

DRO

Words Alison Ratcliffe Photos Empics, Offside

Bloody prima donna, I think, before even meeting Didier Drogba. He apparently refuses to walk the hundred yards from Chelsea's training centre to the media building, where

a cameraman has spent half an hour setting up his equipment, for an interview.

So when I speak to him, it's a surprise. His outfit is at the more outlandish end of the more-money-than-taste scale, but the man inside it seems thoughtful and genuine, whatever his peculiar preferences for a prefab hut on one side of a car park as opposed to a press room on the other. He produces one of those rare interview moments when you wish you worked in TV. Asked what it feels like to score a goal (surely not for the first time?) he looks simultaneously like a child trying to decide on a dream gift to request in his letter to Father Christmas and a wine connoisseur trying to pin down an exceptional bouquet. "It's special," he says after a long pause. "I don't know how to express it..." He smiles knowingly, his eyes twinkle. His head on one side, he is thinking hard, flummoxed even in his native French.

"I don't know... It's hard to find the words... It's a pride," he says eventually. "An immense pride and pleasure, because to score that goal, you've had to shake off defenders... sometimes you get a great pass, so you only have to score the goal... but it's difficult when you've had to get free from defenders, like the goal I scored against Barcelona [in the 2-2 draw at Camp Nou this season]. For me that was brilliant, because it took some work, a piece of control that unbalanced [Rafael] Márquez, and then the delicate sidefoot with my left that beat the keeper. That's the kind of goal I love scoring, because it's the kind of goal you remember."

It's a tennis-ball-in-the-street moment from a player who is otherwise as on-message as any of his teammates when it comes to extolling the →

GBA



Leading man:
Drogba in action
for Chelsea
(right); the Ivory
Coast striker was
crowned African
footballer of the
year in March
(below)

Chelsea work ethic. Every trainer he has worked with has taught him something, he says. Guy Lacombe at Guingamp, for instance, taught him timing. José Mourinho has taught him to win. "You can play not especially well, but be effective. You can not be in the game, but have one chance and score and make the difference. You can play badly against a team like Arsenal, but still impose yourself. The most important thing for Mourinho is not whether I score, but the work I do defensively, the calls I make, the knocks I take. It's all part of breaking down opponents."

It's hard to take a man seriously when he's wearing skin-tight, knee-length denim pedal pushers, studded and embroidered with a floral design, and a too-short matching T-shirt. But Drogba's first coach in the professional game at Le Mans, Alain Pascalou, had a point when he said Drogba was a truly intelligent player. Asked to name the standout match from his career, he considers the question, before explaining that at each club in his career, there has been a "reference point". He enumerates steadily. At Le Mans it was a brace scored in only a quarter of an hour on the pitch. At Guingamp, two goals on the last day of the season at Lyon. At Marseille, the second leg of the UEFA Cup semi-final, when Newcastle were dispatched. At Chelsea, the 4-1 league defeat of Liverpool away from home last season when he didn't score but played impressively.

Intelligence carried him through his first season at Stamford Bridge. "I had been injured a lot when I arrived at Chelsea. I'd only had seven days' rest. I was tired. Footballers aren't machines. So I had some difficult times. For a year I was never at 100%. I was playing but hurting. I couldn't accelerate properly, but I was trying to score and be effective. So I had to develop other qualities, and use my brain."

Drogba is no Wayne Rooney, a player of such outrageous natural talent that football simply opened up to him. Drogba didn't sign a professional contract until he was 21, and he didn't play in the French top flight until 24, when he left Le Mans for Guingamp. Three seasons later, after reaching the UEFA Cup final with Marseille, he came eleventh in the FIFA world player of the year standings.

"There was a time when, if I missed a chance, I'd be thinking, thinking, thinking about it. Often when it's like that there is another chance in the next five or ten minutes and I often used to miss it. I've learned to master that. Now I stay concentrated, which means that if another chance comes along I can put it away."

Starting out at right-back didn't exactly help the maturing process. Drogba's uncle, Michel Goba, was a journeyman pro in France. He invited



“Mourinho said: ‘Very few players here have won the Champions League. And that’s what you’re all missing.’ And he was right”



the five-year-old Didier to live with him in the hope of providing better opportunities than could be found in Ivory Coast. By eleven, Drogba was playing for Dunkerque's junior side, his uncle for the senior team. Fed up with seeing his nephew bombing up front to score goals, Goba suggested he start there instead. Drogba scored 40 times the next season.

The measure of Drogba's development is the turnaround in Marseille fans' opinion of him. In the hot, feisty atmosphere of the Mediterranean port, where support is at its most pressured and passionate, his signing was received coolly. Though Drogba's Ligue 1 scoring record was respectable, fans assumed that, at best he would be a good back-up striker, at worst the new Ibrahima Bakayoko, an Ivorian who flopped painfully at Stade Vélodrome. Within a few months, Marseille were being accused of Drogba dependence – Drogbomania was born.

At Chelsea, Drogba initially missed the passionate and noisy devotion of a big crowd – something Pascalou believes is important to his performance. The Ivorian admits his time at Marseille, the club he supported, was integral to his progress. “Just by signing me, [coach] Alain Perrin taught me how to deal with pressure, because Marseille is a club apart. It's a difficult place to succeed if you don't have strength of character and the will to impose yourself and if you don't love the club. He wanted me to learn to cope with that, and it means a lot to me that he chose me to play for Marseille. He could have chosen other forwards, but he chose me.”

Mourinho chose Drogba even more emphatically when he paid £24million (€35m) for him after one season at Marseille. He then set about instilling humility and drive into the striker and his wealthy teammates.

“I always remember when I arrived at Chelsea,” Drogba says. “We had a meeting and Mourinho said: ‘There are very few players here who have won the Champions League. I've won it. Makelele, Geremi, Carvalho and Ferreira have won it. But you haven't won it. And that's what you're all missing.’”

“And he was right. And now we've won trophies. When we won the first, the Carling Cup, that gave us an even greater desire to go

and win.” Any Chelsea fans nervous that Drogba is equating winning the Carling Cup with the UEFA Champions League can relax. “It takes a lot more finesse to play in the Champions League compared to the Premiership,” he says. “It's a very, very high level compared to the league. If you make a mistake in the Premiership, you can recover. If you make a mistake in the Champions League you pay.”

“I used to watch the Champions League on TV with my mates when I was younger, when I was at Le Mans, so every time I go out on to the pitch I think of that. The Champions League music brings back those memories. The teams that really stick in my mind from then are the AC Milan of Van Basten, Gullit, Rijkaard, Baresi. Olympique de Marseille, the club of my heart, and Real Madrid and Barcelona. They left an impression on me, and on the history of the Champions League.”

Ivory Coast's African Nations Cup win in 1992 made compulsive early viewing for the youngster, and Drogba cites qualifying for the 2006 World Cup as the best moment of his career. His success has spawned the cultural phenomenon dubbed ‘Drogbacité’ back home, where a beer and a street have been named after him, a CD has been released in his honour and his image is aped by the country's youth. His name seems to have

been designed to have suffixes attached – to conveniently label the commotions he causes.

Drogba watched the Nations Cup victory from afar on a French TV, but he traces his zeal for the game to a more immediate experience. “The first match I went to was at Angoulême, when I was a child, to see my uncle play. I remember the supporters and the noise and that was when my passion was born. That was when I decided I wanted to be a footballer.”

Arsène Wenger recently admitted that Arsenal came close to signing Drogba after tracking him during his time at Le Mans. Wenger suggested that Drogba's motivation owes much to his time in the lower leagues.

Drogba, though, is having none of that. “My passion for the game has always been the same,” he says firmly. “From six years old, to 20, to 29 today.” ★

DROGBA SEASON BY SEASON

		App	Goals
2005/06	Chelsea	27	12
2004/05	Chelsea	25	10
2003/04	Marseille	35	19
2002/03	Guingamp	34	17
2002	Guingamp	11	3
2001	Le Mans (L2)	21	5
2000/01	Le Mans (L2)	11	0
1999/00	Le Mans (L2)	30	7
1998/99	Le Mans (L2)	2	0

A hat trick of firsts

His hat trick against Levski Sofia was the first by a Chelsea player in the Champions League. He is the first Ivorian to be voted African footballer of the year. He won it for 2006. In 2004, he became the first Marseille player to score eleven goals in Europe in one season.