

A different Drogba

Football

NORMAN HUBBARD

That the front-runner for the Footballer of the Year award is in the Chelsea attack is no surprise. It is his identity that confounds expectation. So too though, does the sight of Didier Drogba on top of the goalscorers' chart. Many accusations have been levelled at him in his time at Chelsea, but clinical finishing was rarely among them.

Now things have changed. Drogba has 14 goals to Andriy Shevchenko's five. It is a sign of the 30.7-million-pound striker's place in the hierarchy at Stamford Bridge that Drogba is often left alone up front while the Ukrainian is substituted.

Jose Mourinho has described the Ivorian as the best striker in Europe on current form, a title that, at various points in the last eight years, has belonged to Shevchenko. Not any more. There have been times since his move from Marseille when many would have disputed the labelling of Drogba as the foremost forward at Stamford Bridge, let alone Europe.

Now Drogba's higher status among Chelsea's firmament of stars has been cemented by a new and improved four-year contract that should end speculation of a return to France or a move to Italy.

It is further proof that in the department of a superannuated squad who have witnessed Mourinho's ruthless side more often than not, Drogba is the ultimate survivor.

Among the forwards, the home-sick Hernan Crespo left in the summer along with Carlton Cole, constantly regarded as a reserve, and Eidur Gudjohnsen, subject of a midfield conversion by his manager before his departure to Barcelona. Mateja Kezman was sold the previous summer and Adrian Mutu summarily sacked the year before that. Only Drogba remains.

It helps that he has always conformed to Mourinho's team ethic. An imposing, disruptive physical frame and a willingness to work ensured defenders were always aware of his presence, even if his shooting sometimes did not trouble goalkeepers.

Playing alone in attack, as he did for the majority of his first two seasons in English football, required the self-sufficiency Drogba has displayed in recent times. Though accompanied by a



DIDIER DROGBA

partner (Shevchenko) for the majority of the current campaign, it has shone through in the way he has conjured chances out of nothing; as glorious winners against Barcelona and Liverpool show. Service from the flanks is traditionally the staple diet of target men, but Chelsea's narrow midfield can occasionally deprive the strikers of crosses leaving them to fend for themselves.

Drogba's blossoming into a prolific goalscorer can be attributed to increased competition and company in attack, as well as an increasing aptitude for the big occasion. The arrival of Shevchenko indicated Drogba could be dropped if Mourinho persisted with a solitary striker. Instead, they have been paired together and the Ivorian appears the beneficiary, not least because defenders may be distracted by the presence of the former European Footballer of the Year.

Two hat-tricks already, against Levski Sofia and Watford, indicate a determination to capitalise on the chances offered by weaker opponents. But how many of Drogba's haul are directly attributable to Shevchenko? The walloping of Watford, where the strikers shared the four goals, was the most con-

vincing case for a burgeoning partnership, though it appeared as though Drogba provided the former AC Milan man with more chances than vice-versa.

The long-range strikes against Liverpool and Barcelona suggest Drogba, at 28, is still adding to his armoury, as does an increasing interest in free kicks - although he may have to wrestle the ball from Frank Lampard's grasp in this department.

His greater confidence is also reflected in the most controversial element of his repertoire of skills; now that his most valuable contribution to the Chelsea cause is not winning a penalty, Drogba seems capable of retaining his balance and has even shown an ability to stay on his feet under pressure.

Even when not scoring, as against West Ham on Saturday, he had a goal disallowed for offside and induced the foul from Danny Gabbidon that led to the free kick for Geremi's winner. Perhaps the contribution from the Cameroonian should have been expected. One of the intriguing subplots in Chelsea's season, besides the plight of the wingers, is African excellence.

Drogba has flourished in the 4-2 formation Mourinho has

adopted. So too has Michael Essien, whose all-action style has made him a formidable opponent and the most impressive member of the midfield when, like Drogba, he started the season with considerable doubt over his inclusion in the first-team. If the Ivorian has a rival for the tag of the best player at Stamford Bridge this season, it is the Ghanaian.

It is impossible to ignore the question of cost in any examination of Chelsea. Though Roman Abramovich got, by his standards, little change from £50 million for the two Africans, suddenly they seem to offer value for money.

If appreciation of Drogba is growing, is his popularity? Should he maintain his magnificent form, the acid test will come in a few months when the votes for the annual awards are cast. So far, he is the outstanding candidate and other early contenders have their own enemies; Essien for his savage tackling, while Cristiano Ronaldo was the convenient scapegoat for England's World Cup exit. Drogba's propensity to tumble could yet cost him, but this is a season where his standing has risen considerably.

Wenger considers Theo

INTERNET, undated

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger says the time may have come to give teenager Theo Walcott a start in the Premier League. Walcott impressed in midweek when he came off the bench to help Arsenal beat Hamburg in the Champions League.

And with captain Thierry Henry missing Saturday's game at Bolton through injury, Wenger is considering playing Walcott in his place.

"I don't know whether I will start with Theo. It depends on what inspiration I get in Bolton before the game," Wenger said.

"Theo is getting closer and I understand people's desperation to see him start but it's up to me to manage him well and at the moment he is making a good impact off the bench."

Despite Walcott's progress, Wenger feels too much is being expected of him after his shock selection in England's World Cup squad.

"There's a lot of expectation. I feel the boy is under a lot of pressure, because if he plays and doesn't deliver, people are very, very aggressive with him. That was already the case," Wenger said.

"There is a strange attitude with Theo. People can quickly be negative about him because they still think as he went to the World Cup at 17 years of age he must be a superstar."

"He is surprisingly level-headed. He makes no demands on you. He is a very intelligent boy because he analyses very well what happens with him. He's humble, listens and wants to learn so it is positive."

Nakamura in higher legion

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic's Japanese star Shunsuke Nakamura has been compared to David Beckham and world player of the year Ronaldinho after his sensational Champions League free-kick winner against Manchester United.

The 28-year-old scored the only goal of the game at Parkhead in midweek to send Celtic into the knockout stages of Europe's premier club tournament for the first time.

Celtic assistant manager Tommy Burns believes Nakamura is fast becoming recognised as one of the world's true set-piece talents.

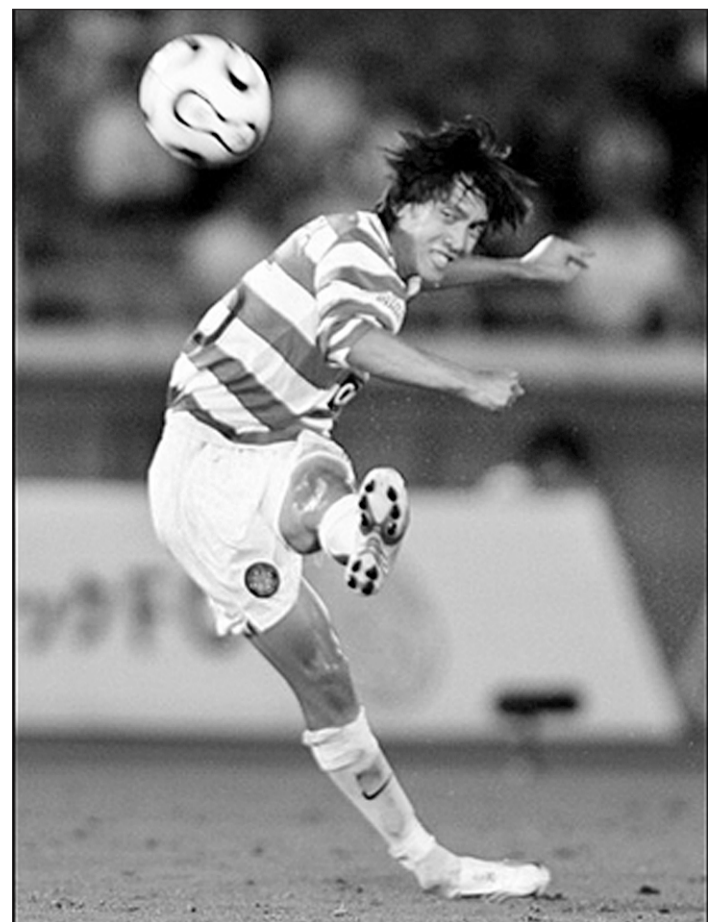
"Every now and then Beckham and Ronaldinho will come up with a special free-kick. Naka's definitely up there with them," Burns told the Glasgow Evening Times.

The Scottish champions are adamant that they can hang onto Nakamura who signed a new contract last summer.

"I'm sure people will cast envious eyes towards us and Nakamura," said Burns.

"Football being football, in a year or two he may want to try something else."

"But, for Celtic, the important thing is the here and now, and Naka is doing fantastically well for us. Long may it continue."



SHUNSUKE NAKAMURA

Chelsea plan world domination

Football

THE GUARDIAN

With a visit to Old Trafford tonight, Chelsea chose to remind Manchester United of their determination to usurp them in being recognised as the world's leading club. Peter Kenyon broke into a knowing laugh when asked whether United represented the past and Chelsea the future, with the chief executive saying: "I am not going to support that headline."

But it is a vision the Stamford Bridge hierarchy would like to see become reality.

Kenyon reiterated Chelsea's desire to be "internationally recognised as the world's No1 football club by 2014" but was realistic about the distance still to be travelled. Although he referred to Chelsea as "more dynamic" than United as a club and brand, he said that was not a criticism but largely a reflection of the London club trying to catch up. The former Old Trafford employee knows it will take more than Chelsea's Premiership titles of the past two seasons to surpass one of England's traditional powers.

"We have certainly haven't overtaken Manchester United," he

said. "Their fanbase is bigger than ours, their historical success is bigger than ours. There's no question that we are set here saying we have overtaken them. I think what we're pleased about is (that) the growth of our fanbase is quicker than other football clubs, our revenue has grown dramatically and is now on a par with Manchester United. There are a lot of indicators there and the success of the team is the key driver."

More trophies will be a key part of the equation by which Chelsea intend to determine whether they have become the world's premier club. "It will be by revenue, by profitability, about looking back over 10 years and hopefully saying: the number of Premiership wins, the number of European Cup wins, the number of FA Cup wins," Kenyon said. "We carry out independent research now on fanbases and relativity of Real Madrid versus Manchester United versus Milan versus Chelsea. It will be all those measures. I think it's a very ballsy vision but it's one that I think has captured the interest of the owner (Roman Abramovich)."

A European Cup win is missing from Chelsea's honours and Kenyon acknowledges the importance of changing that. "Not at the

expense of the Premiership," he emphasised, "but equally I think the biggest statement any European club can make is to win the European Cup. It just moves you to a completely different level."

He noted how United's heritage and success set a benchmark and dwarfed Chelsea's experiences. He described the Chelsea he joined as "a fairly soulless place so it was about starting again", adding: "It was about creating the heritage from day one, because there wasn't a lot to fall back on."

Kenyon, who ruled out a move for David Beckham if the former England captain leaves Real Madrid, said Chelsea were on track to break even by their target date of 2009. A greater stadium capacity would generate more revenue and the club, who would like a 55,000-seat stadium, look increasingly likely to pursue a move from their current ground.

"It's got to be within this area but that's what gives us the problem," Kenyon said. "We are pretty sure we can't expand. We've been working on it and I think it's pretty clear we can't get to where we want to here." Chelsea expect to decide in the next 12 months whether they will move.

Iran defiant after FIFA ban

Football

AFP, Tehran

Iran's football federation (IRIFF) said the sport's world ruling body FIFA had suspended Iran on false information and defended its "independence", the state news agency IRNA reported Saturday.

On Thursday, FIFA suspended Iran from all international football activity because of government interference in running the game and non-adherence to their statutes.

"By sending false information and continued lobbying, opportunists had a decision made about the country's football which is favoured by enemies," IRIFF said in a statement.

"We insist on the federation's determination and independence in decision (making) to defend our country's football rights," it said, while adding "the federation will do its best to negotiate to clear the accusations and obtain the country's football rights."

The federation said it was "correcting its statute" as demanded by FIFA, but warned it could challenge the world body's decision.

"We see it as our right to refer to a sports arbitrary body, which is approved by FIFA," the statement said.

The FIFA Emergency Committee said Iran had violated Article 17 of the FIFA Statute, which relates to the independence of national football associations

free of any government interference.

In August, following the national team's World Cup failure in Germany, the Iranian football federation's elected president, Mohammed Dadkan, was sacked.

Both FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation set November 15 for Iran to reinstate Dadkan and to comply with the FIFA statutes. Iran refused to meet the deadline.

FIFA and the AFC adopted the clear position that Dadkan and the members of his board remained the recognized and legitimate president and leadership of the federation. FIFA added the suspension would be lifted once they complied with the statutes.

'Give ref a chance'

AFP, London



Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson has called on players not to crowd round and intimidate referee Howard Webb in Sunday's top-of-the-table match against Chelsea at Old Trafford.

After two seasons of almost complete dominance, Jose Mourinho's Chelsea find themselves trailing United at the head of the Premiership and face the prospect of a six-point deficit if Ferguson's side secure a home victory this weekend.

The stakes could not be

higher and with Graham Poll on annual leave, 35-year-old Webb has been handed the task of controlling the teams.

It is arguably the biggest game of Webb's career and emphasises what high hopes referees' chief Keith Hackett has for the FIFA official.

Hardly renowned as a lover of referees, Ferguson is aware of the difficulties Webb could face in a game which means so much. And he has called on players from both sides to maintain their composure as the battle for points intensifies.

"He is a young referee and we should let him get on with the game and give him a chance," said Ferguson. "As long as he is

fair, no-one can complain. I certainly hope it is not a game where we see players start to crowd round the referee as has happened so often recently."

Surrounding officials is something Chelsea players do on a regular basis, although United can hardly claim to be on the moral high ground given Roy Keane led the infamous pursuit of Andy D'Urso after he had awarded Middlesbrough a penalty at Old Trafford six years ago.

For the sake of everyone involved, it is to be hoped the contest is not decided by a major decision from the official.

Ferguson certainly believes his players have the potential to

repeat their success in the corresponding fixture 12 months ago, which would take Chelsea into uncharted territory during their time under Mourinho's control.

"Who is to say what their reaction might be," said Ferguson, when asked how Chelsea might respond to falling so far behind. "For all I know, they might go out and buy another six players."

"What we have to do is get ourselves into a position where we can find out what happens. You cannot hide the fact this is a great opportunity for us."

"Over the last two years Chelsea have always been nine or 10 points ahead, which has made it very difficult for us to peg them back."

"This year we have got out of the blocks. For the first time we are in front and have the prospect of us going six points clear, which would have them chasing us rather than the other way round."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

- ACROSS**
- 1 Half a 1960s quartet
 - 6 Skilled player
 - 9 Put away
 - 12 Insignificant one
 - 13 Off-tattooed word
 - 14 Illumination measure
 - 15 Avian penthouse
 - 16 Superior in quality
 - 18 "— in the Wind"
 - 20 Eastern potentate
 - 21 Greek vowel
 - 23 Fairway start
 - 24 Take as one's own
 - 25 Unaccompanied
 - 27 Step
 - 29 Man with all the answers?
 - 31 Penguin's adversary
 - 35 "If You Knew —"
 - 37 A few
 - 38 Michaelmas daisy
- DOWN**
- 1 Harper Valley grp.
 - 2 Shock partner
 - 3 Sheet material
 - 4 Carreras rendition
 - 5 Exhausted
 - 6 Magic charm
 - 7 Manage somehow
 - 8 North Sea feeder
 - 9 Crockett's last stand
 - 10 Tiny Tim's flower
 - 11 Work the muscles
 - 17 West Point newbies
 - 19 Classroom array
 - 21 "Guinness Book" suffix
 - 22 Anderson's "High —"
 - 24 Khan title
 - 26 Haunt one's mind
 - 28 As cross as —
 - 30 One side of the Ural Mts.
 - 32 Carter's veep
 - 33 "I — Camera"
 - 34 Kans. neighbor
 - 36 Block
 - 38 Terrible
 - 39 Coastline
 - 40 "Flying Down —"
 - 42 U.N. goal
 - 45 Thick chunk
 - 46 Fermi's unit
 - 48 "Eureka!"
 - 50 Actor Cario
 - 51 Hallucinogen letters

Solution time: 25 mins.

ACROSS

1 HALF a 1960s quartet: **THE BEATLES**

6 SKILLED player: **GOALKEEPER**

9 PUT away: **SHOT**

12 INsignificant one: **ONE**

13 OFF-tattooed word: **SCAR**

14 ILLUMINATION measure: **LAMP**

15 AVIAN penthouse: **ROOST**

16 SUPERIOR in quality: **PREMIUM**

18 "— in the Wind": **THE**

20 EASTERN potentate: **SULTAN**

21 GREEK vowel: **OMEGA**

23 FAIRWAY start: **TEE**

24 TAKE as one's own: **APPROPRIATE**

25 UNACCOMPANIED: **SOLO**

27 STEP: **STAIR**

29 MAN with all the answers?: **TRIVIA**

31 PENGUIN'S adversary: **EMPEROR**

35 "IF YOU KNEW —": **THE**

37 A FEW: **DOZENS**

38 MICHAELMAS daisy: **POPPY**

DOWN

1 HARPER Valley grp.: **THE**

2 SHOCK partner: **TECHNICAL**

3 SHEET material: **FLANNEL**

4 CARRERAS rendition: **THE**

5 EXHAUSTED: **TIRE**

6 MAGIC charm: **AMULET**

7 MANAGE somehow: **CONDUCT**

8 NORTH SEA feeder: **THE**

9 CROCKETT'S last stand: **THE**

10 TINY TIM'S flower: **THE**

11 WORK THE muscles: **EXERCISE**

17 WEST Point newbies: **ROTC**

19 CLASSROOM array: **THE**

21 "GUINNESS BOOK" suffix: **THE**

22 ANDERSON'S "HIGH —": **THE**

24 KHAN title: **THE**

26 HAUNT one's mind: **THE**

28 AS CROSS as —: **THE**

30 ONE SIDE of the Ural Mts.: **THE**

32 CARTER'S veep: **THE**

33 "I — CAMERA": **THE**

34 KANS. neighbor: **THE**

36 BLOCK: **THE**

38 TERRIBLE: **THE**

39 COASTLINE: **THE**

40 "FLYING DOWN —": **THE**

42 U.N. goal: **THE**

45 THICK chunk: **THE**

46 FERMI'S unit: **THE**

48 "EUREKA!": **THE**

50 ACTOR Cario: **THE**

51 HALLUCINOGEN letters: **THE**

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CRYPTOQUIP

V A C X Z R J D X M R H R J C . K W Q

Y A W Q B E R E E L Q H A Y Q M R G .

D P V D B B L R J C K W Q G

Z D P P C G Z R P P C G Z C P P C G .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: BEING CHECKMATED SIX TIMES IN A ROW, IT'S NO WONDER I BEGAN TO EXPERIENCE CHESS PAIN.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals T

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.