



**TOP SCORERS** Sergio Aguero and Erin Dzeko have been prolific in front of goal this season, with 15 and 12 goals respectively.

# WE BUILT *this* CITY

On 28 April, Manchester City play rivals United in what could be the fixture that decides the fate of the 2011/12 English Premier League. But while City are hell-bent on winning a first Premier League title, their ambitions for the future of the club are a whole lot grander.

**BY BEN EAST**

**P**ATRICK VIEIRA IS planning for the future, but he thinks, just for a second, of the past. “Did you see the last Champions League final?” he asks, eyes gleaming. “Barcelona won it with eight

players who had come from their academy. Eight! For me, that is the perfect way to do things. They are the team to follow.”

Vieira wouldn't be the first person to be enchanted by Barcelona's success. They are loved by supporters from all over the world, who are attracted not just by their trophies, but by their style of play and

footballing philosophy. But for the club for which Vieira now works – Manchester City – Barcelona's model is not something to be envious of. It's a blueprint to be improved upon.

Vieira's brief these days is to bring a little of his World-Cup-winning experience to a club aspiring to its own slice of Champions League glory. Since retiring last summer, he has taken on the role of football development executive at Manchester City. It's perhaps a surprise move for those who more readily identified him with his long career in Arsenal's midfield, but it's a natural progression for Vieira himself.

“I was only here 18 months as a player, but I really felt at home,” he says. “There was a great atmosphere, a belief that we

could be up there with the best. I wanted to be in a place where I could bring my experience to a club that is doing the right things, that feels it has a duty to the community. It's about giving kids at our academy the right environment, not just to play for the first team, but to win the biggest honours in the game.

“The thing is,” he smiles, “Barcelona have been working this way for 30 years. We've only just started at City.”

He has a point. Since Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mansour bought the club in September 2008, City have been completely transformed. The financial fears are over, and relegation a thing of the past – it has been replaced by genuine aspirations, not just for the Premier League title but for the Champions League as well.



**NEW CHALLENGE** Former French national player Patrick Vieira is committed to building a new Barcelona at Manchester as the club's football development executive.

**“There are cycles in football, and for us I believe it started with winning the FA Cup. It gave us belief.” – Patrick Vieira**

Could Manchester City be the English Barcelona? The early phases of the takeover didn't suggest it could be. Indeed, the first year didn't appear to be appreciably different to the situation at many football clubs purchased by flamboyantly ambitious foreign owners. There were the hugely expensive, statement-of-intent purchases of star players who didn't quite work and have since left – Robinho for £32.5m, Craig Bellamy for £14m, Wayne Bridge for £12m. The club only managed a modest 10th position on the 2008/09 English Premier League log, while the incumbent manager, Mark Hughes, lasted until December 2009 before being replaced by the more high-profile Italian, Roberto Mancini (who, incidentally, made Vieira his first signing). So far, so Chelsea.

And yet, spend a day behind the scenes at Manchester City, and it's quite clear that what animates everyone, from the owners down to the community workers (and one in six staff work in the community in some way), isn't whether Manchester City win the Premier League this year, but how the club develops over time. And most importantly, how it becomes one of the top clubs in the world while maintaining a close sense of identity and kinship with its fan base. At its old home at Maine Road, the season ticket holders, players and celebrity fans all mingled together, and while of necessity things have moved on, the ethos of the fans being close to the club is carefully maintained.

“You hear football owners talk about long-term aims, but it's very rarely acted

upon,” says Jon Stemp, the chief infrastructure officer. This is the man presiding over the construction of The Etihad Campus, which will become arguably one of the finest sporting facilities for the development of talent in the world, from kids to first-team level. “We're very lucky that we have owners whose day jobs are all about figuring out how to make the UAE a solvent, self-sustaining place when the oil runs out in 50, 60 years' time. They are thinking about the long term in everything they do.”

It's not surprising, then, that it irritates chief football operations Officer Brian Marwood when events such as Manchester City's recent exit from the Champions League at the group stage are cast as some sort of disaster. “People forget where we were,” he laughs. “We were playing Bayern Munich, Napoli, Villarreal, all teams with significant CL experience. And not so long ago our fans were standing on the terraces at Gillingham, Macclesfield and Lincoln in League 1. So we have come a long way in a short space of time. I do accept that expectations are a lot higher, but it's unusual to finish with 10 points and not qualify. It was a disappointment rather than a disaster.”

Of course, it was during a Champions League game that Carlos Tevez had his much-publicised fall-out with Mancini – their frosty relationship is now in the process of thawing. Mancini's reign has been intriguing: there are big personalities in his dressing room, yet rather than let them all have free reign on the pitch, in his first two seasons he focused on making City difficult to beat rather than particularly exciting. “I like 1-0 wins,” he smiled at a pre-match press conference in January 2011. Perhaps that wasn't surprising from a man who won the Italian Scudetti three times in a row with Inter, where defensive solidity is prized above all other attributes.

The regime has sometimes been tough. Mancini has often talked of needing “good men” rather than simply good players. But such strong, unwavering management – which not every player has agreed with – has brought respect. Which is why the FA Cup win last year was so crucial. It wasn't just a return on the owner's investment – it was a reminder that Mancini's methods work. As Tevez, Bellamy and



**BOSS MAN** Roberto Mancini's strict leadership has brought out the best in players like Mario Balotelli and Sergio Aguero (left) – two young players who are already showing a great deal of passion for and commitment to Manchester City.



Emmanuel Adebayor learned to their cost, you cross Mancini at your peril.

And once Mancini's authority was established with the FA Cup win and Champions League qualification, City became much more expansive and enjoyable to watch. Sergio Aguero, at £38m, was certainly a lavish acquisition last July, but the Argentinian immediately changed the perception of City as a conservative side. He may have arrived in Manchester

laden with the tabloid baggage of having Maradona as his father-in-law, but Aguero's electric start to the season meant he was soon rather more famous for his striking talents than his domestic arrangements. It also helped that, far from being a flash footballer constantly pictured with his famous wife on his arm, he admitted that he was a family man who loved his work – a state of affairs City tend to insist on these days.

In the early phases of the season, it was Aguero's link-up play with Spanish midfielder David Silva which fired City to their breathtaking start of nine wins and a draw from their first 10 games, scoring a staggering 36 goals in the proc-

ess. But Aguero's delicate touch in front of goal also benefited Edin Dzeko, who had endured a miserable opening season in English football, but suddenly began finding the net again. Mario Balotelli, too, began at last to make headlines for his footballing prowess. All, noticeably, players that Mancini has backed publicly.

True, since the turn of 2012 there have been hints that City have begun to revert to type, and 1-0 wins have become rather more prevalent as the pressure has ratcheted up. But it's clear that Mancini has built a fearsome squad. A squad that, as Yaya Toure said before the season began, is a bit more like Barcelona. And he should know. He played for them.

“There are cycles in football,” says Vieira, “and for us I believe it started by winning the FA Cup. It gave us belief. And if you look at Nasri, Aguero, Dzeko... they are all between 24 and 26. So they are really young, which is really exciting.”

They also cost vast sums of money. To a certain extent such expensive acquisitions have lumbered Manchester City



All of which might sound a little irrelevant to the armchair fan sitting in South Africa, waiting to be thrilled by the majesty of a mazy Silva run. But the thinking is, if you get the local community on your side, the matchday atmosphere is more intense and the stadium more colourful. It's the Barcelona effect again: because they cast themselves as the club of the Catalan people, melding that to successful, attractive football, it created a brand that people wanted to be a part of, and shout about.

"The question you're asking is: what do we want the world to feel about this football club?" says Stemp. "And the answer is to be found back in our local community. We were founded 130 years ago to stop local men drinking and fighting. So we believe it's a peculiarly

with the image of being United's flash-with-the-cash, upstart neighbours – even though nobody could argue with the sheer beauty of their football when they thrashed United 6-1 at Old Trafford earlier this season. Any accusations of 'buying success', however, don't wash with Marwood.

"I do laugh when people accuse us of that," he says. "It's not as if Manchester United have never spent any money. Berbatov and Ferdinand cost £30m each, Rooney was £26m. I do accept that we have spent a lot of money very quickly to get this club competitive. But actually, Joe Hart cost less than £1m, Micah Richards came through the youth system, Vincent Kompany, Pablo Zabaleta and Adam Johnson were all pretty sound acquisitions at the price we paid for them."

In fact, four of those five were already at the club before the change in ownership, but the argument still stands in the sense that they are all first-team regulars. And while the fans can be excused a little brashness after years without trophies, yo-yoing between divisions and watching city rivals Manchester United become one of the most successful teams of all time, it's not really how the club itself operates.

Instead, the owners insist on respectful understatement in every area of the business. Stemp makes a point of explaining that, although the Etihad



**GRAND PLANS** A computerised image shows the scope of the new Manchester City Football Academy, which will include a 7 000-seater stadium for Academy games.

Campus looks fantastic, they don't want to make a big deal of it. "Manchester used to export cotton to the world, and now it exports football," he smiles. "But we try not to be too flash. Every sporting institution that works has a philosophy, and ours is about our community – the owners realised that you couldn't homogenise and turn into something inauthentic. We have to remember our more humble roots."

human club that hopefully people can connect to because they can see that we're trying to be successful, but in an accessible and open way."

And yet, such are the vagaries of football ownership that such lofty aims would mean very little if City finished halfway up the Premier League. They can insure against such a scenario by purchasing some of the world's greatest players, but just as there's always been the sense that

Chelsea won't be a truly global team until they win the Champions League, so the fortunes of Manchester City will always be at the mercy of another team of 11 men, kicking a football around.

"Everyone gets emotional about match day, understandably," says Marwood. "But if you get drawn into continually reacting instantly after a game that hasn't gone your way, you lose track of what you're trying to do long term. I'm not saying for one moment that results and success aren't important. But we're very fortunate to have owners with a broader vision than getting carried away by one specific result."

Ironically, one of their long-term aims could actually be realised in the next few months. Their first Premier League title is tantalisingly close, and with Yaya Toure back in the side after the African Cup Of Nations, it's probably only Manchester United's previous experience of winning titles that can prevent City's upstarts from success. There will be nervy moments along the way, as there always are when the prize is within touching distance.

It's a battle, essentially, between two clubs; one seeking to preserve their history, and one seeking to make it. Come the end of the season, the difference will probably be down to whether some of Manchester City's incredibly highly-paid players are willing to go that extra mile for the cause that means so much to their fans.

"We had to pay a lot for these players because we were asking them to buy into a dream, rather than a trophy cabinet," says Marwood. "In a young footballer's career, three or four years is a really long time. But I would say to anyone who doubts their desire, spend half an hour with Vincent Kompany, James Milner, David Silva, Joe Hart, Micah Richards. They would very quickly see how passionate they are. There's a fierce determination, shared by all of us, to create something special at this club."

Come May, they might well have done just that. **SI**

See Manchester City vs Arsenal (7 April) and Manchester Utd (28 April), live on SuperSport.



## WHAT'S SURPRISED US THIS EPL SEASON?

### DEMBA BA AND NEWCASTLE

This time last year, Demba Ba was starting his short career with West Ham. Despite seven goals in 12 games, he couldn't keep the Hammers in the Premier League, and it seemed reasonable to surmise that his short stay in English football might end in relative ignominy. Enter Alan Pardew's Newcastle, desperate to reshape their team after too many years of infighting between their big-name, underperforming players. It was a gamble for both sides – although Newcastle didn't have to pay a fee for his services, his wage demands were impressive – but it's paid off in spectacular style. Almost no-one had Newcastle down as contenders for Champions League qualification, but Ba's uncanny eye for goal has given Pardew's side a real chance of doing just that.



### SWANSEA CITY AND NORWICH CITY

It's become fashionable to tip the three promoted clubs for immediate relegation, even if history shows that doesn't occur as regularly as it might seem. This year, though, most expected Swansea and Norwich to struggle thanks to limited budgets. But both teams have thrived, thanks to the sheer desire of their players to seize their chance in the Premier League, as well as the hugely impressive tactical acumen of their young managers. Brendan Rodgers at Swansea has fashioned a side capable of out-passing the best teams in the Premier League, while Paul Lambert's side are ruthlessly efficient in their approach to games. They play it long when necessary, counter-attack if the opportunity arises, and keep the ball when the occasion demands.

### THE RETURN OF THE OLD GUARD

Initially, it seemed a little depressing that the major intrigue of the January transfer window came in the dredging up of some of the Premier League heroes of yesteryear from retirement or Major League Soccer in the US. Still, the return of Thierry Henry to Arsenal, in particular, summed up all that is great about the game: he loved having the chance to play for his club again, and took it with a succession of typically Henry-esque goals. As for Paul Scholes, he answered the call from Sir Alex Ferguson without complaint, and has proved as metronomic as ever in the Manchester United midfield, while Robbie Keane turned back the years with a tremendous goal for Aston Villa.

### SPURS

After failing to qualify for this year's Champions League this was always going to be a make-or-break season for Spurs if they had any hope of holding on to their best players. And after a shaky start, it's fair to say they are the most enjoyable team to watch in the Premier League in terms of pure entertainment. Their victory against Norwich over Christmas summed them up – Redknapp admitted he basically allowed Gareth Bale and Rafael van der Vaart to play where they wanted and they ran riot – but it's allied to more tactical nous than Spurs are given credit for. In that sense, the acquisition of Scott Parker has been key: as the holding midfielder he's quietly gone about giving Spurs the foundation to build attacks – and defend them.



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