

Renaissance Man

IN THE 30 YEARS SINCE **BOBBY DEKEYSER** 'RETIRED', THE FORMER PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLER HAS BUILT ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SUCCESSFUL OUTDOOR FURNITURE COMPANIES, ESTABLISHED A CHARITABLE FOUNDATION, CREATED A LUXURY RESORT ON A SECLUDED ISLAND IN THE PHILIPPINES, AND TRADED LIFE IN THE FAST LANE FOR A 35-ACRE FARM IN NORTH-WEST IBIZA. HERE, DEKEYSER TALKS OVERCOMING ADVERSITY, DEALING WITH GRIEF AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVING BACK

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“Looking back, I have to say that Bayern Munich came too early for me. I wasn’t mature enough yet for the pressures and pitfalls of that parallel world”

all the problems of everyday life, when you’re given everything. A life apparently without worry is quickly taken for granted.”

Yearning to do something more creative, and with a wife and two children to support, the then 26-year-old turned entrepreneur. His first venture involved selling kitsch, hand-painted skis out of a loan-facilitated barn outside of Munich. “It didn’t work out,” Dekeyser laughs. “But it was a good lesson on what not to do when starting out in business”.

Spending a lot of time outdoors, Dekeyser came up with his next business idea: garden furniture that could be enjoyed all year round. He sold his first range of chairs to Club Med, which broke within weeks, leading to an “interesting” showdown with hotel management. “Looking back, one tends to romanticise adversity. In reality, it’s exhausting, but I did learn how to deal with setbacks”.

The search for a more durable product took Dekeyser to the Philippines, a place where textile weaving dates back to the 13th century and holds great cultural significance as a recreational and social activity. Dekeyser fell in love with the islands’ people and, he says, their culture.

“So we all moved there – my wife, my two kids, my uncle and my aunt. We moved there for eight months to really learn how to produce proper furniture.”

The first company to utilise and operate its own fibre-and-woven furniture production, Dedon’s mission statement was simple: ‘to be a celebration of life’. “Only a happy employee invents a comfortable chair,” Dekeyser laughs. Dedon grew into a global brand, with a database of more than 700,000 clients and representation in more than 80 countries. PLAY, perhaps the company’s most celebrated collection, was created in collaboration with renowned product designer, Philippe Starck.

A life spent on the road – up to 12 countries a month, says Dekeyser – soon took its toll. “Sometimes an entrepreneur has to be an actor, and that just isn’t in my nature.” In 2006, Dekeyser sold a minority stake in Dedon to a private equity ▶



“I came from a background in soccer,” says a sun-kissed Bobby Dekeyser, the former Bayern Munich goalkeeper, speaking over Zoom from one of the many terraces of his Ibizan home. “Soccer was very rigid. It was about training not to look left and right, but forward, in one direction. It was a great experience, but I was happy to move away from that – I never wanted to be focused on just one goal.”

Dekeyser was 12 when, after cutting off the cast of a misdiagnosed leg injury, he took part in trials in his native Germany for a Pelé-endorsed football training camp in New York. Selected from thousands of young applicants, Dekeyser spent a summer in the States before returning to stints at several German youth clubs and a bench position at second division FC Kaiserslautern. Dekeyser’s big break came aged 21 when he challenged Bayern Munich player Jean-Marie Pfaff to a penalty shootout in a car park after passing him in a hotel lobby in Frankfurt.

“Sometimes a door opens an inch, and you realise that a chance has come to enter a different room completely.”



Dekeyser signed for Bayern Munich for a year, before an elbow to the face while playing for rivals 1860 Munich in 1991 – which left the Belgium-born footballer in hospital for several weeks – marked the end of his footballing career.

“Looking back, I have to say that Bayern Munich came too early for me,” says the 60-year-old. “I wasn’t mature enough yet for the pressures and pitfalls of that parallel world. It’s not good when you’re courted, when you are liberated from

TOP BOBBY AND HIS DAUGHTER, CAROLIN ABOVE AND RIGHT NAY PALAD FARM, IBIZA ©SAYANACAIRO



THIS IMAGE AND OPPOSITE
NAY PALAD FARM, PHILIPPINES

firm. Ensuring that the values he instilled weren't left behind – Dekeyser had always been sure to look after his staff, including arranging daily transport and credit cards for each of his 3,000 employees in the Philippines – the deal was signed with a special clause, the 'Bobby Principle', designed to protect the corporate culture he'd attempted to foster.

Parting ways with Dedon allowed Dekeyser to focus on philanthropy. The Dekeyser & Friends foundation was established to support and fund social change projects around the world. "Starting the foundation helped me express my values," says Dekeyser, "and the values I want to pass on to my children." Over the years the foundation has

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supported thousands of individuals, with projects stretching from Mumbai to Malawi. Through the Compostela Village Project in Cebu in the Philippines, for example, Dekeyser helps families living on dumpsites to build more sustainable lives.

Despite no longer being with the company officially, when the 2008 financial crisis left Dedon in a precarious position, Dekeyser realised he hadn't been able to shake the emotional responsibility he felt for the business and its employees. He bought back his stake in the company.

"It might sound absurd but it's the truth: I love crises – they give me energy. What I loved from the beginning was telling stories. Don't get me wrong, I love furniture [laughs] but I was never a furniture connoisseur – beyond great quality and beautiful designs, it became about what stories we could tell."

Back at the helm, Dekeyser began experimenting with how to tell the brand's "story", launching *Tour Du Monde*, a catalogue of gorgeous travel photography that captured his furniture around the world, shot, in part, ▶



by fashion photographer and filmmaker, Bruce Weber. Flick through most furniture catalogues today, and you'll likely see stock images of families lounging in staged living rooms. Flick through a *Tour Du Monde* catalogue, and you'll see an artfully-woven, Dedon chair suspended from a cliff in front of a waterfall.

The Dedon website describes the *Tour Du Monde* as 'an ongoing, around-the-world adventure in search of unique moments under the open skies.' To capture such breath-taking photography and video (and the visual content on the company's website truly is breath-taking), Dekeyser routinely takes an entourage of 40 staff with him, visiting dream destinations from Kenya to Thailand, and from India to the French Alps.

Within a year of his Dedon return, Dekeyser launched a wholly-owned US subsidiary, Dedon USA, opening showrooms in LA and New York (while living in New York he became locally renowned for paddle-boarding up the Hudson River from Tribeca to Harlem). He also purchased an island in the Philippines, close to Dedon's factory, which he named Dedon Island.

It was during a trip with his daughter to neighbouring Cebu that Dekeyser received a call that would change his life. He was informed by his sister-in-law that his childhood sweetheart,

Dekeyser became locally renowned for paddle-boarding up the Hudson River from Tribeca to Harlem



THIS IMAGE AND ABOVE
NAY PALAD FARM, IBIZA ©SAYANACAIRO



and beloved wife of 20 years, Ann-Kathrin had suffered a bleed on the brain. During the 18 hours of travel it took to return back to Germany, Ann-Kathrin passed away.

The episode resulted in Dekeyser leaving Dedon for the second, and final, time in 2014. "I vowed to live life even more consciously," he says, "to trust my feelings and to not live for other expectations. I decided not to be afraid of anything, as Anna-Kathrin is always with us".

Dekeyser took the decision to transform Dedon Island into a luxury resort, renaming it Nay Palad Hideaway – 'nay palad' meaning 'mother's palm' in Filipino, a symbol synonymous with care, love and respect. The all-inclusive resort, which reopened in 2023 after super typhoon Odette had destroyed much of it two years earlier, boasts secluded beaches, tree houses, 20 dining options, and an extensive spa. Nay Palad Hideaway is, says Dekeyser, the antithesis of "hotels that tell you what time you need to wake up and have breakfast. There's no small print or signing cheques – everything is included."

In 2018, Dekeyser extended the Nay Palad brand by constructing Nay Palad Farm, a finca in Ibiza with 35 acres of land, organic gardens and natural pools, where he and his children now spend most of their time – along with a collection of alpacas, donkeys, goats, dogs and chickens. The farm started as a private residence but, as of this year, is now available for private rental. Six bedrooms provide access to a padel court, football pitch, basketball court, outdoor gym, as well as a sauna and steam room.

"I no longer measure success in material things," says Dekeyser, who, during his footballing career, returned an Aston Martin DB9 to a dealership after "achieving no personal satisfaction", just anguish at its impracticality and fear of waking the entire village in his rural Germany (he's been driving the same beaten-up Ford F Series pick-up truck for decades).

"These days, luxury to me is about having less. In 10 years' time all I think I'll want is a little cottage by the sea and the freedom to travel." ■

To register your interest to stay at Nay Palad Farm, email home@naypaladfarm.com; naypaladhideaway.com