

Drogba: finishing outside top four would be a disaster



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Chelsea's star striker fears missing out on Champions League as Villas-Boas tries to change club's philosophy

Didier Drogba is not trying to fool anyone. This has been a turbulent week for Chelsea, with stories of impending sackings and open opposition to the manager, Andre Villas-Boas, from the players. The striker was 3,000 miles away in Abidjan as the story rumbled on this week, but he was in no mood to use distance as an excuse for ignorance. "We are having a difficult season – not only at this moment," he says. "It's not always easy when you change manager, when there's new players to fit in the team. It is the hardest season I've known since I've been at Chelsea. You want to be in a better position in the league. We are used to being in the first two or three. It's different."

The main source of difference is in the dug out, or rather agitating on his benches in the technical area, pointing and whistling. Once again, for the sixth time since he signed for Chelsea from Marseille in 2004, Drogba is working with a new manager. How has Villas-Boas changed things? "He came with his philosophy which is playing a bit more football than the other managers," Drogba says. "That's how he succeeded in Porto so he wanted to do the same at Chelsea. It's difficult because we are trying to change the way we play and to adapt to his philosophy so that's why it's taking time. Maybe that's the reason why we are struggling a little bit to be in the first two."

The most successful centre-forward in Chelsea's history believes that were his club to fail to qualify for next season's Champions League it would be "a disaster". Talking after he had captained Ivory Coast to the final of the Africa Cup of Nations, Drogba reveals that he has followed the Blues' progress from a fan throughout January and has become concerned about their position in the Premier League.

"When I came the club was second and I helped them to be first," he says. "For me it would be a disaster if the club is not in the top four this year. I've had a successful eight years so I don't want that to happen."

Three championship winners medals, finishing no lower than third in his career in a Chelsea shirt, Drogba has been successful indeed. Taking a couple of days off to inspect charitable projects in his homeland,

he is able to reflect on the expectations that he has helped generate with his club.

"You can win with different philosophies, but the best tactic is always the one which makes you win," he insists. "You can feel comfortable in a certain system like 4-4-2 or 4-3-3, but believe me when you win you forget about the tactics to achieve it." Nevertheless, the growing sense from outside the club is of a manager not entirely in harmony with his senior players. Drogba, though, insists this is not an issue.

"He is trying to motivate the players, he is a good motivator," he says of Villas-Boas. "Training is good, it is not that different from what we were doing the previous season. He's ambitious, he wants to win, to succeed, to be successful in the Premier League. You know how it is when you come with a lot of ambition and it doesn't go the way you want: it's difficult. It's not easy for him but he's not the only one who's responsible, we all are."

"Talking in general, not about Andre, a manager is the manager and he knows he's responsible for the wins and the defeats so he will be the one to be blamed first. But sometimes it's more complicated than that. Players have to have responsibility because once we are on the pitch the manager can do nothing," Drogba can certainly speak from close observation of a wide range of managerial approaches. "Yes that's why I know a bit about it."

DIDIER ON...

ANDRE VILLAS-BOAS

He's a good motivator, ambitious. He wants to win, to succeed, to be successful in the Premier League.

CHELSEA'S LEAGUE POSITION

For me, it would be a disaster if the club is not in the top four this year.

LUIS FELIPE SCOLARI

Scolari is a good manager, he won the World Cup. But it didn't work at Chelsea.

MANAGING CHELSEA

Why not? It would be nice. Have this club and I always want to help the people I love. So why not?

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For more information on Didier Drogba's foundation or to support his charity event on March 10 in London go to www.didierdrogbafoundation.com or follow @FondationDrogba on Twitter.

I've had six managers but most of them won things and brought something to the club. Some didn't win but they helped the club to improve and grow." Even Luiz Felipe Scolari, the manager whose removal the senior players like Drogba were rumoured to have instigated.

"Scolari is a good manager, he won the World Cup but it didn't work at Chelsea. A lot of people say I didn't get on well with Scolari but I always respected his choices for the team. For me if I'm not playing it's not the manager, it's me who needs to improve. I always respect that, manager's decisions even if sometimes you see me sulking on the bench."

One thing that is different about the latest new man, though, is that he is the same age as a number of those in his charge, including Drogba. Does that have a bearing on the relationship? "For me that's not an issue, you have to respect his position," he says. "Even if he was younger than me you would have to respect him. He's not the manager because he came and said 'I'm going to be the manager'. He's the manager because he proved he could manage a team and win trophies. I think he's a big man and he's also learning. There's no age where you can say you don't learn anymore. Even [Sir Alex] Ferguson is still learning with his team – that's how you become better year after year."

Beyond league position, one of the young manager's most pressing concerns is the future of his star striker. Drogba's contract with Chelsea is reaching its conclusion. Does the player himself know what will happen next?

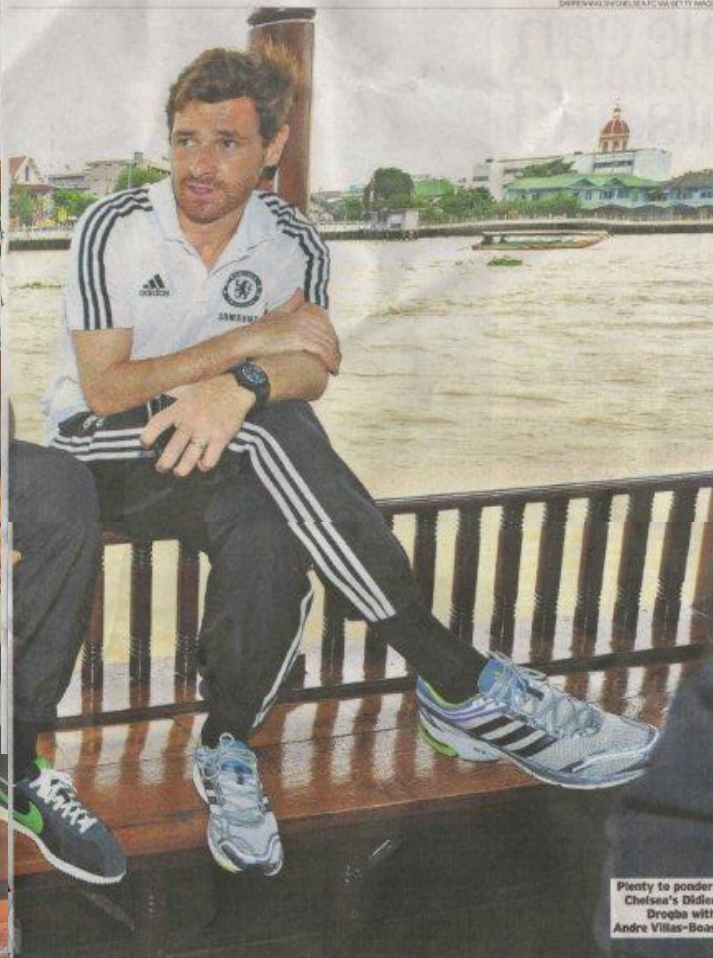
"We are still talking about it. Everybody knows I love the club, everyone knows I want to stay so we are discussing it and let's see what comes out of the discussions. My heart is blue."

Chronology, however, insists time will eventually be called. And what then for Didier Drogba? With his range of philanthropic activity, many have predicted a career in politics back in his home country. But the man himself suggests there could be another possibility.

"Me as manager of Chelsea?" he says. "Why not? It would be interesting, it would be nice. I love this club and I always want to help the people I love, so why not?" And, having watched half a dozen others do the job, Drogba has an idea of managerial requirements.

"If I wanted to be a manager I would give a lot to my players because I think it's the only way for them to give back. You have to show them that you care. But maybe it's a bit early to speculate like that. First, I am a player. A player, moreover, on a mission to avert disaster."

Matthew Norman © 19



Pleanty to ponder: Chelsea's Didier Drogba with Andre Villas-Boas

Villas-Boas says he has Abramovich backing

Chelsea manager accepts players doubt his 'project' Portuguese does not want dreaded vote of confidence

By Jason Burt

Andre Villas-Boas yesterday claimed that he continued to have the "full backing" of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich although he admitted his relationship with some of the players might not be so harmonious. The Chelsea manager, while conceding he was under pressure after a poor run of results, said he did not feel in danger of losing his job despite mounting concerns from sources close to Abramovich that the billionaire is less convinced that the

34-year-old can turn it around. Villas-Boas insisted that his dealings with Abramovich, who spent much of last week at the club's training ground and held a series of talks with the manager, were "perfect".

"They don't have to back my project," Villas-Boas said of the players who were called into a training-ground inquest the day after Saturday's defeat away to Everton, with Abramovich also at the club's Cobham facility. "It's the owner who backs my project," Villas-Boas added, saying it was "normal" for some players to disagree with him.

"I think the owner has full trust in me and will continue to progress with the ideas that we have," he said. "There is no problem with him at all. It's a relationship that is perfect at the moment. We have discussed how we can correct what's going wrong. He

asks how we will improve where we are and I have to put into perspective how we plan to do that."

If he is to survive, Villas-Boas will have to curry on convincing Abramovich that he is the right man to keep Chelsea in the top four and qualify for next season's Champions League. Chelsea also have two crucial matches within the next week – an FA Cup fifth-round tie at home to Birmingham City followed by next Tuesday's daunting Champions League first leg away to Napoli – which could define his future.

John Terry completed his first full training session for more than a week yesterday but Villas-Boas said the defender was unlikely to be able to play in both matches. It is understood that several senior players have urged Villas-Boas to play a strong team against Birmingham as they accept

the FA Cup is a competition they can win. The spectre of Guus Hiddink remains as the 65-year-old Dutchman weighs up whether to accept a lucrative offer to take over the Russian club Anzhi. Abramovich always regards Hiddink as his "insurance policy" should matters continue to go wrong at Chelsea, as they did this time three years ago when Luiz Felipe Scolari was sacked.

Villas-Boas also has other 'ghosts' to deal with and loughed yesterday when one interviewer referred to him as "Jose". No one needs reminding of the Mourinho effect.

If Abramovich publicly backed his man, would it not kill any doubt over his future?

"The funniest thing in football is the vote of confidence," Villas-Boas said with a smile. "It means it is the end. It would not make any differ-

ence. Maybe I don't want one!" Tellingly, he added: "My authority is total because it's the owner's authority."

There was an acceptance, however, that some players may have struggled to buy into his approach with the suggestion that a major overhaul of the squad is planned this summer should Villas-Boas remain in place.

"There are different ongoing situations regarding contracts which will have to be addressed," he said. "Nicolas Anelka and Alex have already departed and more will depart in the future." He added: "I have the full backing of the owner. Hopefully we can go past Napoli."

Napoli coach Walter Mazzarri has been banned from both legs after Uefa rejected his appeal against a suspension imposed for improper conduct following a clash with Villarreal striker Nilmar.