

## Jose Mourinho proves Europe's resistance is not so futile

And so, one by one, the Premier League's victims strike back. First, Lyon, representatives of the land and the league plundered more than any other as English football's taste for the exotic grew into an addiction in the mid- to late-1990s, score two late goals to dump Liverpool out of the Champions League.

Then Inter Milan remind the world that Serie A, the league displaced by this country's as the world's richest, still has bite by calling on all the guile and grit, the cynicism and skill and swagger that once made Italian sides the scourge of Europe to do the same to Chelsea.

The revolution has begun. It has also been televised, though it was all too easy to miss the broader significance of Jose Mourinho's victory at Stamford Bridge amid all of the homilies to the great man, the special one.

Mourinho is, after all, a compelling figure. Charismatic, charming, brooding, sharp of suit and tongue. The story is a good one, too, a tale of prodigal sons and avaricious owners and revenge, sweet, glorious revenge. But while Mourinho may attract the

headlines, Inter's triumph represents something far more important than a valedictory parade for the Portuguese.

For all the hyperbole which Inter's professional display at Stamford Bridge has inspired, it should be remembered that this is a side which has won just one of their last six games in Serie A, a team roundly humbled in Sicily on Friday night as Catania – managed by former Inter defender and noted spitting enthusiast Sinisa Mihajlovic – recorded their first win over the Nerazzuri since 1966.

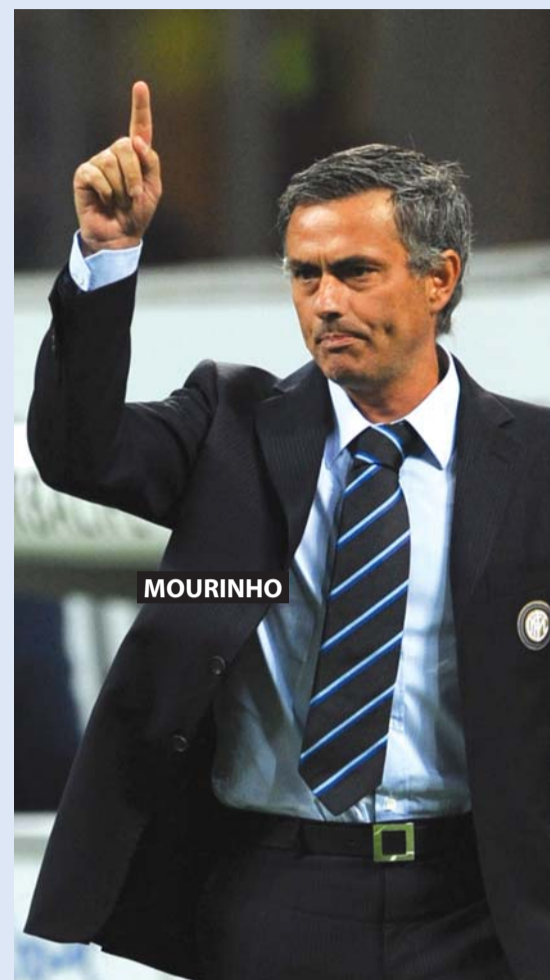
This was not Barcelona, the best team of the last decade, outclassing Manchester United in Rome last May. It was not a case of a very good side losing out to a great one. Chelsea were out-thought and out-fought and outplayed by a side who are, basically, nothing special. And that suggests that, perhaps, the Premier League's era of supremacy in Europe is nearing an end, that the playing field is beginning to level out.

In truth, it was always a curious sort of dominion, one that involved just two teams actually winning the competition which

was supposedly a duck-shoot for English clubs in 10 years. Premier League sides have performed in Europe roughly as Arsenal have domestically, and you wouldn't say they'd dominated the league for a decade.

But it is not just the financial titans of the Premier League who find themselves overthrown. Look at the quarter finalists. By the time tonight's games are over, there will be just two English sides, one Italian and, at most, one Spanish. Should results go as expected, the other four will be from Russia, Germany and two from France.

The outposts suddenly find themselves in the spotlight. A favourable draw could see Bordeaux, Lyon or CSKA Moscow in the final. It will come as little consolation to Chelsea, but that is good for the tournament and, in the long run, for them, as more countries watch and more broadcasters pay a fortune for TV rights. For the first time in years, the Champions League is a truly continental competition. The age of the elite may just be over.



## With four players who are the best in their position in the world, how have Liverpool got themselves into this mess?



It was interesting to hear Fernando Torres suggesting that Liverpool need to sign "four or five top class players in the summer", otherwise he may have to consider his future at the club.

Interesting, because against Portsmouth on Monday night, it looked like those four world class stars had already turned up, and were orchestrating proceedings in the latest 'must win' game for the Anfield team.

I know it was only Pompey, and I know maddening inconsistencies have been a feature of Liverpool's erratic season, but what we saw on Monday was enough to convince me of a thought I have gradually been forming about this current side for some time.

Namely, why the hell have Liverpool got themselves in such a mess this season, with the players they still have at their disposal? Why has just about every other game been a 'must-win' one, when they have the quality to dismiss the likes of Wigan and Lille with ease? Just how does a side become so lacking in confidence – as we witnessed in those two lame 1-0 defeats last week – when they can boast at least four world class players?

We know the spine of the team is its most important structure, and Liverpool's spine is equal to that at just about any other club in the world. Not many teams can boast four players who are – arguably – the best in their position in the world, and yet in Torres, Ger-

rard, Mascherano and Reina, the Anfield side have precisely that.

Add to that imposing quartet the likes of Jamie Carragher, who has been one of the best centre halves in the world over the past five years, England's right back Glen Johnson, established Brazil and Argentina internationals like Maxi Rodriguez, Fabio Aurelio and Lucas, Italian international Alberto Aquilani, and a whole host of other experienced international stars and you wonder how can they possibly go into a game against the likes of Portsmouth fearing a defeat that would make their season untenable.

A year ago, Liverpool were challenging for the title. Since then, they have spent £18million on Johnson, one of the best right backs in the Premier League, and £20million on Aquilani, a midfielder considered the heir apparent to the Italian throne back in his homeland. They have also signed Rodriguez, a vastly accomplished Argie international, who scored the best goal of the last World Cup.

Compare that to Manchester United who lost their best player last summer, and spent little on replacing him. Or Chelsea, who basically signed no-one before the new campaign started. Or indeed Arsenal, who lost their two best players, and signed only an unknown centre half.

Torres is not alone in complaining about a lack of investment, because the Liverpool fans have been vociferous about an apparent lack of support for their manager Rafa Benitez in the transfer market, but surely that is not the only reason for their demise this season.

Injuries too, are not the only answer, though they have certainly been a factor. Arsenal have played for almost all the campaign without a recognised centre forward and yet are still in the title race, with a side, remember, that lost its two best players.

Against Portsmouth, we saw a glimpse of the real Liverpool, but why was that? Because, perhaps, their pride had been pricked by the deluge of criticism that came out of their miserable week previously, when their attitude and commitment was questioned by their own manager?

Sure, Liverpool need better strength in depth, because anyone who thinks David Ngog is a perfect replacement for Torres wants their head examining. But United don't have that much strength in depth this season, and yet they are still on course for an unlikely treble.

What we saw against Portsmouth on Monday night, was a side of quality that is simply not at ease with itself. What we saw was a team containing some of the best players in the world, who can turn it on only sporadically, and only after an avalanche of criticism.

That means something is fundamentally wrong with team morale, something is undermining the spirit of the players. Ultimately, questions will have to be asked about that in the summer, because it can not be allowed to go on into a fresh season.

Maybe certain players will have to leave to bring unity and sense of togetherness to the team. Maybe it is a bigger picture than that, and more fundamental changes will have to be made.

But one thing is for certain. A side which can boast four players who are the best in their position in the world should not be scrambling around for points in must-win games against Portsmouth. Liverpool are too good to be in this position whether they sign four new players or not, and that is a fact that must be addressed when the dust settles on this campaign.