

How Liverpool could make a shock swoop for Juan Mata

By Guillem Balague

Premier League fans have become acquainted with the names of Valencia stars David Villa and David Silva in recent transfer windows; but there is one player who is rapidly becoming the most coveted asset in La Liga: Juan Mata.

He left Real Madrid in 2007 to sign for Valencia and the 21 year old Spanish international is now contemplating a move away from a club where he feels - as one of the lowest paid players in the squad - that his true worth goes unappreciated by the board.

There is a possibility that Chori Domiguez from Rubin Kazan could sign for Valencia in January and automatically pick up three times what Mata currently earns: a slap in the face for Mata that push him towards a transfer to another club where he can work with a manager who will help him develop while allowing him to flourish on the big stage.

Mata has recently been linked with a move to Liverpool and Mata's associates have been briefing Rafa Benitez about the talented young forward's qualities both on and off the pitch - informing the Liverpool boss of the player's university education, intelligence, his excellent work ethic and attitude in training: not to mention the fact that he already speaks some English.

And of course, Rafa already knows about Mata's international credentials and his ability to play anywhere across the forward line.

I have a theory that Liverpool may try with Mata a similar thing to what they attempted to do with Silva: make a move for him early on before a bidding war escalates with the likes of Real Madrid and Barcelona pushing his value beyond the Premier League club's reach.

That plan failed with Silva last summer after Valencia refused to negotiate with Liverpool who were willing to offer £20 million.

Valencia needed the player to stay to help convince investors reduce the club debts but now they are prepared to sell someone for a much higher fee.

I am sure that Liverpool will seriously consider a move for Mata, but persuading Valencia to part with him may actually turn out to be more complicated than persuading them to sell their more famous stars: as the Spanish club appreciate that while Villa and Silva have reached their full market potential, Mata's value will increase the longer they can keep hold of him.

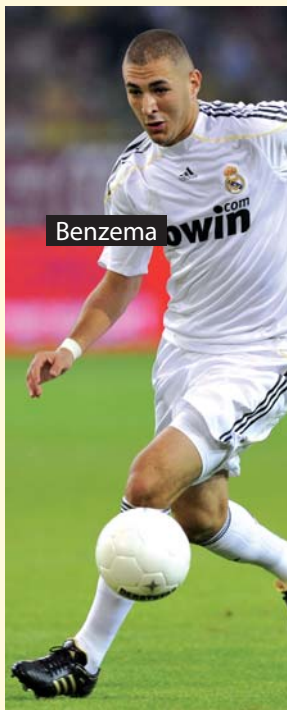


Mata

Why Karim Benzema could be heading for Manchester United in January

Karim Benzema has had a disappointing start to his Real Madrid career - and Florentino Perez is already considering attempting to recuperate the £35million splashed out on him in the summer by selling him, rather than waiting to see if he settles and risk seeing his value diminish.

As previously reported in this column, Manchester United thought that they had landed Benzema last summer. Could Ferguson's interest be rekindled? If Benzema is sold, Madrid would add the money to continue their pursuit of David Villa - who told me this week that he would now consider the Premier League - and Franck Ribery, who may have politely turned down moves to Chelsea or Man City and could already have agreed a move to the Bernabeu.



Benzema

You are not good enough, Rafa

Legend says Liverpool lack pace, playmaker and Torres partner



Klinsmann

JÜRGEN KLINSMANN has put Rafa Benitez's Liverpool future in greater doubt - by slaughtering his management of the club. The former Spurs and Germany striker, who met Kop owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks for talks about taking over from Benitez, hit out after the Reds' latest humiliating Champions League defeat on Wednesday. Ex-Bayern Munich and Germany boss Klinsmann says Liverpool lack:

Pace
Creativity and passing ability
A second world-class striker
Consistency
Quality

And he insists it is unfair of Benitez to keep heaping pressure on his only star players - Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres.

Klinsmann, 45, said: "What you miss in Liverpool is the technical pace and the passing.

"They have a couple of players who can do that but not all over the place. There's no real flow and there's a lack of creativity.

"If it's down to Torres or Gerrard, then that's not enough.

"You can't always put it on the shoulders of two players. That's why they need more quality in the team to make sure they finish in the top four this season.

"It is a big surprise that Liverpool didn't make it to the final 16 because they have always been there over the last few years and had tremendous success.

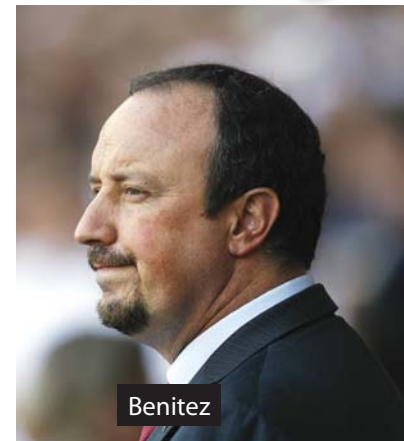
"There were always questions at the start of the season - especially after losing Xabi Alonso, who was a tremendous asset to Liverpool over the last few years.

"It's sad that Liverpool are not in the knockout stage because that is where they belong, Liverpool's name is huge on the continent.

"In my opinion they are lacking creativity and a real No 10, a playmaker, and a great world-class striker next to Torres.

"It's frustrating to see where they stand now. Over the stretch of six games they just couldn't keep up. They lack quality.

"It also shows in the Premier League that they don't have the consistency to



Benitez

keep up with the big teams. Now is a moment to think about how they are to go forward."

Klinsmann, who met Gillett and Hicks for talks in New York in November 2007, recently declared he wants to get back into football after next summer's World Cup.

But he insisted renewed suggestions linking with Liverpool were only "rumours". However his views will still hold big sway at Anfield with Gillett, in particular, a big fan. It was he who instigated the infamous New York meeting, according to Hicks.

Klinsmann - sacked by Bayern last April after taking Germany to the semi-finals of the last World Cup - is all the more shocked by Liverpool's exit because he does not rate Fiorentina, who did the

double over Liverpool to top Group E and finish eight points ahead of Rafa's Kop flops.

He told Sky Sports: "I don't think Fiorentina are a threat in the competition. We played them last year with Bayern Munich and they are not a top-tier team.

"We're not talking about a Chelsea or a Real Madrid or a Barcelona here - Fiorentina are a second-tier team. They are decent but beatable. Winning at Anfield would be the highlight of their campaign."

Liverpool play Arsenal at Anfield on Sunday and skipper Gerrard tried to lift the gloom descending on Anfield with a rallying cry.

He knows if they slide to another defeat it would be a hammer blow to their top-four hopes as well.

Gerrard insisted: "We had gone six games unbeaten before Fiorentina and it was a shame we lost this one right at the end because we wanted to use it as preparation for Sunday.

"But we will be right up for Arsenal, no doubt about it. And if we can get three points there and take it into the Wigan game next week, I'm sure we can turn that corner.

"If we get our full-strength team back I feel as if we are good enough to get into the top four.

"It's massive to have Fernando back. He's our top scorer, he's our main man and if he stays fit, I'm sure we will move up the league and get in the top four."