

Joe Cole: Depressing decline of the fallen wonder kid

By Matt Lawton

So confident was Joe Cole of earning a place in England's squad at the last European Championship, he offered Tal Ben Haim a family holiday to 'anywhere in the world' if Israel could assist Steve McClaren's stuttering side by beating Russia. It proved a pointless exercise.

McClaren blew it anyway. But two-and-a-half years on and Cole's position in the England set-up is nothing like as secure.

It amounts to a depressing decline for a player Wayne Rooney considers superior even to himself when it comes to pure skill. For Rooney, Cole is the closest thing England have to the archetypal Brazilian and someone, if fit, who should be in South Africa this summer.

The problem, however, is convincing an England manager who has already proved with Michael Owen that past glories count for nothing. Last week Fabio Capello declared Cole is 'not the player I remember' and it is now up to the 28-year-old to serve a timely reminder.

Cole has had a tough time, not least because of the cruciate ligament injury that put him on the sidelines for the best part of 2009. His last England appearance was memorable only for the challenge from Robert Kovac that knocked him out cold

in Zagreb - in September 2008. His efforts to return to the form he once produced with admirable consistency have been hindered by the reluctance of another Italian coach.

Carlo Ancelotti has picked him for eight of Chelsea's past 13 matches but he has too often selected Deco, Florent Malouda and Salomon Kalou ahead of the Englishman, most notably in Milan against Inter last week.

Ancelotti seems to have something of a downer on Cole, and not just because of the contract dispute with Roman Abramovich. Ancelotti likes to attack with real pace and he appears to think that Cole slows things down too much.

Which, if one considers how effective Cole has proved for club and country over the years, is rather unfair. Rarely has he not been an asset to the teams he represents. Rooney is among those who does not need convincing.

The 20th Century Boy
It was the moment England had been waiting for. Joe Cole, 17, was the talk of the game and he made his senior debut for West Ham at Old Trafford on January 10, 1999.

On-looking Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson made no secret of his admiration for the schoolboy superstar

and it seemed he had the world at his feet.

'Joe has had a bad injury but, if he gets fit, I think he has a great chance of getting back into the England squad,' he said this week.

'He has great skill and he can score and create goals, so he will be a fantastic player for us to have at a World Cup if he gets selected.'

'He was a great player in the last World Cup in Germany. He scored a fantastic goal against Sweden and he is someone who has experience at major tournaments, which is something you always need. England will benefit if he is there.'

Trouble is, Rooney doesn't pick the England team or the Chelsea team and, until Cole starts appearing regularly for his club, in the matches that really matter, Capello is going to be hesitant in recalling him to his squad.

Sources close to Capello say a fit and in-form Cole would make it on the flight to Johannesburg. For the same reason the Italian remains keen on keeping David Beckham involved, he would like to have Cole around. Because Cole, like Beckham, offers something different; a unique threat that could just make the crucial difference in a difficult World Cup encounter.

The way Capello organises his side means that Cole is no longer a consideration for the starting line-up. As things stand, Steven Gerrard will occupy the role on the left that had long been Cole's.

But if pace and pressure are not doing it against certain opposition, Cole could be an extremely valuable asset. He could be valuable to any manager, which is why he will be in demand this summer whatever happens with England.

Having worked with Cole at West Ham, Harry Redknapp would be among those looking to capitalise on the player's apparent fall-out with Chelsea.

Redknapp has a decent stable of wingers at Tottenham and the player most at threat would be one of his outstanding players of the season so far - Niko Kranjcar - but Cole has the versatility to slot into any side.

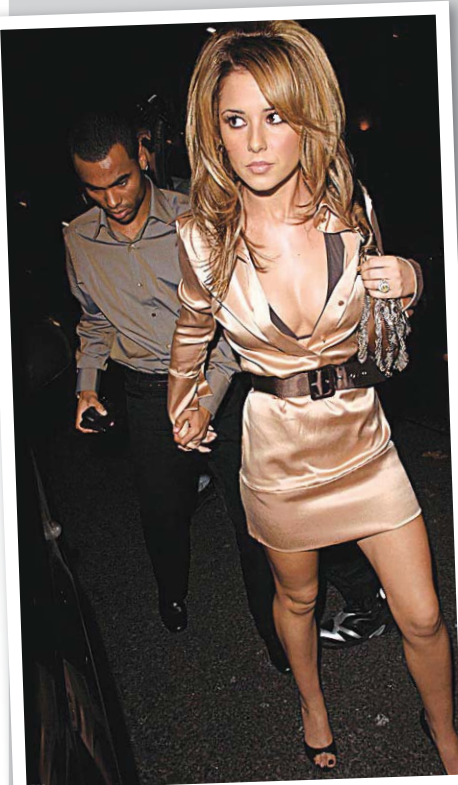
Redknapp will, of course, know that he would not be the only suitor. Redknapp often spoke of how Sir Alex Ferguson would always ask after Cole when he was at Upton Park and there is most definitely room for a wide player of his ability at Old Trafford. As there is, Rafa Benitez would doubtless agree, at Liverpool. Cole or Albert Riera? There really is no contest.



JOE COLE

Top players will be driven out of the Premier League goldfish bowl if they never get any privacy

By Guillem Balague



All these revelations about the private lives of English players has created an interesting debate in Spain.

The Spanish media can't really get their heads around the reasons for publishing the gory details of player adultery and the kiss and tell accounts of the girls involved.

The view in Spain is that these players have a right to privacy and that their professional life is completely separate from the personal.

Footballers don't make the best role models when it comes to showing the rest of us how to manage our relationships and the Spanish argument is that parents, family and educators should provide the lead for our kids to follow.

Yet the Spanish press can be just as guilty of astonishing double standards as well, and they cannot get enough of these lurid tales

from the British press: the likes of Terry and Cole have been the subject of just as any column inches in Madrid as they have in London.

Callers to phone-ins have been asking why the British press are undermining the England team ahead of the World Cup - perhaps this explains the hypocrisy in Spain: we're happy to see England's laundry being washed in public, but we'll be washing our Spain shirts behind closed doors if you don't mind.

A famous agent chatting in London this week warned that top players could be driven out of the Premier League goldfish bowl if they feel they are suffering an invasion of privacy.

But don't many of these same players have themselves to blame? In Spain, access to players is far easier and more frequent than in England.

The Spanish press gets so much from clubs and players, there's little room for anything else. British clubs have put a protective wall around players, limiting access and creating a vacuum for stories.

That gap needs filling with something, and if nobody will talk to the press, well the press will start looking beneath the surface for stories.

And what about those players who employ PR agents and are happy to expose their private lives for an extra few quid to a glossy magazine? Privacy isn't a word you can hide behind when there's a fee involved.

Spanish papers tend to have a peek through the curtains in extreme circumstances: we learnt about the private misdemeanours of Ronaldinho at Barcelona and Sergio Ramos or Guti at Madrid months before they appeared in

the papers.

But they only saw the light of day when it suited the clubs who wanted to shame the players over their unprofessional conduct. It's a system that works in Spain because the papers will keep quiet as long as they know that the clubs will work with them.

The wall of secrecy and the difficulties of access that the Premier League have constructed creates an 'us and them' culture.

Don't get me wrong, the sports Spanish media has many weaknesses: they are easily influenced by clubs, publish too many half truths, often lack rigor and are often exploited for political reasons.

But, when it comes down to peering into the personal lives of players, I'm with the Spanish on this one: leave 'em alone. *-The Mirror*