

Manchester City line up £50m Fernando Torres to front title challenge



Roberto Mancini has laid down a marker for what promises to be another summer of huge spending at Manchester City by confirming that he would like to sign Fernando Torres and speaking openly about the club's chances of persuading the Liverpool striker to leave Anfield.

Mancini said signing a player of Torres's quality could be the catalyst to inspire City to mount a sustained challenge for next season's Premier League title, and he described the Spaniard as belonging to an elite group of footballers including Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.

Torres is known to be questioning his future at Anfield because of the way the club have regressed this season and Mancini spoke of the importance of City, currently fifth in the Premier League, breaking into the top four to help convince one of their principal transfer targets that moving to Eastlands would not be a downward step. "We are a top team and I think all the top teams are interested in Torres but sometimes it depends on the player because they want to play in the Champions League," he said. "If we don't get into the fourth position I think it will be difficult."

Explaining his reasons for identifying Torres, Mancini said: "For me, he is with Carlos [Tevez], [Wayne] Rooney, [Lionel] Messi, [Zlatan] Ibrahimovic, [Cristiano] Ronaldo as the best in Europe. Fernando is a fantastic striker; all the teams in Europe would like him."

Nonetheless, City are one of the few who could afford to make Liverpool an offer in excess of £50m, as well as making Torres the high-

est paid player in English football, with a weekly salary of about £200,000. Asked if City had an advantage over Torres's other suitors, Mancini replied. "Probably."

For a manager to be so open about his interest in a player is unusual but the Italian was speaking in the knowledge that Torres is open-minded to the idea.

When City looked into his potential availability last summer the message from Torres's representatives was that the Spain international was not interested. That, however, changed to a "maybe" when the same calls were made in January and senior officials from Eastlands have been back in touch over the past fortnight.

Asked about City's intentions tonight, the Liverpool manager, Rafael Benítez, seemed unperturbed. "We've said repeatedly that Fernando is not for sale and he still has three years of his contract remaining. So how can they sign a player who does not wish to leave?" he said.

Liverpool are seventh, with only an outside chance of the Champions League, and City are hoping to capitalise on what could be a disruptive summer at Anfield, with the club up for sale and Benítez being linked with the Juventus job.

Mancini was asked whether City stood a better chance of signing Torres if Benítez were to leave Anfield. "I saw in the newspapers in Italy that Benítez was going to Juventus but I don't know if it's true or false," he said. "I think if Benítez goes to Juventus, Benítez will get one, two or three players of his own [from Liverpool]. I have read that Liverpool have to sell one or

two players but I don't know what their situation is exactly." Asked if he felt confident that Liverpool would sell, he said: "I don't know this."

Mancini went on to confirm City's long-standing interest in Benfica's Argentina winger Ángel di María, as revealed in the Guardian last November. "It's the same situation with Torres. Di Maria is a good player and, in the future, we'll see."

Representatives of Ronaldinho, the former world footballer of the year, are also understood to be planning to sound out City to see if there is any interest in arranging a deal with Milan. That idea has not yet taken off but, in the face of further questions about Torres, Mancini addressed the club's desire to bring in a recognised superstar, having failed in the past with a world-record £92m offer for Kaká, then of Milan. "I think we must buy a top player," he said. "We must make sure we don't spend too much on normal [average] players but if there is the possibility to spend the money on top players, young players who can help us build a future, I think it is OK."

"If we want to win the Premier League ahead of Chelsea and Manchester United we must sign some important players. All the top players want to play in the Champions League. But next season I want to win the Premier League; this is my desire even ahead of the Champions League, and I want players to understand that Manchester City are an important project for the future and that they can come here - [and] not only if we get fourth position."

Why Emmanuel Adebayor must show Arsenal what they've been missing at the Emirates this weekend

Emmanuel Adebayor has the chance to show Arsenal what they are missing this weekend, when he travels to his former club for the first time since his acrimonious move to Manchester City last summer.

When the two sides met at Eastlands last September, in City's dramatic 4-2 win, Adebayor was the villain of the piece, racing the length of the pitch to goad Arsenal's fans after scoring and raking his studs down the face of former team-mate Robin van Persie.

Adebayor was subsequently punished for both incidents, but since then his season has been equally turbulent, with injury, further suspensions and the trauma of the gun attack on the Togo team bus at the African Nations' Cup making it a campaign he will want to forget.

But with four games to go, starting with Saturday's trip to The Emirates to face his old club, Adebayor can turn a season of frustration and under-achievement into one of success, by inspiring City to win the race for fourth and clinch a Champions League spot for the first time.

To do that he must cope with the inevitable abuse that

will be tested to the limit by the sustained vitriol aimed his way.

Much of it Adebayor has brought upon himself, with his outspoken remarks about Arsenal and why he had to leave, but he has the chance to have the last laugh on his baiters - by showing them what a class act they let go.

How Arsenal could have done with Adebayor this season, with Robin van Persie out of action for the past five months and Nicklas Bendtner a willing, if inadequate, replacement up front.

Many Premier League defenders, Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand among them, have identified Adebayor as the toughest striker to play against, because of his movement, quick feet and ability to drift all over the pitch and threaten from a variety of positions.

The time has come for Adebayor to justify that esteem in which he is held by his fellow pros by showcasing his enormous ability and consigning the ugly side of his game to the past once and for all. The Emirates would not be a bad place to start.

