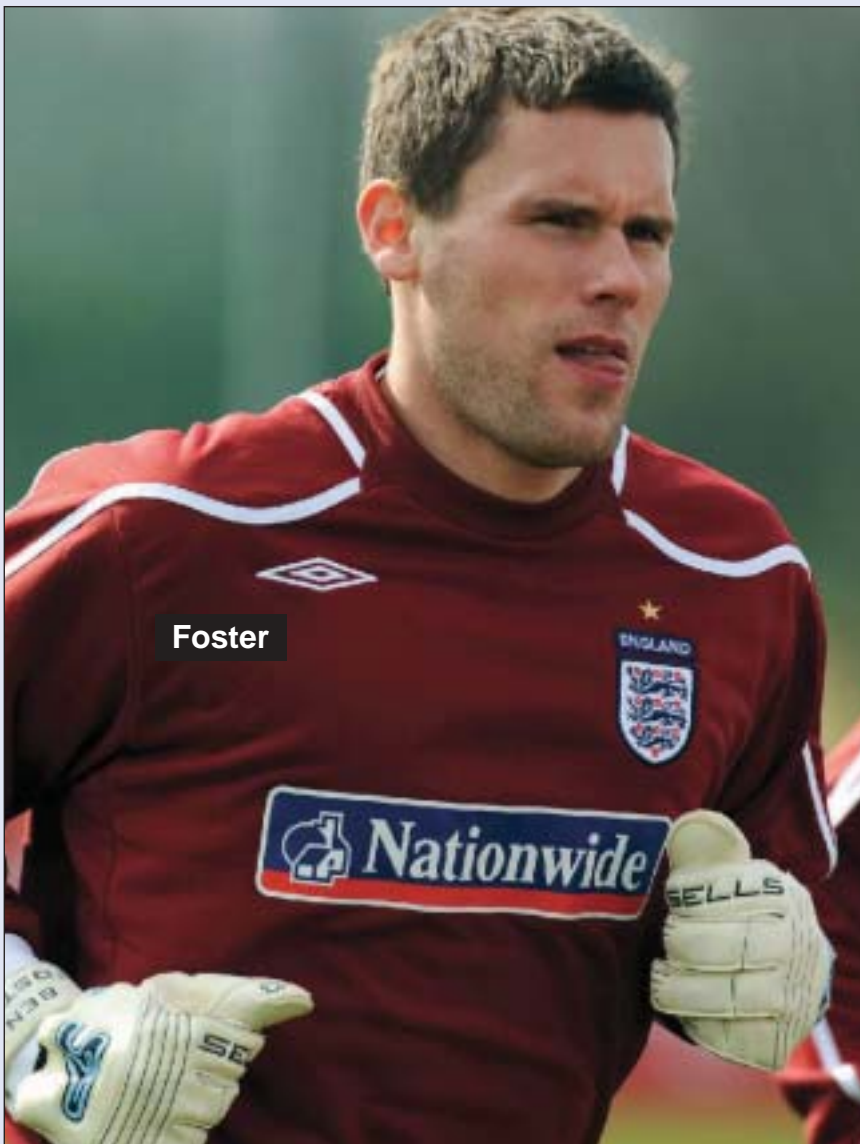


England not alone in their dearth of quality keepers

Goalkeeping used to be the English speciality, but Fabio Capello has few options beyond the veteran



Foster

When Fabio Capello named Joe Hart in the England squad for last month's friendly with Spain it was as much a gesture of despair as a show of faith. It was as if he could not think of a worthwhile replacement. Manchester City had just spent around £8m to take Shay Given from Newcastle United and the younger goalkeeper was being sidelined by the club.

It has proved impossible for the manager of the national team to stick by Hart, who has given way to Ben Foster. The latter is also an understudy and has not appeared in a Premier League match for a year but there was a prestigious outing for Manchester United in the League Cup final. Capello has to compromise where English goalkeepers are concerned.

It is David James's aim to play at the 2010 World Cup finals and there are times when it looks impossible for the 38-year-old not to fulfil his ambition. For the time being, Rob Green of West Ham is his single, realistic rival. Others see a vacancy and Arsenal's Spanish goalkeeper Manuel Almunia raised the possibility

yesterday of applying for a UK passport next year. Such a step would once have been as unnecessary as it was unthinkable. Goalkeeping used to be the English speciality.

Nigel Martyn, for instance, made the Euro 2000 squad along with David Seaman and Richard Wright. The goalkeeper to be dropped from the provisional group was James. "You always think your own era was a good one but at the moment they are thin on the ground," said Martyn. "We've got Jamo still going strong, Robert Green, Chris Kirkland but then it gets thinner.

"I feel for Joe Hart. He was developing nicely and had some great games. He was getting the experience he needed and then Manchester City came across those millions or billions. They are going to go out and buy somebody at the peak of their game who is perhaps not going to make the odd mistake, whereas Joe might.

"What does Hart want to do next? Is he going to be allowed out on loan, as Scott Carson did when he was with Liverpool? I am guessing City will want to keep him on the

bench, which is not helping his development. I've not heard any moans from him and that's good but it's definitely more difficult than it was in my day."

Foster, man of the match in the Carling Cup final, seems able to deal with intermittent appearances, but Martyn, now goalkeeping coach at Bradford, suspects that there must be fragility to these circumstances. "If you've not played for a while you need something to go in your favour early on to make you feel better," he said.

It is not only in England that native goalkeepers are in short supply. With Gregory Coupet out of favour at Atlético Madrid, France must pick Steve Mandanda, who had an unsuccessful trial with Aston Villa in 2007. Mandanda is gifted but floundered in his competitive debut for France, a 3-0 defeat by Austria. In Germany they are not entranced by the contenders, Robert Enke and Rene Adler. Spain, who have Iker Casillas and Pepe Reina, enjoy rare good fortune.

Martyn argues that the leading clubs can no longer afford to be patient and are ready to take goalkeepers from

I thought it was all over... Becks says

When David Beckham decided to move to Los Angeles and into what looked like semi-retirement two years ago, he did so believing that his best days were behind him. That his powers as a professional footballer had in some way been diminished. That he was done.

But it was not a problem with the legs and it was not even a lack of ambition. It was the head - and the head, he has admitted for the first time, was telling him that he could no longer cope with the rigours of top-flight football.

It was his omission from Steve McClaren's first England squad that crushed his spirit. The call from the then England manager as he was boarding a plane with his colleagues from Real Madrid. The words that said he was no longer required, that hit him like a sledge-hammer, so much so that it was all he could do to mutter a monosyllabic response to his tormentor on the other end of the telephone.

One minute he was England cap-tain, the next he was gone. At 31. 'I've been through a couple of down points in my career and being taken out of the England squad was

a big one,' he said yesterday.

'That knocked my confidence a lot. I didn't think that I would ever play for my country again. I thought, "That's it". Things like that can affect you, and it certainly affected me. I didn't feel my legs had gone. I didn't believe I no longer had it. But confidence-wise, it got to me. I've always been quite a confident person but I took that on to the field, and maybe that was the biggest thing.'

It was big enough to make Major League Soccer suddenly look attractive. He was midway through a final season with Madrid which, probably because of McClaren, had not gone terribly well and the LA Galaxy offered him a way out as well as something new. Drained of confidence, the multi-million-dollar deal and Rodeo Drive proved impossible to resist.

'I decided it was time to try something different,' he said. 'To start a new life there. I wasn't in the England team and, while people have asked me whether I regret going to the US, it felt right at the time. I did get a call from AC Milan but it came too late. The deal to go to America had been signed and that was that. I was going.'

In the months that followed, his fortunes would change, with managers recalling him in their desperation. Fabio Capello was the first to have him back, with Beckham performing a key role in what remained of Madrid's triumphant charge to the line in the Spanish title race. Then McClaren would do the same, which cannot have been easy when the axing of Beckham from his first squad had represented his mission statement. It was time, McClaren had originally thought, to give youth a chance. Only the youth of McClaren's day were not quite ready.

Two-and-a-half years on and it is remarkable that Beckham remains part of the England set-up.



Beckham

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