

Manchester City v Stoke City, FA Cup final, 3pm Saturday 14 May

Mario Balotelli: 'I'm not a bad guy but I'm shy. Interviews are hard'

In a revealing interview, Manchester City's controversial Italian striker explains why his 'bad boy' image is undeserved

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Mario Balotelli says he has not produced his best football for Manchester City but is confident he can improve.
Photograph: Tom Jenkins

Mario Balotelli sometimes finds Manchester a lonely place but, since swapping Italy for England last summer, he has rarely been left alone. It remains a potentially toxic paradox but at least Roberto Mancini's most arresting, if anarchic, talent is learning to see the funny side of growing up in public.

Well aware his every on- and off-field excess – and there have been a few – is routinely exaggerated, City's £24m former Internazionale striker has decided the time has finally come to separate fact from fiction. The vexed issue of parking looms high on his agenda. "I heard that I have £12,000 worth of parking tickets," says the 20-year-old in his distinctive, deepest bass, voice. "If that was true then I would have to get about 35 tickets a day. It's not possible. I have maybe 20 parking fines, which I

know is a lot and I *have* been stupid. I have parked my car outside San Carlo restaurant too many times but I have *not* been fined £12,000."

Introducing an element of self deprecation to conversation in a second language is not easy but Balotelli's English has quickly become so advanced that his sentences are now nuanced with the sort of care he has not always displayed towards opponents, team-mates and referees.

As he pours hot drinks rather awkwardly in the coffee shop at St Ann's hospice in Cheadle before devoting two hours to ward rounds spent happily chatting to patients, an intriguing dichotomy emerges. It certainly seems hard to square the apparent delinquent José Mourinho once declared "unmanageable" to the smiling figure described as a "very nice, very polite young man – although he has no idea how to make tea," by St Ann's volunteer waitresses.

"See, I do smile," Balotelli says. "My public image is absolutely not a fair reflection of who I am. Sometimes I do the wrong thing and there are things I regret but I'm 20. People who know me are aware I'm not a bad guy but I'm shy; it's difficult to be here giving an interview."

Coy yet bolshy, Balotelli annoyed Mourinho to the point where the current Real Madrid coach suspended him from Inter's squad. "Maybe Mourinho said I was unmanageable because he could not do it," he says, shrugging. "Roberto Mancini is managing me now, so what Mourinho said is not true.

"They are both great managers but they are different. When I had problems with Mourinho, he tried to work against me; Mancini has supported me. Mancini killed me in the dressing room after I was sent off against Kiev [in the Europa League], he told me: 'You're an idiot, I don't know why I buy you and why I bother with you' but, with the press, he speaks well of me. The problem with Mourinho and me was that we are the same kind of character."

Suggestions that some City fans would like to see Mourinho in charge at Eastlands next season receive short shrift from a player pivotal to Mancini's hopes of overcoming Stoke in Saturday's FA Cup final. "Why?" Balotelli counters. "City are fourth in the league, we are in the FA Cup final for the first time in 30 years. I don't know why somebody would want another coach. Roberto is doing very well; why should he be changed? Roberto never lies. He says what he has to say; that's what I like about him. I trust Roberto."

Mancini is adamant domestic audiences have yet to see Balotelli deploy his coruscating pace and electric skills to their optimal, most devastating, effect. "If I keep working hard then in maybe one or two years I can be one of the best players in the game," the striker agrees. "Maybe not the best right now because Lionel Messi is in front."

By his own admission, Balotelli's game has largely regressed during a season in which his recently much improved off-ball contributions indicate a belated grasp of the English team ethic. "I can't look back on a single game at City and think: 'This is how I want to play,'" he concedes. "I have a normal level and another, higher level. I think that when I play at the normal level I can be one of the best but, in England, I have never played at that level.

"This year was difficult because I was injured twice and I didn't train properly in pre-season. I didn't know if I was coming to City or staying with Inter, so I never trained and my condition was really low. I haven't played so good but I still think I can enjoy English football. It's more physical but it's

easier than Italian football, especially for a striker."

Given his challenging infancy, Balotelli's progress has, in a wider context, been extraordinary. He was born Mario Buruwah in Palermo, Sicily, to Ghanaian immigrant parents who later moved to northern Italy. They struggled to care properly for him and he experienced serious medical problems before, eventually, being fostered by Franco and Silvia Balotelli, at the age of almost three. This personal history partly explains why he has become a staunch supporter of, and regular visitor to, a refuge for destitute children in the Brazilian favelas.

Previously starved of love, he proved a needy, difficult toddler whose first act in a new home containing two new older brothers and a sister was to charge wildly down a passageway, shattering several vases. For a long time Balotelli was unable to fall sleep unless Silvia was there to hold his hand.

If loosening the powerful ties that still bind him to his devoted, Brescia-based family has not been easy, joining City finally freed a man legally adopted by Franco and Silvia in 2008 from the appalling racist abuse that provoked many of his problems in Italian football.

"I can live anywhere," claims Balotelli who, growing up in a very white community, soon learnt that some of his compatriots were not overly keen on diversity. "But, if you ask me about black Italian guys generally, I think it is easier to live in England than Italy."

Yet if racism is no longer a problem, boredom has proved a new enemy. Despite developing a liking for Manchester's Jukes nightclub, Balotelli has spent countless hours alone in his ninth-floor city-centre penthouse apartment.

"At first, being here wasn't easy, it was a little bit difficult," he acknowledges. The suspicion is that it is still hardly Nirvana. Asked how he fills spare time, Balotelli's reply seems instructive. "Doing nothing," he says. "I stay at home and play on the PlayStation and sometimes go shopping. I have to find some interests; in Italy I had lots of things to do like going to the shooting range or Go-Karting and friends to do them with."

Knowsley Safari Park has proved a saviour; Balotelli, a World Wildlife Fund aficionado who loves holidaying at nature reserves, has made frequent visits. Despite receiving numerous invitations to swing a five iron with team-mates, he balks at the idea. "I don't like golf," he says, frowning. "It's not for me, it's too quiet. But next year things will be easier; my friends will come over and I think my family will move here."

However large his support network, Balotelli's unerring gift for controversy appears unlikely to entirely desert him. "At Inter I wore an AC Milan shirt on TV and that was the wrong thing to do," he recalls. "So, don't worry, you won't find me in a Manchester United shirt."

He did sufficient damage to neighbourly relations merely by celebrating in front of United supporters at the end of the semi-final, during which his turns and touch had, at times, left Nemanja Vidic dizzy and disorientated. "I think United players were too sensitive about it," he says. "I showed my shirt but I didn't swear."

Not that he lacks sympathy for his Old Trafford detractors. "I'm sensitive as well," he says. "And, if

one of them did the same to me, maybe I'd react the same. It's normal that, when you lose a game, you're upset and if another player celebrates like that you'll be angry."

City supporters fear Stoke will deliberately try to provoke Balotelli but the prospect simply draws an amused stare. "When I lose my temper it's because I decide to," he says. "If I do something it's because I want to do it."

The bad news for Tony Pulis's defenders is that he "really wants" to help Mancini win the FA Cup.