

Confusing reigns once more at City

By Norman Hubbard

European football and Barnsley are not often mentioned in the same sentence. Nor are Manchester City and stability, but when the first game on British soil of Mark Hughes' reign begins at Oakwell on Thursday, there will be the hope that the Welshman can provide a steadiness and a permanence to a much-changed club.

Right now, it is one of grandiose ambitions and a less exhilarating reality. Owner Thaksin Shinawatra dreams of life in the European elite. City are in the Intertoto Cup, facing the Faroese part-timers EB Streymur at the home of a Championship club. It is a typically quixotic choice from City. Though some of Shinawatra's many millions have come from telecommunications, his team kick off at a ground yet to fully embrace electricity.

They are there because the City of Manchester Stadium pitch is being relaid after Jon Bon Jovi's visit. Another star with luxuriant locks could yet christen the new turf, but not in City colours. In any case, it is likely that when AC Milan visit, City's improbable target Ronaldinho will be in Beijing, more preoccupied with the Olympics than pre-season friendlies for his new employers. Perhaps it is for the best; City may not want a reminder of what they could have won in one of the summer's defining transfer sagas.

There threatened to be another for the position in the dugout, long before Sven-Goran Eriksson was sacked. The surprise, given the some of the surreal elements of Shinawatra's regime, was that such an eminently sensible choice was made after Luiz Felipe Scolari turned him down.

Hughes' CV, featuring a consistent record of overachievement, marked him out as a deserving candidate for a bigger stage. But theirs is an intriguing partnership. Shinawatra coveted the reflected glamour of signing Ronaldinho, supplying a transfer fee and a wage packet that far exceeded those offered by a traditional giant, AC Milan. Hughes, in contrast, is a manager who has made his reputation spending comparatively small amounts with genuine astuteness.

The Thai is willing to throw vast sums at Brazilians with worldwide renown. The Welshman has managed to recruit such low-profile players as Ryan Nelsen and Christopher Samba, whose considerable attributes remained obscured to others.

Hughes has specialised in reviving and resuscitating the careers of those deemed too injury-prone (as Roque Santa Cruz was), too arrogant (as some thought David Bentley) or too likely to underachieve (Stephen Warnock had never convinced many) — and, in the case of Craig Bellamy, one who fell into all three categories.

In the process, Hughes has proved himself an outstanding judge of a player. It is a strange situation, therefore, that City's two major targets this summer, Ronaldinho and the club record signing Jo, were not identified by the new manager. If that trend continues, it threatens to negate one of

Hughes' major strengths.

The new manager may benefit if Shinawatra succeeds in getting £900 million of his assets unfrozen; equally, so may the agents with the owner's ear.

At least the logic for recruiting Jo cannot be disputed. No City striker has managed more than six Premier League goals in either of the last two seasons; the £19 million attacker will be expected to surpass that total comfortably.

Yet, somewhat inevitably given City's propensity for unfortunate mishaps, they are likely to start their league campaign with a substandard forward line, despite possessing a sizeable stable of strikers. But Jo is another Beijing-bound Brazilian, Benjani Mwariwari and Valeri Bojinov are injured and Rolando Bianchi and Bernardo Corradi are awaiting returns to their native Italy. That leaves promising youngsters plus the pair who started in Saturday's 1-0 defeat at Hamburg, Felipe Caicedo and Darius Vassell.

A toothless display in a pre-season friendly need not necessarily be a cause for panic. In this case, however, City's attacking failings may serve as a warning. It is notable Hughes has already been mentioned in conjunction with Santa Cruz and Bellamy, two of his most successful signings.

A faith in the tried and trusted would be understandable, but it would also mark a significant shift from Shinawatra's 'super-targets'. The man likely to be his first actual signing, Tal Ben Haim, would shift few shirts and generate few headlines outside Israel. Yet a need for defensive recruits was established at the end of last season when injuries meant Elano was pressed into emergency service at right-back.

The Brazilian was given a new brief in Hamburg, operating as a deep-lying playmaker. The results were inconclusive, but he may be subject to reinvention by Hughes. The manager's credibility with his new charges was apparent when Richard Dunne, captain and four-time player of the year, signed a new contract. He is vital. Defence was the basis of Eriksson's early success, even if it did not save the Swede. As patience does not rank highly among Shinawatra's attributes, a good start is as important for Hughes. Team-building takes time but it bodes well for Jo that he has proven his ability to integrate imported forwards such as Santa Cruz and Benni McCarthy remarkably quickly.

Having outperformed bigger buyers with Blackburn, Hughes now has the supposedly simpler task of taking City above smaller spenders like his previous club. The harder job may be to persuade Shinawatra of his competence and to get the owner to recognise the reality of City's situation.

In the Intertoto Cup and dreaming of the Champions League, possessing Rolando Bianchi and wanting Ronaldinho, City find themselves, not for the first time, in a strange place. And that is not a reference to Oakwell.



Hughes

Thaksin