

Question and answer for the new EPL Season

By Norman Hubbard



Nasri

Is Samir Nasri really the new Zidane?

No pressure there, then. The nickname may be inevitable for a French flair player of North African origin from Marseille, but Samir Nasri arrives at Arsenal with high expectations. Replacing Alexander Hleb is his initial task.

Adjusting to Arsenal's perfectionist approach to passing is essential, and the Barcelona-bound Belarussian excelled at it. But Hleb's contribution was insufficient in the penalty area. If Nasri can emulate another midfielder signed from Marseille - the prolific Robert Pires - that would suit Arsenal perfectly.

Is Jose Bosingwa finally the answer to Chelsea's full-back difficulties?

Full-backs can be the foot soldiers of a football team. In Roman Abramovich's lavishly-funded Blue Army, however, even they command the prices other clubs pay for proven match-winners.

Yet Chelsea struggle to satisfy themselves in their choices: William Gallas, a centre-back by trade, was arguably their best full-back in recent years; and midfielder Michael Essien played the Champions League final on the right of defence.

Enter Jose Bosingwa, at £16 million the costliest specialist full-back ever in England. At that price, defensive reliability ought to be married with an attacking threat. But will it be?

Will Robbie Keane form the best strike partnership in the Premier League with Fernando Torres?

The £46 million strike force promises much. Fernando Torres, the champion of Europe, excels at accelerating beyond the last defender. Robbie Keane, while making much of his lifelong support for Liverpool, is at his best linking midfield and attack, his roaming instincts still permitting him to top 20 goals in each of the past two seasons.

In theory, they could be Liverpool's best attacking alliance since John Aldridge and Peter Beardsley two decades ago. In reality, Keane's signing means that Steven Gerrard will probably adopt another role, his understanding with Torres sacrificed to sign the striker. The aim is to make Liverpool more potent. The risk is they lose a winning formula.

Can Andrea Dossena end Liverpool's left-back problem?

John Arne Riise spent the majority of his seven

seasons at Anfield as the undisputed first choice on the left of the defence. That status owed as much to a lack of competition as anything else. But last season, Rafa Benitez's frustrations with the Norwegian became apparent as both the right-footed Alvaro Arbeloa and the lightweight Fabio Aurelio were used at left-back.

Andrea Dossena: A left back Liverpool can bank on?

The signing of the £7 million Italian Andrea Dossena, a big-unit with a chequered disciplinary record, is designed to end the debate. If he does not, the ever-versatile Jamie Carragher may be asked to revert to a former role and Liverpool's defence could be disrupted.

Can Jo change the fortunes of Manchester City forwards?

For all his touchline histrionics and unquestioned commitment, Stuart Pearce's legacy to Manchester City may be the unwanted reputation for failing forwards. The catastrophic quartet of Bernardo Corradi, Georgios Samaras, Darius Vassell and Paul Dickov lent the impression they were a greater threat to City's prospects than opposing defences.

Despite a vastly improved midfield under Sven-Goran Eriksson, the City strikers tended to be injured (Valeri Bojinov), unhappy (Rolando Bianchi) or ineffectual (Emile Mpenza). Enter Jo, the £19 million man who may spearhead Brazil's attack for years to come. But first, he needs to ensure the City of Manchester Stadium does not remain a graveyard for goalscorers.

Will Fabricio Coloccini give Newcastle defenders a bad name?

Whenever Newcastle have signed a defender - and a centre-back in particular - it has been a safe assumption he will eventually depart in ignominy. Jean-Alain Boumsong became a byword for blunders; Marcelino managed to incur the most improbable injuries; Titus Bramble was, well, Titus Bramble.

At £9 million, the Argentine Fabricio Coloccini is not cheap. Neither were many of his predecessors, but his CV suggests he is a superior player and the promising Steven Taylor is a possible partner. But a spell at St James' Park has a remarkable habit of denting the reputation of defenders.

Can Paul Robinson become England's No. 1 again?

Having started last season as England's first-choice goalkeeper, Paul Robinson spent much of the middle of it as Spurs' second best. It marked a stark and swift decline and, while he recaptured his place for the Carling Cup final, Juande Ramos was evidently not convinced.

Paul Ince's first signing has much to prove, then, from vindicating his manager - and, in the process, justifying his regime - to reclaiming his pre-eminent place in the international pecking order. At 28, his best years should lie in the future, but Robinson needs to show that the last two seasons were a blip, not the sign of things to come.

Will Peter Crouch prove a long-term signing for Portsmouth?

The nomadic striker has seven clubs on his CV, and this is his second spell at Portsmouth. Crouch's longest stay in any one place was three years at Liverpool, but that scarcely represented stability as debates raged first about his lack of goals and then about his role.

Peter Crouch: A long-term Pompey player?

Reunited with Harry Redknapp and pencilled in to partner Jermain Defoe, Crouch's club-hopping days may be over. But that has been said before.

Does Valon Behrami mark a change of policy at West Ham?

Equipped with his copy of the 2003 Rothmans Football Yearbook, Alan Curbishley populated the West Ham squad with (mainly injury-prone) right wingers. After bringing in Freddie Ljungberg and Kieron Dyer to join Lee Bowyer, he had ample experience, but rather too many injuries.

In contrast, the 23-year-old Kosovan Swiss Valon Behrami, bought from Lazio, seems to represent a change of approach. Perhaps, unlike Dyer or the departed Ljungberg, he has been recruited by the new technical director Gianluca Nani. Perhaps Curbishley is just growing more adventurous.

Can Luka Modric and Deco make the playmaker essential in the Premier League?

The stereotypical Premier League central midfielder is forceful and physical. Proving perfectly suited to the hustle and bustle, however, did not always equip them for the art and craft of midfield. Even such specialist passers as Paul Scholes tended to tackle (in his case badly, but it was essential the effort was made).

However, Luka Modric and Deco, neither boasting an imposing physique, look like the sort of players who used to be equipped with a minder to do their dirty work. If Tottenham and Chelsea win games dictated by their passing, perhaps a global search for comparable playmakers will begin.



Keane



Modric