



JOE LOVEJOY

In six years at Stamford Bridge, Eidur Gudjohnsen has seen many changes — not least his reinvention as a midfield playmaker

Jose Mourinho has taken to calling him "The Blond Maradona", but it is safe to assume that the Hand of God would get rather more games, and would not be made to feel "part of the furniture", as Eidur Gudjohnsen is at Chelsea sometimes. Signed by Gianluca Vialli, Iceland's best-ever footballer has been at Stamford Bridge so long that none of the players with whom he made his debut is still around. John Terry was no more than a young, thrusting reserve in the summer of 2000, when Gudjohnsen arrived from Bolton for a fee of £5m, still deemed big bucks in those pre-Abramovich days.

A 23-goal striker in 2001-02, when he formed a prolific partnership with Jimmy-Floyd Hasselbaink, Reykjavik's favourite son has been turned into a midfield player by Mourinho, to impressive effect. Gudjohnsen would prefer to play up front, and hopes to do so when Didier Drogba leaves for the African Nations Cup, but his midfield play has drawn widespread praise lately, notably in the holiday victories over Birmingham and West Ham, and he accepts that experience in the new role has made him a better player.

As if to support the contention that there is a tendency to take him for granted, we meet in the chilly, spartan bowels of Chelsea's training facility, in stockbroker Surrey, while the club's latest high-profile acquisition, Maniche, is introduced to the media in the proper interview room, upstairs. Unsurprisingly, Gudjohnsen, with more than five years as a Chelsea player to call on, has rather more of significance to say for himself than the Portuguese newcomer. The man with an unrivalled perspective on such things has interesting opinions about his manager — "Mourinho seems to think it's good for me to get an earful" — and his teammates — "Maybe we do feel we're a bit better than the rest now" — but we agree to start at the beginning.

Can he name the Chelsea team in which he made his first Premiership start, and scored, against Liverpool in October 2000? No, he can't. He gets the goalkeeper wrong — "Was it Cudicini?" — then lets me take over. For the record, it was: De Goey, Ferrer, Le Saux, Melchiot, Desailly, Leboeuf, Gudjohnsen, Dalla Bona, Hasselbaink, Zola, Wise. "Amazing, I'm the only one still here," he muses. "That all seems so long ago, but I'm only 27, so I should have a good few years ahead of me yet." He is aware of the danger that familiarity could breed contempt. "Things have changed so quickly and it seems like I've become part of the furniture," he says. Does he really feel taken for granted? He pauses for a moment, before replying: "I've always had the respect of the fans and everybody at the club. Every year I have improved, I've always added something to the team and I've fended off the competition, whoever has come in. I



'Mourinho thinks it's good for me to get an earful now and then. He's right'

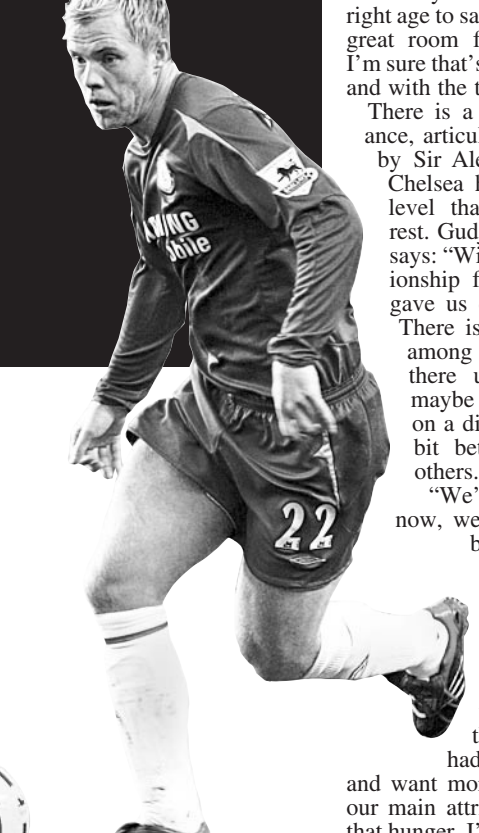
have always played my part in the club's success, especially last season, when I played a big role in winning the championship." It is an equivocal answer at best, and we can probably put it down as an affirmative. A change of tack seems to be in order. It was after the West Ham game last Monday that Mourinho likened him to Maradona. Yet the same Mourinho had relegated him to the bench at Upton Park after his five-star performance against Birmingham two days earlier. What did Gudjohnsen make of that? "The manager picks the team according to the opponents we play, and maybe he wanted us to be a bit more solid in midfield at West Ham. But I got on very early [for Michael Essien after 13 minutes] and it went well." He is justified in talking up his contribution to Chelsea's title triumph last season, when he scored 12 goals and only Frank Lampard (13) got more.

Yet this time around he has been restricted to eight starts in the Premiership, scoring once, which has left him champing at the bit. "Every player wants to start every game, and that's how I am, especially after last season, when I featured in 37 out of 38 in the league. After that, it's difficult to accept it when you don't play, all the more so when I've been doing well. But I think he [Mourinho] still believes in me." That belief appears to be as a midfielder player rather than a striker. "I don't know about that, it might be," Gudjohnsen responds. "At the end of last season I tried to get out of the manager what he saw for me this time, midfielder or striker, but he just said I'd be what I needed to be. It was up to me to enjoy every minute I was on the pitch." He is doing just that, and starting to appreciate his new role, where his clever creativity and eye for the killer pass are

winning positive reviews. "I give the team something different in midfield. I'm more of an attacking player than the others, and my passing game has been quite good. I've always been the type of striker who plays slightly off the front man anyway, and going into that, it's added to my work-rate and got me more involved. I'm on the ball more and I think that has added a lot to my game. I don't have my back to goal as much, so everything is in front of me and that makes it easier to get the play going." "I've only got one goal this season, and obviously I'd like to have scored more, but my tally of assists is creeping up nicely, and if I'm laying on goals, I'm benefiting the team." When I quote John Barnes, who said in his Liverpool pomp that he gained as much satisfaction from creating a goal as he did scoring one, Gudjohnsen nods slowly and says: "I can see where he was coming from. In

recent years the goal creators have been getting more respect, whereas before it was only the player who got his name on the scoresheet who got that respect. Television has made a big difference. With so many angles and replays, the cameras pick up everything. Stats are also monitored much more closely, so the provider gets almost as much credit as the scorer." Nevertheless, he would prefer to be the one putting the ball in the net. "I still consider myself a striker. If I play up there, I'll always score goals. I've proved that throughout my career, and I still firmly believe I would. We've got good options in the striking department, but if the need arose, I'm sure he [Mourinho] would play me there again. So far the strikers have been going well, so it hasn't happened." Against Birmingham last weekend, Hernan Crespo scored five clear-cut chances. Did Gudjohnsen envy him

those opportunities? Would he have done better? "I was surprised Hernan didn't get a hat-trick, because he's a clinical finisher," he replies, before adding, diplomatically: "But he scored one and the team didn't suffer from the missed chances because we won, so it didn't matter." Mourinho criticised Joe Cole for "showboating" after that match, which brings us on to the manager's methods. "It's easy to spend money, not so easy to spend it on the right players," Gudjohnsen says. "Real Madrid have bought all the best forwards around in recent years, but they're not winning silverware. Manchester United have also spent heavily, including £30m on one player [Rio Ferdinand] and look at them. Success is a combination of many things. You have to sign the right



players, with the right mentality as well as the right technical ability, and then you have to be able to put it all together and make it work within a team framework. That's what Mourinho has done. "His greatest strength is his eye for detail. Because of that he makes it very easy for a

Trend-setters: 'Maybe we are that bit better than all the others,' says Gudjohnsen

player to understand exactly what he wants. Through that knowledge he gives each individual confidence and instils great confidence in the team. He also puts everyone under a lot of pressure to deliver, but we all believe we can achieve what he asks of us. His management is second to none. Every player knows where he stands and every player is given every chance to impress him."

When it comes to picking the team, and the selection or omission of individuals, Mourinho's style varies according to the mentality of those involved. "He knows who needs an explanation and who doesn't. Some players need an earful when they're not playing well; others need an arm around their shoulder. He does both very well. He seems to think it's good for me to get an earful every now and then, and he's probably right. His judgment of character is very good."

Cole was the recipient of the latest "earful", warned that he would be dropped if he indulged himself and played to the gallery, instead of for the team. "That's my point," Gudjohnsen says. "He sees Joe every day and knows what he can do and what he needs to be told. Joe is a very gifted player, but sometimes when he keeps it simple and cuts out the tricks he's even more effective."

Despite the arrogant, dictatorial image he appears to cultivate, Mourinho is a good listener. "If I feel I need to say something or need a chat, I'll go to his office and have a word. I've done that to ask why I'm not playing, to express my feelings or to ask what I need to do and what he wants from me, maybe in different positions. He is very receptive, and the outcome has always been positive."

Statistics indicate that Chelsea are a better team this season than they were last. Gudjohnsen is not about to argue with the evidence. "We've improved, collectively and individually. I can see that especially in the players I've been playing with for a long time now, such as 'JT' [Terry] and Frank [Lampard]. The three of us have matured together and feel very important to the team. We've still got our best years ahead, we're the right age to say that, and there's great room for improvement. I'm sure that's the case with me and with the team in general."

There is a common acceptance, articulated in midweek by Sir Alex Ferguson, that Chelsea have moved to a level that is beyond the rest. Gudjohnsen nods and says: "Winning the championship for the first time gave us extra confidence. There is more self-belief among the players than there used to be, and maybe we are operating on a different level, that's a bit better than all the others."

"We're such a big club now, we've taken such a big step, not only on the pitch but off it as well, that now we have to challenge for everything. The squad we have demands that. We have all had a taste of success and want more. That's one of our main attributes as a team, that hunger. I'd like to win everything there is to be won. "I've come to terms with the fact that I'll never be a world champion [with Iceland] so the Champions League is the next best thing. It is a realistic objective this season. You are always going to need a little bit of luck, but if we get that, I know we've got the qualities needed to win it. We're quietly confident." □ Hugh Mellvayne, page 28

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