



Chelsea need to rebuild – and they could learn from Inter

Chelsea's team is ageing but José Mourinho's Internazionale retooled in the summer while balancing the books

By Kevin McCarra

Chelsea must miss the anguish. They could blame the referee, in last season's Champions League semi-final, or the fates, when a shootout in 2008 could so easily have put the trophy in their hands rather than Manchester United's. Miserable as those experiences were, the players could still take pride in their efforts. Last night the side knew they had been second-rate by comparison with Internazionale. Who better than their former manager to train the spotlight on every defect?

José Mourinho's team selection was a comment on Chelsea's gradual decline since his time in charge, and the visitors deserved more than the 1-0 margin in London that helped to ferry them to the quarter-finals. Inter's strategy had a boldness that reflected the opportunities their manager recognised. The line-up not only had three forwards, but also asked Wesley Sneijder to stay close and ply them with the ball.

It should have been risky. In theory, there ought to have been a lack of cover in front of the back four, but Chelsea were too sluggish to get into those positions. Experience can be invaluable, but the club has lost the balance that needs to be achieved between vitality and know-

how. Frank Lampard, 31, and Michael Ballack, 33, were on either side of a three-man midfield. In attack the trio comprised Nicolas Anelka, 31, Didier Drogba, 32, and the comparative colt at 29, Florent Malouda.

These are all players with merits, but the cumulative effect was to make Chelsea look laborious. Indeed any such absence of impetus will be fatal if it is repeated in the campaign for the Premier League title. The blast of the referee's whistle for full-time had barely faded before people were discussing both the necessity of rebuilding the squad and the amount the owner, Roman Abramovich, might have to spend.

The costs that Chelsea could incur tend to be steep because of a lack of continuity in key areas. Since the Russian bought the club in 2003, the team have been managed by Claudio Ranieri, Mourinho, Avram Grant, Luiz Felipe Scolari, Guus Hiddink (on a caretaker basis) and now Carlo Ancelotti. The latter is apparently the candidate Abramovich had most craved for the post. If the Italian is retained for next season it should be because of an aversion to the state of flux that has hampered Chelsea.

Inter's history does not always show

them to be judicious, but of late they have thrived on continuity while the Calciopoli scandal tore through other clubs. Mourinho may merely be in his second season as manager there, but Marco Branca has been technical director since 2003. Whatever the balance of power between the pair, the outcome has been impressive.

Their recruitment has also turned out to be remarkably cheap. Sneijder devastated Chelsea from his central position and had no need to roam because Mikel John Obi, ostensibly the defensive midfielder, lacked the nous to curb him. Sneijder seemed exactly the type of performer who could bring the Stamford Bridge team the touch and verve they sorely lack. Observers watching him last night might have imagined that such talent must cost the earth and wondered whether Abramovich could really go to such expense all over again.

However, although his Inter equivalent, Massimo Moratti, has spent exorbitantly in the past, that trait has been less evident of late. While he still allows lavish wages and bonuses, there has been scant hysteria in the transfer market. Having won Serie A, Mourinho and Branca still embarked on reconstruction of the squad last summer, but did so while balancing the books.

Transferring Zlatan Ibrahimovic to Barcelona brought in £36m, with Samuel Eto'o switching to San Siro as part of the deal. The money paid for Lúcio, Thiago Motta, Sneijder, Goran Pandev and Diego Milito.

There was cunning to the recruitment. The Brazil centre-back Lúcio dominated Didier Drogba in both legs of the tie until the red card for the Chelsea striker, but Bayern Munich sold him for less than £5m when there was just a year left on his contract. The new coach, Louis van Gaal, was thought to be sceptical about him.

Acquiring Sneijder was another coup. His marriage broke up while he was in Madrid and a change of president at Real appeared to lead to a decline in his status. The consequence was that Inter, last year, had to offer little more than half the £22m splashed out when the Spanish club signed him from Ajax in 2007.

Inter have not put themselves back among the elite simply by beating Chelsea. It is stirring, all the same, to see even a weak hope that the Champions League can be rejuvenated as a prize to be fought for by clubs from different cultures and countries across the whole expanse of Europe.