

Summer recruits still bench-warming

By Norman Hubbard

No sooner signed than ignored, the lot of some summer signings is a strange one. Initial excitement has given way to apathy as they pack the benches and the fine seats in the stands; positioned anywhere, it seems, but the pitch itself.

Some are sidelined by a succession of other additions, others by existing players they were expected to displace. Of course, there could be an element of delayed gratification on the part of their managers, keeping their new purchases under wraps until a particularly opportune moment, but it is more likely that they have already questioned their own wisdom in making the buy.

Yet, in the defence of those engaged in a particularly lucrative form of unemployment (or underemployment, at the least), it is often that, rather than failing, they have barely been given the opportunity to.

Rolando Bianchi, for instance, has made a solitary league start since the opening week of the season, despite his status as Manchester City's biggest buy. This is in spite of the long-term absence of Valeri Bojinov and Sven-Goran Eriksson's inability to add a forward on transfer deadline day. After an encouraging start, the Italian's omission against Manchester United was explained by the need for swifter strikers to play a counter-attacking game.

Now the official line is difficulties adjusting to the English game. Yet, while Bianchi's finishing has been decidedly mixed, his array of flicks suggest he has the skill to complement Elano and Martin Petrov. Eriksson, however, does not appear to agree, and appears to have flaws with the £8.8million forward that umpteen DVDs and a high definition television had not revealed.

At least Bianchi has graced the pitch. Thus far the most notable thing about Kevin Prince Boateng has been his name. If royalty are accustomed to a gargantuan salary that they are never expected to earn, however, then his moniker is accurate.

Spurs' insistence that their £5million midfielder is not yet match fit is at least, unlike their proclamations on Martin Jol's future, consistent if not convincing. To judge by their statements, the young German seems to exist on a permanent plateau below the required level of fitness. Others wonder, meanwhile, why a left winger was not recruited instead.

Boateng ranks among the Premier League's equivalents of Lord Lucan. So, too, does Daniel de Ridder. While many of Steve Bruce's arrivals have acquitted themselves well, the Dutch winger is distinguished only by his anonymity. With one substitute appearance, his contribution is even less than that of Borja Melendez, unluckily injured 12 minutes into his full debut.

Anderson, meanwhile, mustered 45 minutes in Manchester United's first team before making a premature exit against Sunderland. After his involvement in the Carling Cup exit to Coventry, it was suggested that a year in the reserves beckons for the Brazilian. However, the combined cost of several second-string sides is rather less than the £17million midfielder's price tag.

At least Chelsea have the consolation that Steve Sidwell did not command a fee. However, it was an indication of his place in the pecking order at Stamford Bridge that, even with Michael Ballack and Frank Lampard injured, successive managers deemed him unworthy of a place on the bench for the league games against Blackburn and Manchester United.

With a goal at Hull, however, Sidwell can at least be called a Carling Cup specialist. So, too, can Danny Guthrie, quite literally a goal a game player. Yet, when Liverpool loaned him to Bolton, it is presumed they imagined the midfielder figuring more frequently.

When David Nugent joined Portsmouth, he would have had the same aspirations. Rather than catching Steve McClaren's eye, however, he has to attract the fourth official's attention to make brief substitute appearances. In one respect, the nadir came on Saturday, when the famously profligate Benjani managed a hat-trick but, in an 11-goal thriller, Nugent's name was absent from the scoresheet.

Another forward who has only managed to beat lower-division defences is Marlon Harewood. Thus far, his most prominent contribution has been to instigate an argument with team-mate Gabriel Agbonlahor over the latter's reluctance to pass - preferring instead to head for the corner flag - in the final stages of the victory against Everton.

While others can plead bloated squads and over-enthusiastic recruitment policies as their excuses, Harewood does not have that option. Villa possess the smallest group of players in the Premier League and he is still yet to start.

Some absentees have been the victims of unforeseen circumstances. Jose Enrique has made a pair of brief cameos in the Premier League. Otherwise the Spaniard has been confined to the Carling Cup by the unexpected excellence of Charles N'Zogbia as Newcastle's goalscoring left-back, unlikely to have been a central part in Sam Allardyce's pre-season planning.

Others, however, are all too predictable. Nolberto Solano arrived at West Ham as the fourth player signed for the same position within three months. With more right wingers than the Norman Tebbit fan club, Alan Cur-

bishley has not called upon the Peruvian yet.

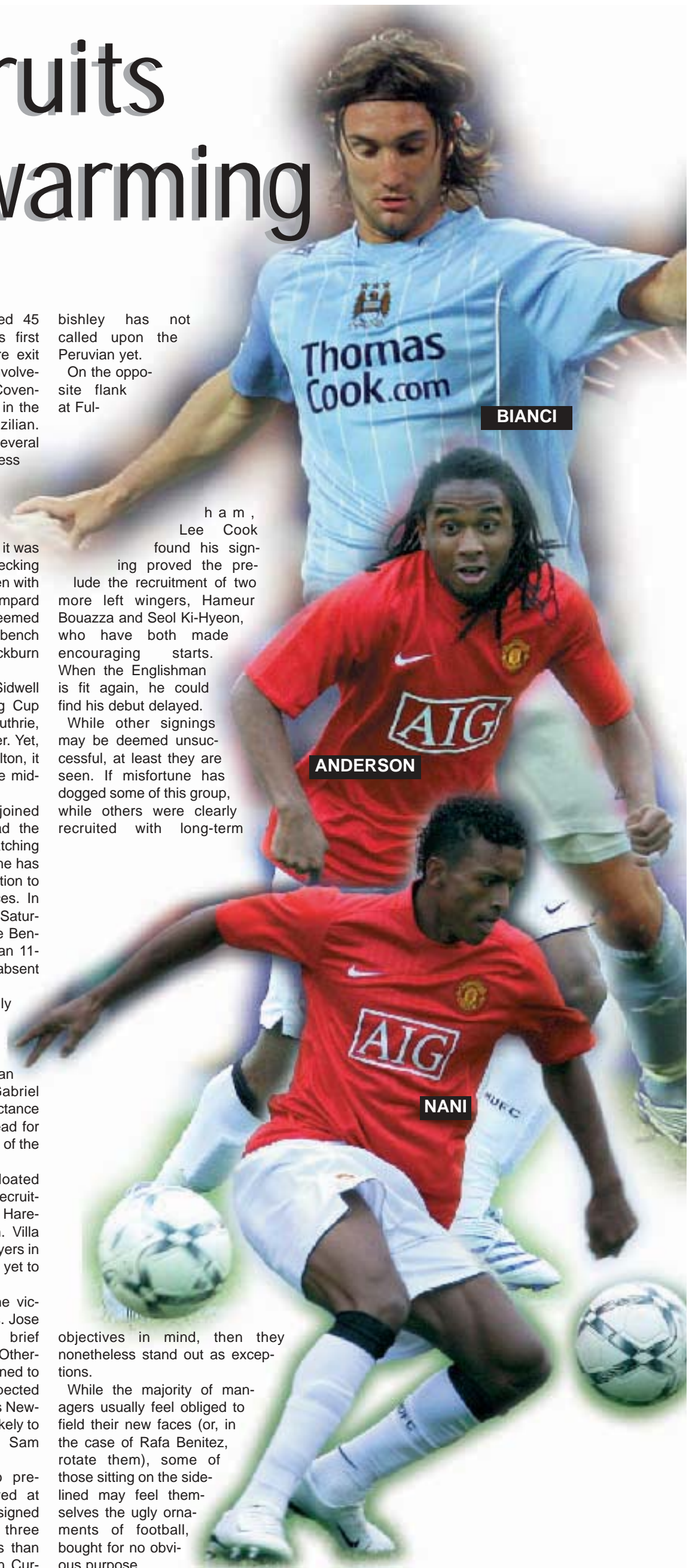
On the opposite flank at Ful-

ham, Lee Cook found his signing proved the prelude to the recruitment of two more left wingers, Hameur Bouazza and Seol Ki-Hyeon, who have both made encouraging starts. When the Englishman is fit again, he could find his debut delayed.

While other signings may be deemed unsuccessful, at least they are seen. If misfortune has dogged some of this group, while others were clearly recruited with long-term

objectives in mind, then they nonetheless stand out as exceptions.

While the majority of managers usually feel obliged to field their new faces (or, in the case of Rafa Benitez, rotate them), some of those sitting on the sidelines may feel themselves the ugly ornaments of football, bought for no obvious purpose.



BIANCI

ANDERSON

NANI