

First trophies, next youth, then the world, says Scolari

Luiz Felipe Scolari has begun to show his tough side as he drives Chelsea on

By Dominic Fifield



Abramovich

A little after three o'clock last Saturday, in a conference room at Moscow's plush riverside Baltshug Kempinski hotel, Chelsea's players were subjected to their first glimpse of the other side of Luiz Felipe Scolari. They had choked in a penalty shoot-out the previous evening against Lokomotiv in the Railways Cup. It may have been a pre-season tournament but the Brazilian had spied weakness which will not be tolerated.

"It was a big lesson for me, and for them," he reflected. "They had two shots in the second half and scored once. We had three times as many chances and didn't kill them off. Do that in the Premier League and opponents will kill us."

"Wherever I've coached in the world the players have said: 'I like Scolari because he is a true man and speaks honestly to you.' I will remain that way until my last day at Chelsea. If I need to say something to a player I will say it to his face. I said some things in that meeting that the players had not heard from me before." A 5-0 thrashing of Milan next day suggested his players were wiser for the experience.

Scolari's pre-season has taken in the industrial city of Guangzhou on China's Pearl River delta, the Las Vegas-style extravagance

of Macau, the steamy heat of Kuala Lumpur and the tedious gridlock of Moscow city centre. For the manager and his players it has been an exercise in mutual discovery.

They returned to Cobham this week with Scolari having settled upon "85%" of his side for this Sunday's visit by Portsmouth, FA Cup winners and an emerging force outside the elite four, who will provide a stern first test. He said he now knew the players he could "trust in certain positions, and those I cannot rely upon" to play specific roles. He is ready for the challenge. It remains to be seen whether the Premier League is ready for him.

The 59-year-old's biggest frustrations have centred on an inability to express himself with clarity in his latest adopted language. Fluency will come, particularly when he begins English lessons. Already his side are showing a pleasing vibrancy as he sets about reinventing the club's image. He does not share Jose Mourinho's brash confidence but, beneath the surface, he has the same thirst for success. Chelsea came close on three fronts under Avram Grant last season and the squad Scolari inherited were still suffering a hangover from those failures. Steadily he is drumming disappointment out of them.

"I talk to them in training

every day and tell them I'm always here to help," he said. "They have been affected by what happened last year but I will help lift their heads. For example, in Russia we lost a penalty shoot-out, just like they did in the Champions League final. There will be a time this season when we need to win a shoot-out so I have to improve the players' minds to stop it happening again."

"I know about English teams and penalties. I was there in Euro 2004 and at the 2006 World Cup, remember. Like England, Chelsea have lost shoot-outs recently, so mentally there is a problem. How do you overcome things like that? You work every day to try to build the players' self-belief. I need to change the mentality in the club where some players are afraid of penalties because they don't want to make a mistake. They must cope with pressure."

"Chelsea want to be at a higher level than they are now. They want to be first in the world. To do that we need not only to beat Manchester United and Ferguson but to finish above all the other clubs. The board haven't said to me that we must win this or that. They just said to me: 'Try to improve on where we are now. We need to win more competitions.'"

Scolari may have scarred the English psyche as coach of Brazil and Portugal but he is something of

an unknown quantity in domestic management, even among his peers. His dismissal of Sir Alex Ferguson's first bout of mind games caught the eye. The other top-flight managers will soon understand him better too. "I've known Arsène Wenger for 10 years, and I like Martin O'Neill," said Scolari, a touchline ranter to match the Irishman and, like O'Neill, a disciple of Brian Clough's. "I like the way he is on the sidelines, and the players like him too. I have also heard the players saying many good things about [Harry] Redknapp at Portsmouth."

"I know Juande Ramos, and Rafael Benítez a little. And Ferguson, because when I was with Portugal we talked about Cristiano Ronaldo and whether he was coming to the national team or not, whether he was injured or not."

That was delivered with a smirk which said much. The pair should enjoy their jousting.

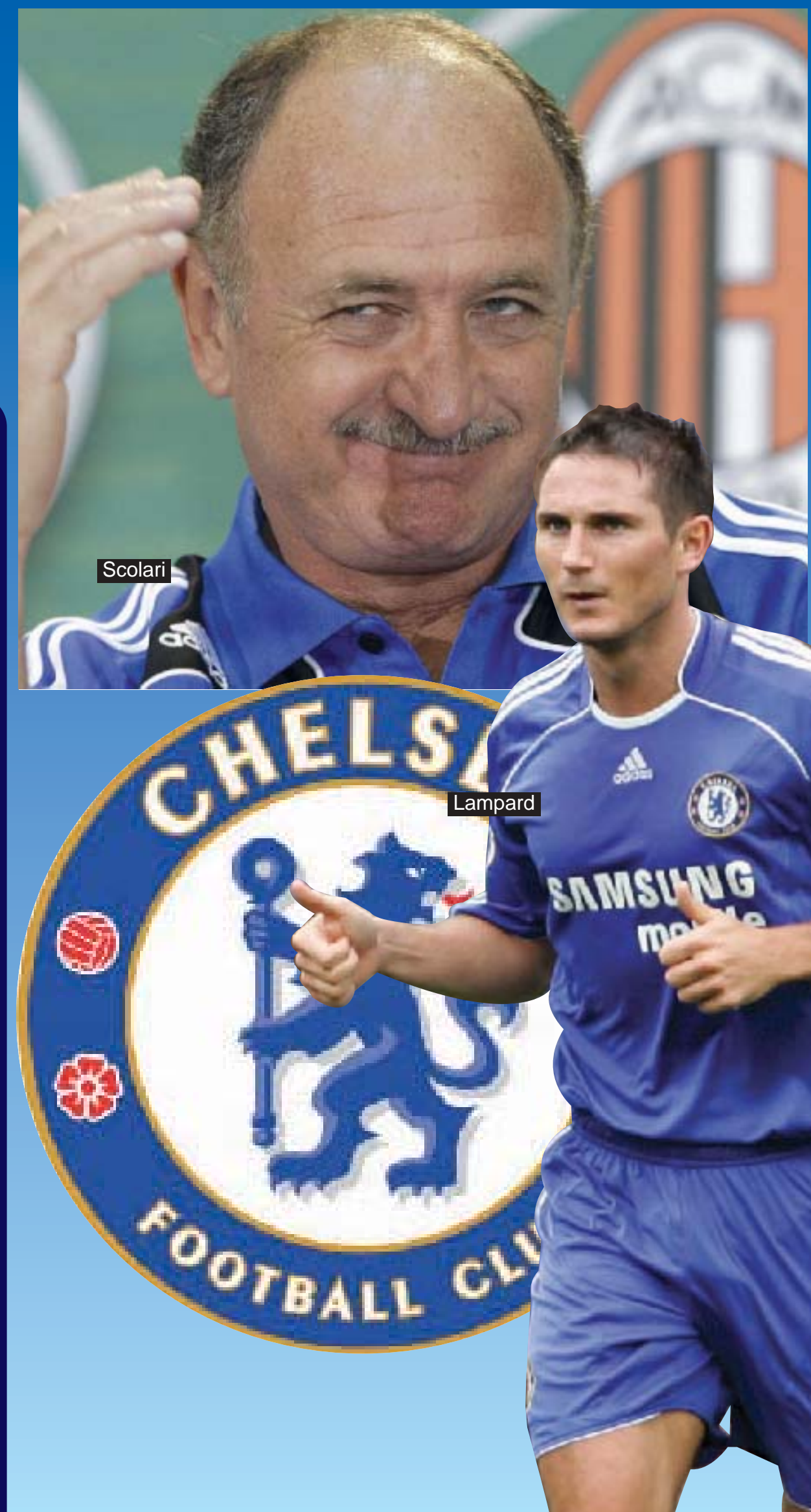
However, Chelsea's progress in recent seasons has been undermined more by infighting than by conflicts with rival managers, with the humbling of Mourinho followed by the lingering demise of Grant last term. Roman Abramovich, whom Scolari first met two years ago when the Russian asked advice on South American players, was in Moscow over the weekend and enjoyed the scintillating display conjured

against Milan.

The oligarch's secretive lifestyle adds to the intrigue surrounding Chelsea. "I've met Roman two or three times, no more, and he's a normal, quiet, reserved person," said Scolari. "We get on very well. The image people have of him, as someone who demands this and that, is not correct. It's fantasy. He's relaxed. He doesn't ask me who will be playing or who won't. He does not tell me who I should play. He never phones and when we do talk it is only to discuss little things - how the players are, how I am feeling."

"When we first spoke about the job we met only once. All he wanted to know was how I play football, what system I use, if I thought Chelsea had a good team and who I'd want to buy. What they need is a coach to develop young players, and I think I am that coach. If we're doing well and winning things, we can introduce one or two more players into the first team. I need that strong base, that winning mentality, and then I can bring young players in. I'm sure if I am still at Chelsea in two years' time there will be three or four young players in the first group."

By then Chelsea will hope they have wrested back dominance from United. Scolari may be the man to turn the tide.



Scolari

Lampard