, he had to stand in the field and control long balls on the volley before juggling them and smashing them back across the pitch. “I’ve learned so much from my dad,” he says.

As well as physical practice, Terry worked on his son’s mental game. “We talk, we live football,” O’Nien says. “Any aspect of any sport, we’ve covered it. We talk about it a lot from the psychology side. I read a lot of books on psychology, I watch a lot of TED talks. In our family you’ll read something and then debate every side and try to get a better understanding of the situation. That’s something we do which is quite cool.”

It does not take very long talking with O’Nien to realise how his psychological conditioning has helped him develop a career as an athlete. After turning pro with Watford in 2013 he went on loan for a season in the National League, playing 40 games for Wealdstone. “I recommend any youngster who’s not playing just to go out there,” he says. “It’s hard, it’s difficult but we all worked for each other and I learned a great deal.”

On returning to Watford in the summer of 2015 he hoped to kick on. Instead he found out he had been released. He was never told to his face – the club instead called his father, who relayed the news.

“Sometimes when things look like they’re falling apart, when you take a step back they’re actually coming together,” says O’Nien, characteristically. “I remember not being at a club. It was difficult but it was also part of life. You could argue it was my first major setback, but I didn’t look at it like that – I used it as motivation to prove people wrong.”

O’Nien reacted to his departure by getting in the best shape of his life. “The focus was now on the next step and that meant I needed to work hard,” he says. “I needed to come back day one of pre-season because that was going to be my trial day. I didn’t know where or when or anything like that, but I had to be ready for it.”

That trial day came at Wycombe and it was enough. O’Nien was offered a one-year deal that was extended by a further three at the end of last season. A leg fracture at the beginning of this season gave him another opportunity to discover the positives in challenging circumstances: “I was finding every kind of activity I could do, like sitting down boxing, and when the physio wasn’t looking I was probably doing keepee-uppies with the crutches.”

O’Nien returned to the first team less than three months later and has not been out of it since.

He has said he hopes to represent Singapore, the country of his maternal grandfather, at international level. He also has ambitions to play abroad (and is learning French and Spanish to help with that aim). With a bit of luck, he might even reach the Premier League. Until then, he can make do with his current sideline. All those keepee-uppies in the snow have paid off because YouTube footage of O’Nien juggling footballs, tennis balls and, after his father’s heart, a golf ball, have gone viral. He admires the freestyle footballers who, in certain cases, are earning reputations to rival the real ones. But, as is typical of the young man, he juggles for a purpose.

“I can tell you now I haven’t got eight ‘around the worlds’ and I can’t balance the ball on my neck,” he says. “I do like to watch [freestyle football] and the guys who do it are incredible but I wouldn’t do an around the world in a game so I wouldn’t practise it. You might argue I wouldn’t control a tennis ball either, but it makes you really sensitive; you’ve got to be accurate with your touch. When you go back on to the football, it feels massive.”

Practice makes perfect they say. Now all O’Nien has to do is to take it to Dembélé.