
Mario Balotelli strikes on Manchester City debut to beat Timisoara

UEFA Europa League Play-off Rnd 1st Leg

FC Timisoara 0
Manchester City 1 Balotelli 72

Daniel Taylor at the Stadionul Dan Paltinisanu
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Mario Balotelli celebrates with his Manchester City team-mates after breaking the deadlock against Timisoara.
Photograph: Andrew Boyers/Action Images

It needed only a quarter of an hour for Mario Balotelli to make his impact. Manchester City had been labouring until the new signing was brought off the bench and immediately set about ensuring this would be an evening bearing his imprint - both good and bad, though mostly good.

His 33 minutes on the pitch incorporated the decisive moment of this Europa League qualifier, turning in Emmanuel Adebayor's drilled cross to establish City in a commanding position ahead of the second leg next Thursday, but that would tell only part of the story and there was a flash, too, of the tempestuous personality English football has been warned about.

Objecting to a challenge from the Timisoara captain Dan Alexa, the £22.5m signing from Internazionale rebounded to his feet and tried to prolong the argument, pushing his face aggressively towards his opponent. He was booked for his troubles and the feeling was left that, as advertised, there are going to be plenty of controversies, as well as goals, to come from this talented but problematic 20-year-old.

"He had a great debut and I don't think this will be the only time we see him do something like this," his manager, Roberto Mancini, said afterwards. "I'm really happy for him that he has scored, he is a good player and remember, too, this was the first time he has played with this team. It is important for him that he gets to know his new team-mates and when he does that I think he will improve and we will see more goals from him."

Mancini was not so impressed with Balotelli's first indiscretion as a City player. "We must work on this with him because it will be different for him in the Premier League than in Italy," he said.

Balotelli certainly livened up a hitherto rudderless match, his goal making this tie a

near-formality for City while sparing Mancini some difficult questions about an otherwise prosaic performance, with few players standing out.

Over time, as the new players bed in and the club becomes more accustomed to its newly acquired fame, it has to be imagined City will develop the knack of coming to these kind of places and asserting the sort of authority that comes from being the most expensively assembled squad in English football.

It is a state of mind as much as anything to do with talent and, for now, what we are seeing is a work in progress. Mancini is searching for the right balance between creativity and conservatism but currently seems to be veering towards the latter, with eight defence-minded players in his £180m starting line-up. David Silva and Carlos Tevez played behind, and wide of, Adebayor but in terms of creativity there were long spells when they scarcely threatened to get behind the opposition defence.

Timisoara were a poor side and, though it would ultimately be a satisfying evening for City, it was not until Balotelli's introduction that they began to demonstrate the disparity between the two sides.

The Italian gave the team a new sense of adventure, with one of the three holding midfield players, Gareth Barry, making way. Balotelli was positioned on the left side of attack and his first touch was to shoot wildly over the crossbar. In the next attack, he flattened the right-back, Cristian Scutaru, in an aerial challenge, earning his first reprimand from the German referee, Florian Mayer.

An ordinary match suddenly had an extraordinary debut in the making. Balotelli's first decent chance was fired into the side netting after Tevez's misdirected overhead kick presented him with a sight of goal, admittedly from a difficult angle.

Soon afterwards Yaya Touré lashed a shot against the post from a Balotelli corner. This was City's best spell of the match and it was duly rewarded on 72 minutes when Adebayor drove a cross-shot across the penalty area and Balotelli applied the finishing touch to send the ball into the roof of the net.

This was the moment the 200 City supporters who had travelled to Romania had hoped to see, though Balotelli also spent the final moments receiving lengthy treatment for an injury, and he was lying flat out beside the goal when the final whistle arrived. He finally managed to make his own way off the pitch, long after his new team-mates, but he was limping heavily.

"We think it is not serious," Mancini said, with his mind on Monday's game against Liverpool. "It was a kick, but it is not a problem, we hope." Nonetheless, Balotelli's right knee was heavily strapped when he left the stadium.