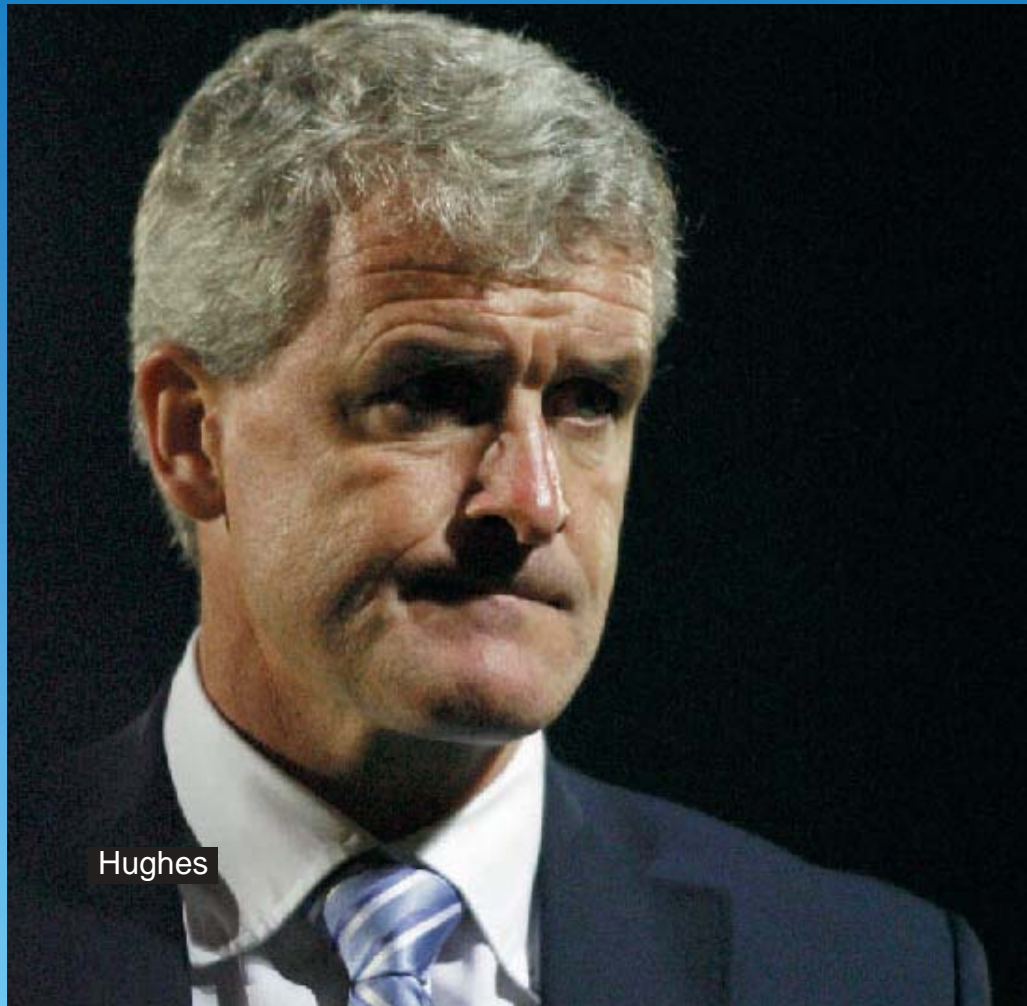


Heat on Hughes as City's learning curve gets ever steeper

If Mark Hughes is to get the best out of the fluid attacking talents at his disposal, he needs solidity behind them - and to stay in the job long enough to make his mark



Hughes

They may be the richest club in the world, but this season Manchester City have been desperately poor. Naturally, then, Mark Hughes is under pressure even if the club's owners are publicly preaching patience.

"This is a winning team that is going through a learning curve right now," said chairman Khaldoon al-Mubarak today, ridiculing claims that he and his Abu Dhabi posse are preparing to lynch the manager. "This is an exciting 10-year dynasty that we are building and we are only in the first two months. We have a good coach and we will upgrade our players [in January] and hopefully results will come."

The intention of the above declaration is obvious - to alleviate the stress on Hughes and suggest there is some kind of plan in place - but some of the content is contradictory: if it's a winning team, why is a player upgrade required?

If he was seeking to explain why City have lost seven Premier League matches this season - the joint worst record in the league, flirted with European elimination at the hands of Danish yokels and been dumped out of the Carling Cup by Brighton, Mubarak could have alluded to the club's harrowing injury record, which has deprived them of their first-choice strikers for most of the season as well as midfielders who could be integral to their balance, Martin Petrov and Michael Johnson.

But that, of course, would only have been part of the explanation. And Mubarak did cover the other part: the "learning curve" he referred to is the one that the manager is on. At Blackburn, Hughes proved he could create a formidable team that, though it contained some skilful players, was based on rugged dynamism and an efficient shape. Indeed, Harry Redknapp revealed ahead of yesterday's match that, when he was at Portsmouth, he used to print out Blackburn's running yardage and post it around the training ground to inspire his Pompey players. City, however, lack shape and, to an extent, do not appear to want one. Nothing necessarily wrong with that, of course - Manchester United won the Premier League and Champions League last season with a formless offence - but fluidity demands familiarity between the players and, crucially, it's new territory for Hughes.

Fostering off-the-cuff invention rather than rehearsed relentlessness is perhaps the next logical step in Hughes' managerial progression, and it seems that City's owners are willing to wait for him to make it, at least for a little while. As a relatively young manager he may have more scope to evolve than Sven-Goran Eriksson, whose deeply ingrained conservatism ultimately hindered City last term.

What remains to be seen is whether Hughes can find the right pace and scale of change - early indications are that, perhaps because of the injuries, he has sacrificed too much solidity too soon - and whether his charges are willing and able to accept a minimum of rigour. Away to Newcastle, Hughes's formation seemed to aspire to solidity - he included two holding midfielders - but the performance was horribly listless. Richard Dunne's run of own-goals and red cards could just be a strange phase that an erstwhile stalwart is going through, or it could be a symptom of a confused or uninspiring reign, while Micah Richards's form does not appear to have been helped by constant positional switches.

Hughes, then, needs to learn fast, both to keep his chairman's confidence and to retain - or regain - the hearts and minds of his players (the ones he has, rather than the ones who may come in January). Regardless of Mubarak's tolerant words, it can't have escaped the tycoon's attention, bearing in mind yesterday's opponents, that a lack of cogency undermined Juande Ramos, whose last league game in charge of Spurs was a 2-1 defeat featuring two expulsions for his team and a slew of individual blunders. And that a change of manager changed Tottenham's luck.

Hughes' modest wish list at odds with City's grand ambition

By Ian Herbert



Robinho

The billionaire who was Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan's personal representative in the purchase of Manchester City has admitted there is a difference in opinion on how to develop the club between his own ideas of signing box office names and Mark Hughes' plans to build through more modest acquisitions.

Dr Sulaiman al-Fahim, the businessman and property mogul who secured the £200m deal in August,

reeled off names in the days afterwards of those players - from Cristiano Ronaldo to Fernando Torres - whom he wanted to see in the club's colours. The Arabs' immediate, audacious £32m purchase of Robinho suggested his vision was the way ahead and there was no doubt that the Brazilian's arrival brought the global attention which Abu Dhabi was looking for in buying a Premier League club.

But Hughes, with names like Chelsea's Wayne Bridge, Portsmouth's Lassana Diarra and Blackburn's Roque Santa Cruz

on his list, has displayed a more measured philosophy and though the City manager said of Dr Al-Fahim's ambitions a few weeks back that "the people who made those statements have obviously moved aside now", it remains to be seen whether the entrepreneur, highly acclaimed by the British financiers who brokered the take-over, will have his say if City continue to founder.

"My vision is rather different [to Hughes']," Dr Al-Fahim said yesterday. "I put my vision forward but it is the role of the manager and the chairman to take it for-

ward. I was only asked to close the deal. Only if I was approached by His Highness [Sheikh Mansour] would I have the chance to put ideas across."

Dr Al-Fahim did not shed any light on suggestions in Abu Dhabi that he has produced a list of four or five big names for whom City might bid and he said that Sheikh Mansour was not currently seeking further involvement from him. But the so-called Donald Trump of Abu Dhabi - so named because, like Trump, he hosts his own reality show - is bound to have his ideas on how to develop City.