

# ALL HAIL THE NEW MO-SSIAH!

Liverpool's £37m wing wizard has been quick off the mark at Anfield, but what would you expect from a player with the pace to trouble Usain Bolt and a touch to rival Lionel Messi?

Words Alison Ratcliffe

“For years you’ve been taking the piss out of me about these *comportamenti giusti*,” Luciano Spalletti told the press, quite deadpan, after Roma’s 5-0 rout of Palermo in February 2016.

*Comportamenti giusti* – ‘the right behaviour’ – is a Spalletti catchphrase dating from his first stint with the Giallorossi in 2005.

“This,” he said, pointing his thumb back over his shoulder, “is the right way to behave.” His hand wheeled forward into a jabbing index finger, accompanied by a tone and stare to make most grown-ups regress to six-year-olds squirming behind their old wooden desks.

Spalletti’s lesson was a re-run of the one he had just given in the Roma dressing room. He moved his chair out of the way and played a video clip on the huge television screen behind him, using a laser pointer to pick out Mohamed Salah.

“We were in the 30th minute of the second half, at 4-0, and he had already scored two goals, one of them a stunner from the by-line. And I must reiterate – it wasn’t a fluke, it was a deliberate shot. He could have taken the glory for himself and the 10 out of 10s in the papers. Instead, he made that run.”

The video showed Roma losing the ball in the final third. Salah set off as if stung, eating up the Palermo player’s 10-yard head start and helping Roma’s rearguard to shepherd the ball to safety from their six-yard box, before returning upfield to join the forward line. Spalletti called it an act “crazy in its beauty” and scolded the journalists for getting sidetracked by Salah’s goal.

Quite. How frivolous of them to get distracted by a man curling the ball into the net from the by-line, just outside the six-yard box with his back to goal – without even taking a touch first – after an eviscerating Roma counter-attack.

Salah’s impact in Serie A with Fiorentina and then Roma was so immediate that *La Gazzetta dello Sport* said: “It’s now reasonable



SOMETIMES THE VERY THREAT OF HIS FAST FEET AND THINKING IN THE PENALTY BOX IS ENOUGH TO CAUSE A DEFENSIVE MELTDOWN

to ask why Jose Mourinho (of all managers) played him so little and why he allowed him to leave.”

After Fiorentina rescued Salah from Chelsea with a loan move in February 2015, they were taken aback. “Salah? We knew what his attributes were, but frankly we didn’t realise he could be so decisive,” said manager Vincenzo Montella after the Egyptian had made five appearances. “We knew he was one of the fastest players with the ball at his feet, but perhaps only Lionel Messi is faster than him.”

Former Italy and West Ham United forward Alessandro Diamanti was more pithy: “I’ve played with fast players before. But he’s fast, technical and he scores goals.”

After half a season, Salah moved to Rudi Garcia’s Roma, initially on loan. He continued to impress. But when the obsessive Spalletti replaced Garcia as Roma’s manager in January 2016, bringing his mania for repetitive training routines for each unit within the team, Salah became less a pleasant surprise and more the kind of player who might win a side the title.

Ultimately, Roma finished four points behind the all-conquering Juventus last season, but they scored 90 goals to the Old Lady’s 77 (or Liverpool’s 78) – recording the club’s best-ever points and goals tally. If you bundle goals and assists together as goal ‘contributions’, Salah made nine in 16 league matches for Fiorentina and five in 15 for Roma under Garcia, rising to a scarcely credible 42 in 50 under Spalletti. Last season he contributed to a goal every 94 minutes – more often than any Liverpool player, Philippe Coutinho included. Salah found the back of the net 35 times in only 71 Serie A starts.

At the start of last season, Spalletti administered a little remedial criticism, insisting he expected Salah to beat his man at least twice. By the time Roma had stuffed Chievo 5-3 away in May with a brace from Salah, Spalletti was calling him “extraordinary. Now that he’s confident he can play between the lines, who can catch him? You’d need a motorbike. He has to understand when to let the ball go”.

Like many overseas players, Salah has said he found Serie A a tactical education. Never a tactical stick-in-the-mud, Spalletti was the ideal instructor for a crash course, sending the Giallorossi out in an array of 4-3-3s, 4-2-3-1s and 3-4-1-2s.

Salah mostly operated on the right side of an attacking trident, but on occasion played as second striker to Edin Dzeko, or right-leaning *trequartista* in a cosy triangle just behind Dzeko and ahead of Radja Nainggolan. He has also had a few run-outs on the left flank. With Egypt, where his team-mates are perhaps not quite as gifted as him, Salah’s been more of a No.10.

Jurgen Klopp has suggested that his Liverpool side will need to be tactical chameleons in 2017-18. Discussing the 4-2-3-1 of his first season in charge (and beloved of his Borussia Dortmund) and the 4-3-3s and 4-5-1s of the last campaign, the German boss suggested any or all might come in handy.

Regardless of the finer details, Salah’s shtick is to cut in from the right on his left foot. He heads for the penalty area as soon and as fast as possible. The classic Salah goal involves springing the offside line with his pace, leaving him all alone in front of a terror-stricken goalkeeper, who is bypassed with a nonchalant side-foot from eight yards. His second strike in Roma’s March victory over Fiorentina last year is a classic example – even Salah’s former club couldn’t stop it.

Salah’s Spalletti-era strikes often resulted from quick-fire passing triangles almost under the opposition goalkeeper’s nose, as he became truly integrated into the team – a focal point even, rather than just a slingshot – and supported centre-forward Dzeko in his mission to attack the first ball.

Salah’s poaching is surprisingly sharp for a winger, thanks to his exceptional anticipation: you’ll often see him Hoover up a rebound or loose ball inside the six-yard box, while the instinct that saw him follow up Roberto Firmino’s lob against Watford in August is typical. Sometimes the very threat of his fast feet and thinking in the box is enough to cause defensive meltdown, as when the usually stately ▶

Jan Vertonghen collapsed like a newborn foal, with Salah breathing down his neck, in Fiorentina's Europa League victory over Tottenham in February 2015. The Egyptian finished with a characteristic zipping eight-yard futsal-esque toe-poke.

Salah is all about homing in on the six-yard box, hence his crack shot-conversion rate of 19.3 per cent in Serie A, which is better than Harry Kane's over his Premier League career and would put Salah in the top five per cent of forwards in the Premier League over the past six seasons. The fact he remains calm and lucid inside the box after his strenuous sprinting helps, too.

Salah's assists tend to come from very similar game situations to his goals, as well as from cutbacks after he has reached the by-line close to goal. Prior to that acutely angled goal against Palermo, he had intended to square the ball for Dzeko but soon changed his mind after the keeper came racing out.

Dzeko, a 'bomber' in Italian football parlance, was royally served though, scoring seven of the 22 chances Salah created for him in 2016-17. The duo proved the second-most prolific in Europe after Dortmund's Ousmane Dembele and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. The prospects are appetising for Firmino, or perhaps Divock Origi.

That does not mean the Egyptian's toolkit is lacking a long-range screamer (search YouTube for the one against Sassuolo last year) or an Andres Iniesta-style pass, like the one for Diego Perotti that bisected Bologna in April, teeing up Dzeko for the third in a 3-0 win. Perhaps developing these alternative routes to goal will be the key to making Salah world-class, and no doubt to extending his career.

That was Roma's second 3-0 defeat of Bologna in 2016-17. The previous one in November featured Salah's first ever hat-trick, with Italian daily *La Repubblica* labelling the wideman "possessed" and "untouchable... every time the ball arrived at his feet it was trouble for [Roberto] Donadoni's team who had no idea how to stop him".

Salah hit a sprint speed of 33.89 kilometres per hour during that match; Usain Bolt averaged 37.58kph in his 2009 world-record run. A beIN Sports report has pegged Salah as a 10-second 100 metre runner based on a 70m sprint he did against Fiorentina last season.

This ridiculous speed underpins the emblematic goal of Salah's career to date, for Fiorentina at the Juventus Stadium in the 2015 Coppa Italia semi-final. Salah reads Simone Pepe's corner for Juve before it even drops: it's going to be cleared. He darts off from inside the Fiorentina box. As the ball falls to a free Viola player on the edge of the penalty area he's accelerating, but his team-mate's first-time lob falls just behind him. He checks and nudges it forward with his heel. By the centre circle he is fully extended. Simone Padoin, Juve's last man, is still six yards ahead but Salah knocks the ball through his legs, hurtles into the box and blasts it into the top right corner.

Montella joked the goal was a training-ground move. Fiorentina's sporting director, Daniele Prade, called it "a crazy goal... the kind of thing you do when you are a kid."

Lovestruck Viola supporters carved a heart into Salah's front door, which, since it was attached to a historic palazzo close to Florence's old bridge, caused a minor imbroglio. A blip, in fact, among the far graver hardships Salah has faced.

As a darling of the Islamic world playing in the west, the Egyptian is forever dodging largely unasked-for flak from both sides. A delicate situation during his time at Basel – when he avoided shaking hands with Israeli Champions League opponents Maccabi Tel Aviv, finally offering fist bumps – followed him to Rome. A local Jewish leader objected to Roma signing a player he termed "an antisemite". The winger has always strongly denied making anti-Israel statements that had been attributed to him.

When Salah was presented with the Swiss League's Player of the Year trophy for 2012-13, the female host offered him the standard continental kiss on the cheeks, causing big controversy among his Muslim fans. Salah pointed out his evident embarrassment in the moment and said that the reaction had spoiled his joy at the award.

Little did he know that three years later he would be embroiled in international relations between Italy and Egypt. In February 2016 a young Italian, Giulio Regeni, was tortured to death in Egypt, with

**Right** Salah scores in the season-opener at Watford **Below right** Japester Totti tells the winger another zinger



## WHEN ROMA VISITED DUBAI, MORE FANS SHOWED UP TO SEE SALAH THAN TOTTI, AN UNHEARD-OF SCENARIO IN THE ANNALS OF THE GIALLOROSSI

Europe blaming the Egyptian police and the Egyptian government blaming the Muslim Brotherhood. Roma took part in a campaign to unfurl banners demanding "the truth for Giulio" in a game against Napoli on April 25, 2016. This put Salah in a spot. He was the newly appointed ambassador for the Egyptian tourism sector, with a series of ads scheduled for filming at Roma's training ground. Arab media reported that he wanted to leave Roma, but Salah's lawyer denied it and the player responded with an assist in the match in question.

The tensions between Roman ultras are barely less fraught than those between east and west. After the Rome derby in May 2017, Lazio ultras hung dummies from a bridge by the Colosseum. The mannequins were wearing Roma shirts bearing the names of Salah, Nainggolan and Daniele De Rossi under a banner reading, "Some polite advice... Sleep with the light on!"

It was heavy stuff for a private and devout man who gives few interviews, despite having good English and Italian. After scoring,

Salah generally limits his celebrations to a few hugs and a prayer. If you saw him tear half his kit off celebrating his Fiorentina strike against Spurs, it's because he felt he had a point to prove in England, which surely bodes well for Liverpool.

Salah is no cold fish, though. He will happily go nuts for a team-mate's goal and proved popular at Roma, making friends with Nainggolan and Francesco Totti, who regaled him with his famous jokes in Roman dialect. He was also seen patiently signing autographs for a throng of fans who spotted him leaving a mosque in the capital after joining Roma.

Montella once talked of the "routine, calm way in which [Salah] meets every challenge". When the wideman received a barrage of social media-orchestrated whistling on his return to Fiorentina with Roma (the Viola fans allege he had strung the club along before moving on), he scored after six minutes. After his effigy was hung outside the Colosseum, he made two and scored two in his next three games.

Salah has also endured layoffs, injuring the same ankle in both seasons at Roma. The second absence bled into his time away at the Africa Cup of Nations. So when you see him among the top 12 goalscorers in Serie A for 2016-17, or the top two assist-makers, remember he missed six games. Napoli's Jose Callejon, with one more assist for the season, missed just the one.



Salah's compatriot, the Premier League veteran and now Egyptian Premier League coach Mido, has raved about Salah but says he will need to learn Klopp's pressing game. The tactic isn't entirely foreign to Salah: Roma did adopt a high press against Napoli last October, which saw the winger pinch the ball off Kalidou Koulibaly on the defender's own goal-line and set up Dzeko to score in a 3-1 victory. In any case, Salah's figures for tackles and interceptions are slightly higher than Sadio Mané's.

And Salah wipes the floor with Mané when it comes to social media. He has become an Arab superstar with in excess of 10 million followers, and has been Pepsi's brand ambassador for the Middle East and North Africa. When Roma visited Dubai in the summer of 2016, more fans showed up for Salah than for Totti – an unheard-of scenario in the annals of the Giallorossi.

Most Liverpool fans will be more concerned with how Klopp arranges his attacking options than how their marketing and media director Markus Brengle conjures Instagram followers. However, the pertinent question might not be where or with whom to play the Egyptian, but what to do if he is ever unavailable. Last season, a journalist asked Spalletti how he would deal with Salah's absence during the Africa Cup of Nations. He quipped: "I will have to buy someone just like him."



**WAYNE ROONEY**

Club: Everton

Fee: Free

Position: Striker

Toffees fans will have needed no introduction to their striking recruit this summer, although young supporters might struggle to recall his first spell at Goodison Park, which came to an end 13 years before this second began. After a somewhat underwhelming final few campaigns at Old Trafford – hitting just the five Premier League goals in the last campaign after eight in 2015-16 – the initial signs are that Wazza's return to Merseyside may give the tail end of his career a shot in the arm. A header 45 minutes into his second league bow for the Blues – as well as a decent display in Everton's Europa League win over Hajduk Split five days later, and goal at Manchester City – suggests that Ronald Koeman's gamble (on his wages, if not a transfer fee) could be a pretty shrewd one. "He shows that he's still one of the best in his position," the Dutchman said after Everton's 1-0 win on the opening weekend. "He was different class with his ball possession, was comfortable on the ball, made some good choices with it and scored a great goal, too."