

The midfielder grew up a Man Utd fan, but now he's all about Chelsea



FAST FACTS

MICHAEL ESSIEN
Born December 3 1982
Birthplace Accra, Ghana
Height 6ft
Position Midfielder
Teams Chelsea and Ghana
Previous clubs Lyon, Bastia
Chelsea debut August 21 2005
v Arsenal (Premier League)
League appearances 70
League goals 5
Ghana debut January 21 2002
v Morocco (African Nations)
International caps 28

He might just be the hardest midfielder in football, but Michael Essien is also as shy as they come. Always up for a challenge, *Sport* attempted to bring the Ghanaian out of his shell – and we were rewarded with the inside story on the departure of Jose Mourinho, life in London and sleeping

Michael Essien is spinning a ball on his index finger and firing a mean glare into the camera. We're in a west London studio, a long ball from Stamford Bridge, for an appointment with the Chelsea and Ghana man. As he continues to pose for the snapper, the man from his sponsor, Nike, sidles over with a request. "Go easy on him, will you?" he asks. "Michael's a shy lad." *Sport* scoffs. Balls, man. This is Michael Essien. The man's a beast. He runs through walls and fights bears in his back yard. We have no proof on which to base either of these assumptions, of course, but we've seen enough of him dominating midfield for club and country to believe that he is capable of both. So don't tell us he's shy.

"No, really. He's a lovely guy – he's just quite shy." The photographer wraps up, Essien drops the ball, traps it on the floor and walks over. And, in the five paces it takes him to reach us, he undergoes a remarkable – but predicted – transformation. He offers his hand, which is as stout and manly as you'd expect, but it comes with the most timid "hello" you ever did hear. *Sport* almost didn't hear it, and is forced to crane its neck and squint. None of this makes sense.

So we sit down, click on the recording device and flick effortlessly into amateur psychologist mode. Let's put Michael Essien under the microscope...

You're Michael Essien, perhaps the best midfielder in the world, the man Jose Mourinho called the perfect player...

[Smiles almost apologetically and strokes shoulder blade nervously]

You're the man so robust, so indestructible, that they called you 'The Bison' – until Mourinho decided that 'The Train' might be more apt...

"Yes. [Laughs nervously] He did call me that."

So why are you so timid? You should be strutting about the place like you own it – or, to quote one of your teammates, 'giving it the big 'un'...

"I'm just naturally a quiet person. I have never been a loud person – that is not who or how I am. I was always brought up to be respectful and modest."

It's certainly not a criticism, Michael. Is it Michael, or can we call you 'Train'?

"Yes, you can call me that if you like. I don't mind."

Mr Mourinho gave you that nickname, of course. Have you come to terms with his departure yet?

"We were all very shocked to see Jose go, and I felt very sad about it, both personally and professionally. He was the manager who brought me to Chelsea and to the Premier League – he helped me a lot to develop as a player, so it has been difficult."

And how have the...

"But it's been a difficult few weeks for the team. We have to back our new manager, though, and go out and win games – for him, for us and for the fans."

Before becoming the Train, Train, you were the Bison. Who gave you that nickname?

"I got that name at Lyon, and it just stuck. It was a physical thing, I think, because we were pulling a tractor in training at the time." [Smiles]

Mourinho regularly spoke of your versatility – he played you across the midfield and, when needed, in defence. But what's your preferred position?

"Defensive midfielder. I started out as a central defender, so maybe that's why I like the defensive side of things. I like to break up teams' attacks and let our more attacking players get forward."

So when did you switch from defence to midfield?

"When I went to France. I joined Bastia as a defender, but one of the midfielders got injured and I was asked to play there. I played well, and it just stuck."

You were 10 and growing up in Ghana when the Premiership began – did you follow it?

"Yes, of course. We all watched Premiership football on the television."

Were you aware of the perennial underachievers that, at the time, were Chelsea?

"Not really, no. I knew of them, of course, but it was usually Manchester United and Liverpool – Eric Cantona, Roy Keane, Robbie Fowler, Steve McManaman – who were shown. I didn't know much about Chelsea, if I'm honest."

So who did you support back then?

"Manchester United. [Laughs nervously] The lads here don't know that I supported Man Utd when I was young, but now I give everything to Chelsea and, of course, I'm a Chelsea fan. I'm always happy when we play Man Utd, though – it gives me an extra reason to play well."

As a result of you playing here, how popular are Chelsea in Ghana these days?

"Yeah, Chelsea are really big in Ghana now."