



Essien has become a firm favourite with the fans at Stamford Bridge

That's partly down to me playing for Chelsea and partly because of the other African players at the club. I'm proud of that – of course I am – but I don't pretend it's just down to me."

Who were your heroes growing up? Who did you try to base your game on?

"Roy Keane. I always liked Keane, and the way he played the game. He was always a very hard player, but he was fair and he could really play."

Are you a bad loser?

"Yes, of course. It hurts to lose, but I'm not the type of player who will sit and mope over a defeat or losing a trophy. You always have to look forward."

Did the best team win the title last season?

"Yes, I think so. Man Utd did really well to win it, and we had to accept that. We had our problems and it hurt to lose, but you have to move on."

What are your ambitions for this season? Can you win back the Premier League?

"Of course we can. We have the players and the team to do it, but we also know how hard it will be."

What was your priority at the start of the season: Premier League or Europe?

"Personally, the Premier League comes first."

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It would be nice to win the Premier League and the Champions League, of course, but the competition is so fierce. I think we have to aim for the Premier League and then see what else happens."

Who's your closest friend in football?

"I'm always by myself, really – I'm a private person."

Do you not socialise with any of the other players?

"Sometimes, yes. I hang out with Shaun Wright-Phillips mostly. Doing what? Er, not much really. We'll sometimes go out for dinner."

What kind of dinner?

"Er... normally a Chinese or a curry. I like a curry."

Can you wander around London without being bothered by fans?

"Yes, it's fine. People do recognise me, but they're always polite if they ask for my autograph. I love London, it's such a fantastic city – so much to see, so many shops and restaurants, so friendly."

Where do you go?

"I love to just wander round, really. I go to Bond Street and down the King's Road. I've been to Buckingham Palace, too. It's big." [Smiles]

What's surprised you most about England?

"What's surprised me? Erm, nothing really."

Do you watch EastEnders?

"Not really, no. I prefer to watch MTV."

What about the traditional fare: fish and chips?

"I like fish, but fresh fish. I'm not really a fan of chips."

Jellied eels?

[Looks puzzled]

ESSIEN ON MOURINHO



'ONE OF THE BOYS'

In May last year, Jose Mourinho spoke in glowing terms of Michael Essien's qualities, telling *Fifa Magazine*: "He is a great player. He can play every position in midfield. Where he is perfect is in choices – in football, the most difficult thing is to choose well, and in every situation Essien chooses well. He presses, stays in position, passes long, passes short, first touch, two touches. He controls the pace of the game, fast or slow. He is dynamic and strong. The boy has incredible physical power – he is super-resistant with great speed and unending tactical abilities."

The admiration is clearly mutual. "For me, Mourinho is one of the best managers in the world," Essien tells *Sport*. "He knows how to get the best out of his players and that we all need a different approach. He would shout if he needed to, but he'd never throw things around or rant and rave just for the sake of it. Was he able to be one of the boys? Yes, absolutely. He liked to joke around, tell jokes, speak funny and put on voices. He definitely liked to have a joke with the players."

Pie and mash?

"Still puzzled, but smiling!" I don't really know about English food, but I like English tea. I've always loved English tea, with sugar and milk. Very nice."

What do you do to relax and unwind?

"I like to sleep."

A lot?

"I wouldn't say it's a lot. Maybe 14 hours a night. It is quite a lot, I suppose."

Where do your medals live?

"I've sent them home to my mum, in Ghana. She has them on show because she is very proud."

Is it true that you phone her every single day?

"Yes, we speak for about 30 minutes a day. She is the person I listen to most, and she keeps my feet on the ground. Hopefully she can come over and live with me soon – then I won't have to call so often."

What will you do when you retire?

"I want to set up a charity in Ghana – to work with children and give them a better chance in life, whether that's through football or not. That would make me happy."

Okay, well time's almost up, so last question: where are you going now?

"I think I'll go home and maybe go to sleep."

But it's only 4pm, Train.

"I know, but I need to rest." ❄

NICK HARPER

Michael Essien wears Nike's Total 90 Laser boot. Nike has developed the 790 Laser to enhance accuracy and allow players to put the ball where they want to