

Timisoara 0 Manchester City 1: Super Mario Balotelli spares Roberto Mancini's blushes with debut goal in Romania

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So this is what all the fuss was about, then. In the space of 15 minutes Mario Balotelli nearly grabbed a hat-trick, escaped a booking, got two lectures from the referee, did earn one yellow card, squared up to the opposition captain and needed treatment from the medics in injury time.

Oh, and he scored the winner.

Audiences back home were denied the chance to see the 20-year-old's City debut, but on this evidence, they will be in for a treat when he is unleashed on the Barclays Premier League.



Dream debut: Balotelli is congratulated after his debut goal

There will be bigger occasions than this for the £23million Italy striker to make his mark but it was certainly a memorable debut for a player Jose Mourinho remains convinced is more trouble than he is worth.

Are you sure, Jose?

As promised, Roberto Mancini gave Balotelli his debut but decided to blood him into a side which, on the

evidence of their sorry first-half showing, can best be described as a work in progress.

If Mancini wanted an immediate impact, he got one after sending him on for Gareth Barry in the 57th minute. At that point, City fielded a front line that consisted of Balotelli, Carlos Tevez, David Silva and Emmanuel Adebayor.



Supersubs: Manchester City's bench in Romania last night cost more to assemble than some Premier League teams

A goalless draw would have left this tie hanging in the balance but an away goal, even against a side who knocked Shakhtar Donetsk out of the Champions League a year ago, means City can surely look forward to Europa League group stages after next Thursday's second leg. Balotelli's first touch in a City shirt was awful.

His wild shot at the edge of the Timisoara area landed somewhere near Bucharest, and may well still be bouncing. And his second contribution was equally uncontrolled.

He threw himself in mid-air at Cristian Scutaru and how Florian Mayer decided not to book him, only he will know. Balotelli was cautioned eventually, for going toe-to-toe with Timisoara skipper Dan Alexa, but by then his work was as good as done.



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Worry: Balotelli suffered a knee injury late in the game

The booking came while Balotelli was still catching his breath after celebrating side-footing Adebayor's drilled centre into the roof of the net from close range in the 72nd minute.

Adebayor may have made little impact for the rest of the night, but his cross was played so perfectly into Balotelli's path, the Italy striker could hardly miss.

There was still more to come from him, and his intelligent chip from another Adebayor cross, with Costel Pantilimon stranded, only just missed the target.



© AP

The race is on: Manchester City striker Carlos Tevez is chased down by Alexandru Bourceanu

However, his participation in Monday's showdown with Liverpool must be in doubt judging by his exit, long after his team-mates had left the pitch. The challenge looked innocuous enough but Balotelli was clutching his hamstring and he was still receiving treatment at the final whistle.

By the time he was slowly making his way down the tunnel, the stadium was half-empty. He later hobbled on to the team bus with his right knee heavily strapped. It was the only blow on a difficult night for Mancini, who named a starting line-up assembled for a staggering £182m.



Eyes on the prize: New boy David Silva races past Laszlo Sepsi

Although it was a laboured performance until the introduction of Balotelli, City were rarely troubled. And Mancini was also delighted by the impact of winger Adam Johnson who injected some muchneeded energy into a team lacking cohesion and inspiration and created the opening for Yaya Toure to crash a shot against the post.

Timisoara are on 100,000 euros per man to knock City out next week, and looked the more urgent.

Coach Vladimir Petrovic, a former Arsenal midfielder, was happier with the opening half, although all his side had to show for their bright start was a corner after a shot from lone striker Mircea Axente cannoned off Vincent Kompany, and two pointless penalty appeals.



The provider: Emmanuel Adebayor set up Balotelli's winner

Although Mancini prompted from the technical area, pulling Barry wide and urging Silva and Tevez to show more movement, City also failed to create anything more than a couple of set pieces.

MATCH STATS

Timisoara (4-1-4-1): Pantilimon 6; Scutaru 6 (Zicu 71min, 5), Luchin 6, Cisovsky 7, Sepsi 6; Alexa 7; Contra 7 (Mera 80), Magera 6 (Goga 83), Bourceanu 6, Curtean 6; Axente 7. Booked: Luchin.

Manchester City (4-3-3): Hart 6; Zabaleta 6, K Toure 7, Kompany 7, Lescott 6; Barry 7 (Balotelli 57, 7), De Jong 7, Y Toure 6; Silva 5 (Johnson 66, 6), Tevez 5 (Jo 77), Adebayor 5.

Booked: Balotelli.

Man of the match: Nigel De Jong.

Referee: Florian Mayer (Germany) 6.

Meanwhile, Mancini has admitted he misses Italy and believes he will be back home 'sooner rather than later'.

He has been at Eastlands for less than a year but he told an Italian newspaper he wants to coach the Italian national team eventually, but can envisage returning to a club side.

Asked what he misses about living in Italy, the 47-year-old said: 'Everything. The way of life, the habits. It would be hypocritical to say otherwise.

'I miss our lack of rigid attitudes, our ability to solve problems on the spur of the moment.

'Here in England they are more regimented.

'I would love to coach Italy one day. You cannot say no to the national team.

'It will happen sooner rather than later.'