

Spurs score an own goal with their principled stand

The likelihood is that Dimitar Berbatov will banish Tottenham from his sight this week by moving to Manchester United

By Kevin McCarra



Berbatov

Tottenham have been determined to take a tough stance and it is their duty to drive a hard bargain. The chairman, Daniel Levy, showed he had no inclination to acquiesce. While alleging previously that there had been an illegal approach, he accused United of arrogance and hypocrisy. That is bracing talk but there have to be doubts whether it has served his club's interests.

Ramos's team are off to a false start. Defeats in both Premier League games have underlined a need for cover in defence. Furthermore, the sale of Robbie Keane to Liverpool, for an irresistible fee of £20.3m, left Tottenham with nothing but a queasy hope that Darren Bent would maintain the form shown in pre-season friendlies. After the defeat to Sunderland, Ramos said: "We were only able to play with one forward."

The trouble now is that Tottenham could be restaging the bathos of last season when, despite a great deal of anticipation, the side, initially managed by Martin Jol, took one win from their opening 12 fixtures in the league. No one expects the woe to be prolonged to that degree but the likelihood is that a trip to Stamford Bridge on Sunday will add to the current disquiet.

If Berbatov does sign for United shortly, will Tottenham really feel as if the extra few million pounds have vindicated the whole exercise? There are no grounds for warming to them as feisty underdogs. When occupying a comparatively similar position to that of United they, too, flex their muscle. Ask Blackburn, who lost David Bentley to White Hart Lane, how much affinity they have for Tottenham.

Whatever price was extracted for Berbatov would have to be reinvested under the pressure of an impending transfer deadline of September 1. In the sunniest circumstance, Levy would already have agreed a deal or two that can instantly be activated. Outsiders, all the same, are unsure if Zenit St Petersburg are quite so compliant as to hand over Andrei Arshavin, who appears to be the prime target, without more haggling.

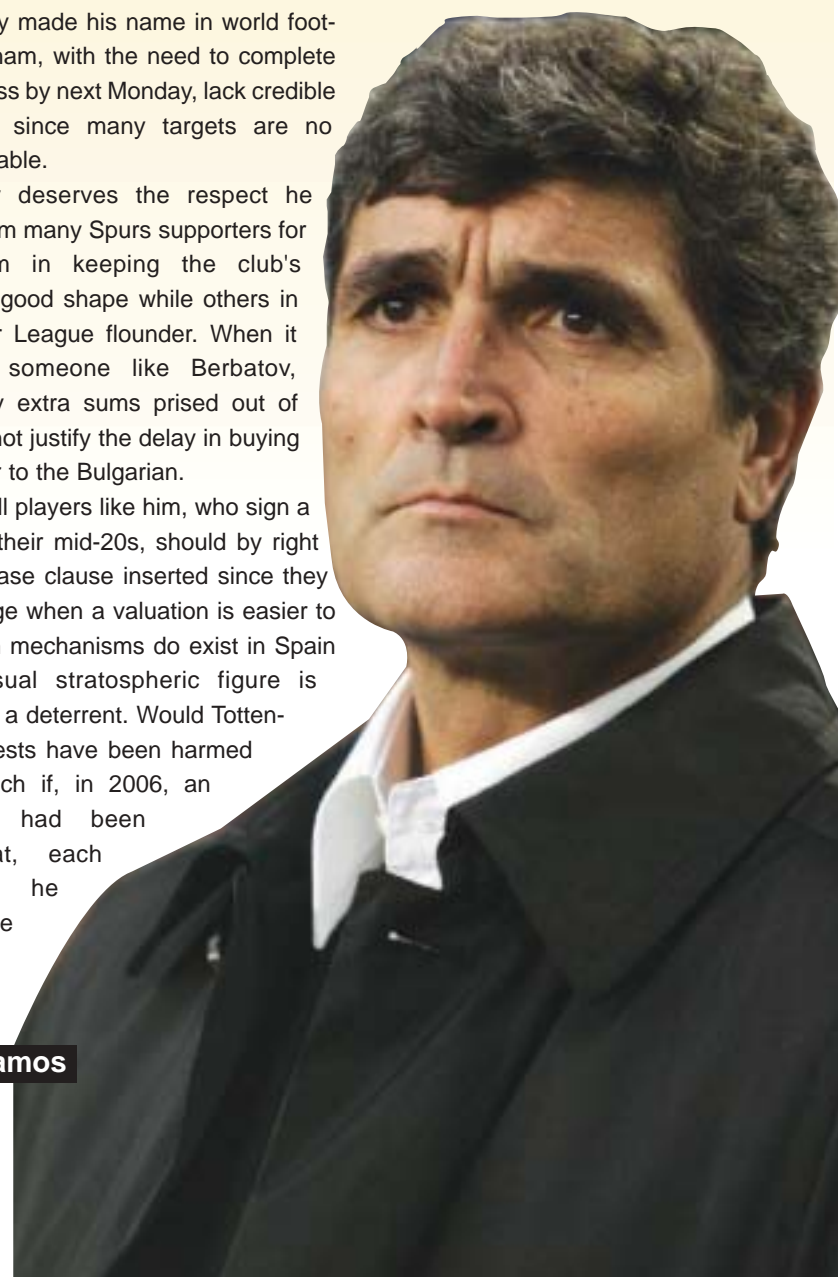
Jose Mourinho ruled out a bid of his own to take the Russia forward to Internazionale when he observed that Arshavin was "switched off" in the Euro 2008 semi-final with Spain. Some do wonder about the temperament of a footballer who, at 27, has only recently made his name in world football. Tottenham, with the need to complete their business by next Monday, lack credible alternatives since many targets are no longer available.

Levy fully deserves the respect he receives from many Spurs supporters for his wisdom in keeping the club's finances in good shape while others in the Premier League flounder. When it comes to someone like Berbatov, though, any extra sums prised out of United will not justify the delay in buying a successor to the Bulgarian.

Perhaps all players like him, who sign a contract in their mid-20s, should by right have a release clause inserted since they are of an age when a valuation is easier to make. Such mechanisms do exist in Spain but the usual stratospheric figure is intended as a deterrent. Would Tottenham's interests have been harmed all that much if, in 2006, an agreement had been struck that, each summer, he would have t h e

option of leaving for, say, £20m?

A Europe-wide system of that sort, after all, would let men like Levy and Ramos acquire other footballers on the same basis. The Sunderland manager, Roy Keane, oversimplified the issue, but he was right about the urgency of selling men who no longer want to play for you. As it is, Tottenham are under stress. The only fate worse than losing Berbatov now may be retaining this moody virtuoso in a surly frame of mind.



Ramos

Dimitar Berbatov does not show much forbearance when a team-mate carelessly misdirects a pass intended for him or, worse still, fails to spot that he is in space. On those occasions the Bulgarian can seem to drop out of the game for a while in disgruntlement. It is as if he wants to send the rest of the Tottenham side to a sin-bin for 10 minutes or so.

The likelihood is that this outstanding attacker will banish the entire club from his sight this week by moving to Manchester United. There was a trial separation at the weekend. Although the manager, Juande Ramos, said it was his decision not to include the 27-year-old for the match with Sunderland there is every indication that Berbatov's attitude meant it would, in practice, have been impossible to pick him.