

The Rafael Benitez column: We don't need to respond to Fergie, we can let Liverpool success speak for itself

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Rafael Benitez

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What have you made of Sir Alex Ferguson's comments about you in his recent autobiography?

The problem with answering on those comments about me - or about Steven Gerrard - is that it only adds to the publicity. All I can say is that at the time we were doing our best to defend our team and our club. We got a reaction. We did a good job. We were challenging well. They were good times for the club. We can let the things we did at Liverpool and the success we had make our answer for us. Beyond that, there is nothing more I think I can say

Who are the five stand-out players in the Premier League for you this season?

Well, I have to name a player at my former club. Luis Suarez. Everybody knows how he has a hunger for football and it has been very impressive to see the way that he is showing so soon - immediately - after coming back what a dangerous player he is. You will have to believe me when I say that it is not my connection with Liverpool which makes me name Daniel Sturridge, too: a different sort of player but one who has confidence that comes with starting games. We have said several times already this season that strikers work off confidence and need to feel that they are an important part of the manager's plans. These two have created the most dangerous striking partnership in the Premier League so far this season. Another striker who has had less attention but one who I have been impressed when I have seen him is Alvaro Negredo, the Spanish player at Manchester City. He has a very good left foot. I must name Wayne Rooney, of course. It is a few months since we talked about Southampton as the dark horses and I must talk about Adam Lallana, their captain, working together well with Rickie Lambert.

What have you made of Wayne Rooney's return to form this season and how do you explain it?

He explains it himself! Everyone knows he has this level in his game. He is coming back and showing his level. Let us go back to our point about strikers being complex people sometimes - perhaps needing to prove something. He looks like he is wanting to show things because everybody has been talking, talking about his best being in the past. Robin van Persie has continued scoring, even though he has been struggling with full fitness, and that helps Rooney, too. Rooney is working well around van Persie, using his understanding of the game.

Why is it so difficult for an English team to copy the Barcelona system of play? Surely with good coaching and hard work this could be replicated?

The debate about needing to create a team that works through possession and kills other teams through possession is an interesting one. Everyone seems to think that if you don't play the ball on the ground, you don't play nice football. I don't see it like that. The important thing is to play well and win games: do what you have to do to win games. Look at my Napoli team. We had 74 percent possession against Sassuolo in September and drew. We had 40 per cent possession against Fiorentina on Wednesday night and won 2-1. Possession is only important if you do well with it. Some teams don't understand that to pass the ball is not the only way. If you give a manager three or four years to develop a winning style, with the right ideas then it doesn't matter what that style is.

Who is the most important player for England as we head toward next summer's World Cup finals in Brazil?

Apart from Rooney, who will be outstanding if he can keep at this level, Steven Gerrard has the elite quality that very, very few players possess and it will be especially important because of the way England play. Playing a little bit deeper for England, he will be able to dictate the tempo of games. Another of the qualities we can talk about is his ability to play the long balls to perfection, again and again. He can play short and long balls, over and over. That is important for any team but with England, who possess quick players up front, it can be especially useful.

How are you adapting to life in Naples?

It is an incredible place to work and because of the job we have had to do, it has taken time to get to see some of the 'other' Napoli, beyond the crazy football city. I visited Pompeii last week when my family came over to visit which was amazing, as any visitor to the ancient City in the shadow of Vesuvius will tell you. Since I last wrote, I have also paid a visit to Reggia di Caserta and the Teatro di San Carlos, next to the central Piazza del Plebiscito here. Another incredible experience at an auditorium where there has been such an incredible history of Italian opera. To any of you unfamiliar with Napoli, I recommend you get organised for a visit.

You are second in Serie A. Have you exceeded your own expectations with Napoli?

I would say the start is 'not bad.' We are 75 per cent strong and we can certainly get better. Roma are the surprise of the division, because they have won every game so far, and Juventus, who are up there with us, are very strong. We are growing. The understanding between the players is growing. Every week and every month we are doing things a bit better.

What did I read about the Napoli fans calling you 'Rafè'?

You are right. The Napoli fans began calling me 'Rafè' when they were posting in the forums and if they prefer it because it is easier, then that is fine and it is good for me. The support here is incredible. There is an incredible passion among the fans. It has made me feel at home

Who have been the biggest influences on you as a manager?

There have been many and I will tell you about meeting one of them only last Wednesday in Florence, from where I've just returned with my Napoli team as I write this. Yesterday morning we visited Coverciano, the Italian federation's training base which is located in the Tuscan countryside outside Florence, and I had the chance to meet the great Arrigo Sacchi. We talked a lot, about our ideas on football, ways of play, Spanish football and the Italian game. Of course, his ideas have always interested me, since the days he won back-to-back European Cups with AC Milan and before. Another manager I have always followed is the Colombian Francisco Maturana – a football coach with great ideas, who I encourage you to make a study of. He is one of the greatest coaches to have come out of South America. Johan Cruyff is another whose developments I follow. Always, you try to take the best from all the great coaches

Who do you think should win the UEFA Coach of the Year award?

It is a strong shortlist* and I am very pleased to be on it. For me, the one who receives the award has to be someone with values and principles which go beyond just winning. For me, that has to be Jupp Heynckes who in his great career has set an example to a lot of people.

The nominees are Carlo Ancelotti, Rafael Benitez, Vicente **Del Bosque, Antonio Conte, Sir Alex Ferguson, Jupp Heynckes, Jurgen Klopp, Jose Mourinho, Luiz Felipe Scolari and Arsene Wenger*