

Bradley on the set of his new ITV1 game show, *Cash Trapped*

Bradley Walsh

## “Variety is great for the soul”

From award-winning dramas to daytime quiz shows this versatile star just can't stop performing. By **Simon Evans**

**H**AD THE dice fallen rather differently Bradley Walsh could have carved out a career as a professional footballer.

The actor, comedian and game show host is perhaps best-known for the long-running drama series *Law & Order*, for his stint in *Coronation Street*, and for hosting ITV1 quiz show *The Chase*, but at the age of 18 he had signed professional terms with Brentford FC. Ankle fracture injuries put paid to his dreams of soccer stardom, but Bradley already had his eyes on an alternative career.

“Growing up it was always going to be football until my mum, Margaret, took me to the London Palladium to see Tommy Steele in *Hans Christian Andersen*. I said if I don't play football for a living, that is what I want to do,” he recalled. The year was 1974, and Bradley was 14-years-old, and that show instilled a life-long love of showbusiness.

“I thought all I ever wanted to do was kick a football but I can remember being overawed by these young kids on stage.

“I saw football as showbusiness anyway. As a young child at family gatherings I'd stand up and tell jokes and I acted and sang in productions at school, so right from the start I had a natural aptitude to perform.”

Bradley was born in Watford in 1960 and grew up in a council house in nearby Leavesden.

“My mother was a single parent, who had to struggle hard to make ends meet,” he told the *Telegraph*. “At one point she

was holding down three different jobs. It was a happy childhood but we certainly didn't have a great deal of money.”

From the age of 14 Bradley started taking on odd jobs, including a stint as a baker's boy. He would get up at 4.30am to help the baker unload his van at 5am, go home to grab an hour's sleep, and then get ready for school.

“I think I've inherited my mother's attitude, that hard work will pay off,” he says. “I believe you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it.”

Bradley left school at 16 and started working as an apprentice jet engineer in the Rolls Royce Helicopter Engine factory before being snapped up by Brentford FC. Although he never made the first team, Bradley had a run in the reserves, and also had successful loan spells with Dunstable Town, scoring 15 goals in 25 appearances, and Barnet.

When his football career ended, Bradley was able to indulge his early love of showbusiness by working as a bluecoat at Pontin's in Morecambe for three months, earning £37 a week after his board and lodgings were deducted.

“It was there I got the bug to perform,” he says. “I wrote to about 25 bookers and agents yet only one replied, with a gig at a club in Kilburn. But I was paid £45 for a 40-minute slot, which was a fortune for me, as I had only been paid £120 for a week's work at the factory.”

He started picking up more and more gigs but becoming a father in his early 20s made Bradley realise he had to start

“I didn't want to do the same thing all the time”

◀ earning some serious money. “In the early days it was a struggle to juggle my day job with showbusiness ambitions and there were times when we were left with £5 at the end of the week for food,” he says.

His daughter, Hayley, is now 34 and Bradley also has a son, Barney, with wife Donna, a choreographer who he has been married to for 19 years, having met in 1992. They spent the first few years of married life in Donna’s East London ‘manor’ Canning Town, but the couple now live in Chigwell, Essex

Hayley, he says, never showed any interest in following her old man onto the stage, preferring a behind the scenes role.

“I do seem to remember she’d tap me up when she was younger for the odd pop star’s autograph though!”

Bradley’s big break came when he was asked to host the Royal Variety Show. He was 33 at the time.

“An ITV executive had seen me support Shirley Bassey in concert – that was my lucky break. As I’d done my apprenticeship by working in the clubs for years, being booed off stage at Blackpool, having to win over audiences of 11,000 when I was a support act for Tom Jones at the NEC in the late Eighties, it was very welcome, and opened doors for me.”

Having started out as a comedian, Bradley soon realised he had to broaden his horizons and try his hand at acting, despite not having any formal training.

“I never did any of that drama school stuff. What’s the point in all that ‘act like you’re a tree’ rubbish. I know it’s meant to help you get in touch with your inner self but how often in your life do you need to be a tree?”

Bradley’s first major acting breakthrough was in the Channel 4 series, *Lock, Stock...* followed by that of spineless yes-man Dave Dodds in the film version of *Mike Bassett: England Manager*. His career took a big leap forward, however,

Bradley reliving his early footballing days at a charity match



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when he took on the role of factory manager Danny Baldwin in *Coronation Street*, the son of factory owner Mike Baldwin. Although, at the time, Bradley was also

hosting a chat show and a variety show as well as appearing in panto, he relished the pressure. “Anyone who tells you an actor’s life is stressful is having you on,” he told the *Mirror* at the time.

“If they think it’s too much to take they should get out of it. Why don’t they go to bed early like anyone else who has to get up early? I’ll tell you what stress is, it’s being a single-mum in a one-roomed flat in Kosovo, it’s digging roads from dawn till dusk, it’s being a miner. It’s not being able to feed your kids. I’ve been in showbusiness for 20 years and I’m still pinching myself.” Bradley almost didn’t

take the role of Danny however; it was wife Donna who persuaded him.

“She’s the one who recognised what it could do for me even though it would mean being apart.”

Making the most of his raised media profile, Bradley began hosting the popular daytime quiz show *The Chase* in 2009 and one edition, in which he was confronted with having to pronounce the name of German alpine skier Fanny Chmelar has long been a Youtube favourite. In fact it became a tradition that writers on the show would deliberately come up with names to catch him out.

From 2009 to 2014 Bradley also starred in 53 episodes of the ITV detective series *Law & Order: UK* as world-weary copper DS Ronnie Brooks, and he relished slipping between these two very different roles, that of serious actor and quiz show host. “When I’m doing *The Chase* I can be me and have a laugh, but we make 150 of

those shows a year and sometimes a change is as good as a rest. Variety is great for the soul, so for four months of the year I’m a detective.”

Although his career has also embraced stand-up comedy, Bradley prefers to think of himself as, first and foremost, an actor. That’s not to say he doesn’t enjoy playing host, be it new ITV1 week day quiz show *Cash Trapped*, or *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*.

Of *Cash Trapped*, Bradley says, “It was an idea I came up with in my dressing room about ten years ago whilst in between scenes on a drama.” It involves six contestants going head-to-head in a series of fast question rounds trying to trap their competitors out of the game.

Although *The Chase*, ‘*Corrie*’, *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and *Law & Order: UK* have made him a household name, life has not always run smoothly for Bradley. He was linked romantically with Bernie Nolan in the late Eighties, but the relationship disintegrated amidst some bitterness, and Bradley found himself in the tabloids again some 15 years later over his close friendship with fellow

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*Coronation Street* star Debra Stephenson.

And last year his comedy series *Sun Trap* was a critical and commercial flop, one critic remarking that “there are things I’d rather do than watch *Sun Trap* and one of them is watching paint dry”.

The series had been a conscious attempt by Bradley to open a new chapter in his career.

“I had spent so many years on *Law & Order* being a downtrodden detective standing on Hammersmith Bridge at six o’clock in the morning, being rained and snowed on, and I thought, ‘I’ll have a bit of a change of direction in my career and go and do *Sun Trap* in Gran Canaria. That was the deciding factor for me.”

“That’s the whole basis of what I wanted to do with my career. I didn’t want to do the same thing all the time. Everyone’s path is different. It’s not always about money – sometimes it’s about the journey.” Despite the knocks, Bradley says it is his love of showbusiness, instilled in



Bradley with wife Donna and son Barney

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all those years ago at the London Palladium, that still motivates him.

“There have been times when I’ve felt like packing it all in but it’s the love of this business that’s kept me going and the endless support I’ve had from people like Des O’Connor who’s been like a dad to me and, when he was alive, Bob Monkhouse who never stopped encouraging me.”

He has little time, however, for the new breed of reality show ‘entertainers’.

“It’s galling that people who sweat blood and tears on stages all over Britain can’t even get a sniff of work on national television while these idiots are presented as so-called entertainment.

“At least *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing* are about people achieving goals. At least they’re trying to entertain.

“At the end of the day everyone’s path is different. It’s not always about money, sometimes it’s about the journey. It’s taken me 53 years to get here, so maybe there’ll be more twists and turns, who knows? There is only one thing around the corner, and that’s more corners.”



Bradley in *Law & Order: UK*

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