

Mario Balotelli interview: Tell the Man City fans that when I hear them chant my name I'm smiling inside

By [Mark Ryan](#) Last updated at 12:09 AM on 3rd January 2011

EXCLUSIVE

Mario Balotelli wants to know if the rumours are true. 'I have heard that people are betting on how quickly I will end up in prison,' he says. 'Is this true? It's all over the internet.'

The 20-year-old striker may have brought a reputation for petulance — some would say wildness — with him when he joined [Manchester City](#) in a £24million move from Inter Milan last August, but the young Italian is at pains to stress that his sights are on a Premier League title, not a spell inside.

He insists that the image many in football have of him as troublesome and divisive is unfair and untrue, although training-ground scuffles, notably with City team-mate Nigel de Jong, clashes with managers, including a difficult relationship at Inter with Jose Mourinho and the odd brush with the law over his driving have not helped his cause.



Troublemaker? Mario Balotelli has a reputation for being divisive, but he insists that is unfair

Others have spoken of the positives Balotelli can bring to the game. Carlo Ancelotti, manager of title rivals Chelsea, says: 'He is one of the best young players in Europe, he has got everything to be successful in the Premier League. It is up to him to become more mature. But if he can play every week, he will soon become one of the most important players in the league.'

Another fellow Italian, Roberto Mancini, his manager at City, goes even further. 'This is a player with such potential that, if he fulfils it, he could be decisive in every match,' he says.

The counter-balance to that came in the wake of Balotelli's low-key hat-trick in the 4-0 victory over Aston Villa last week. Mancini, apparently frustrated by Balotelli's lack of joy at his achievement, said: 'When you score three goals in a Premier League game, you should celebrate. Every day I fight against Mario and sometimes I would like to give him a punch.'



Difficult job: Balotelli with his manager at City, Roberto Mancini

Balotelli's response to that — 'He couldn't. I do Thai kick-boxing' — is symptomatic both of his playful humour and the immaturity highlighted by Ancelotti. The enigma of Balotelli is that while his touch on the field can be sublime, earning him the nickname Super Mario, his temperament and attitude can appear surly, although, in his defence, two penalties and a tap-in against Villa were never going to stir his blood.

Balotelli, left out of yesterday's Premier League clash with Blackpool because of a knee injury, is adamant that his desire for City to succeed should not be questioned. 'I want City's supporters to know this,' he says. 'When I heard them chant my name

the other night, as I scored those three goals, it gave me a really warm feeling inside. Sometimes I don't smile outwardly but I am smiling inside and that is how it was when I heard them.'

Some have suggested Balotelli's problem is one of feeling lonely and homesick. Others point to his upbringing.

Born in Sicily to a Ghanaian couple, Thomas and Rose Barwuah, Balotelli suffered serious ill-health as a toddler, undergoing a series of operations on his intestines before he had reached the age of two.

Italian social workers, worried about the cramped living conditions of the Barwuahs as they struggled to raise a family in the northern city of Brescia, recommended that Mario should be fostered.

From the age of three, he was cared for by the white Italian couple he now calls his parents.

First Francesco and Silvia Balotelli fostered him, then, as the teenage Mario distanced himself from his own family, he became their adopted son.

Balotelli has suffered from the racism that afflicts the more extreme corners of Italian football, notably from notoriously Right-wing elements among the followers of Juventus.

But hoping to unlock the mystery of Mario is a risky business. Even that master of mind games, Mourinho, confessed that he feared Balotelli would 'age me prematurely and make me visit a psychiatrist'.



Tough start: Balotelli's early years with his Ghanaian family were anything but carefree as he endured the upheaval of being fostered to a white Italian couple

Balotelli dislikes being interviewed and professes to hate journalists, even though his sister, Cristina, one of the Balotellis' three children of their own, works as one in Italy.

'I don't like journalists and I hardly ever talk to them,' says Balotelli as we talk — in Italian — at Manchester's Rosso restaurant, an establishment partly owned by Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand.

'When I have an argument with my sister, I tell her: "I'm not speaking to you today. Today, you are a journalist". Later, we make up.' And he adds: 'Look at you. Six

newspapers under your arm. What else could you be but a sports journalist?'

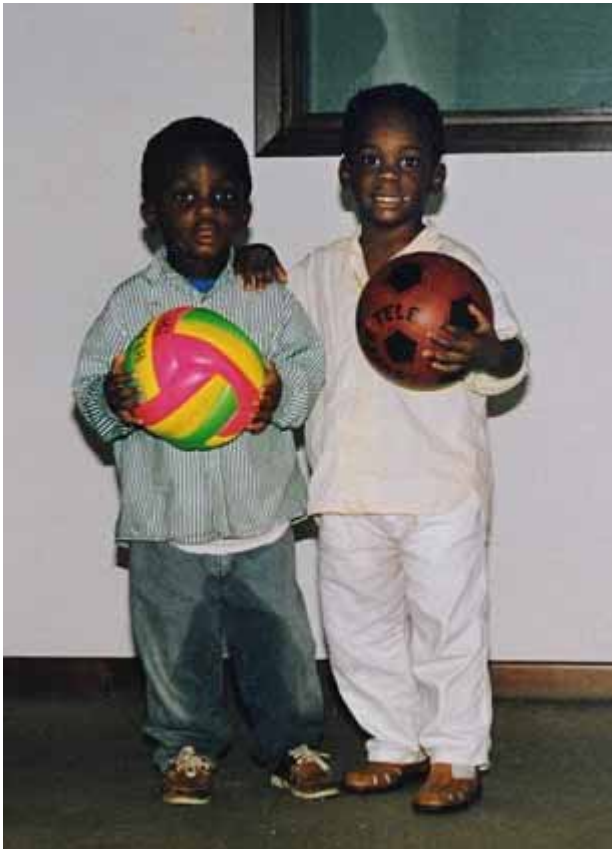
His tone is teasing but, nonetheless, Balotelli does not seem to find it difficult to fall out with people.

Only a few weeks ago he appeared to treat Arsenal star Jack Wilshere with disdain, when Balotelli finished first and Wilshere second in the Golden Boy awards, the Under-21 version of the Ballon D'Or for the best player in Europe.

Asked for a comment on the young Englishman, Balotelli is reported to have said: What's his name? Wil? No, I don't know him but the next time I play against Arsenal I will keep a close eye on him. Perhaps I can show him the Golden Boy trophy and remind him that I won it.'

In the wake of the furore his remarks provoked, Balotelli now appears more conciliatory, shifting the blame on to those who reported his comments.

'Look, I really do want to get this across, since you are going to write something,' he says. 'I was asked about Wilshere and I didn't know much about him and the media turned it into a big thing. But now I want to say something else. I watched Jack Wilshere when Arsenal beat Chelsea and you know what? He is fortissimo", a really strong player. He is very good. And Arsenal are serious contenders for the title.'



The picture of innocence: A three-year-old Balotelli, with an anxious smile and a friendly hand on the shoulder of a childhood pal

As, of course, are City, although many would still favour Manchester United given their points, games in hand and massive experience at the business end of the title race. The theory is not received warmly by City's young star.

'That's it, bye,' he says abruptly and suddenly shapes to go. Just when all seems lost suddenly he is sweetness and light again, laughing at his joke.

His penchant for self-parody appears again when he explains his much-publicised brush with the law shortly after he arrived in Manchester in August. He crashed his powerful Audi R8 in a collision with a BMW one morning. The police breathalysed him and he was clear. Balotelli insists that the accident was not his fault but would never have happened had he listened to his parents' advice.

'When I agreed to come to England, my mother said: "Get a car with the steering wheel on the right",' he says.

'My father also said: "Get a car with the steering wheel on the right". And what did I do? I kept my car with the steering wheel on the left. Now I have taken the advice of my parents and I have a car with the steering wheel on the right. It takes some getting used to, this driving on the left-hand side of the road, but it is getting easier.'

But what of his life in Manchester. Is that getting easier? What of the reports of loneliness and homesickness?

'Did you ever hear me say that?' he counters. 'Sure, it is normal to miss your home and your family but I can see my family and friends here, too. My mother was here just recently, for that match when I scored those goals.'

There have been reports of romantic links with Melissa Castagnoli, a former Miss Italy contestant; and another beauty called Betty Kourakou. But Balotelli refuses to talk about them.

'I am a very, very private person,' he emphasises. 'I know some players like being the centre of attention and I admit that when I first became a player I liked fame, too. But that feeling lasted only for three months. Then I realised what it was really like to be the centre of attention all the time. It isn't all good.'

'Of course, there are many advantages and I don't want to sound ungrateful because I know I'm lucky. I know I have a responsibility as a role model to children and I try to fulfil that.'



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In the public eye: Balotelli's private life has attracted attention, particularly when he was involved romantically with Miss Italy finalist Melissa Castagnoli

But he still has to resolve that dilemma of wanting to be with other people and yet knowing that all eyes will be on him when he steps out in public. Unsurprisingly, he feels most comfortable among other Italians and he seems to spend almost as much time with friends in Manchester's Italian restaurants (especially San Carlo on King Street West) as he does in his penthouse flat at a trendy apartment block.

From there he can walk to his favourite Italian haunts but he prefers to drive the short distance. Sometimes, when he does not feel like eating in public, he parks his car outside and a waiter brings him his favourite pizza, pasta or veal Milanese, or City have his food ferried to his apartment.

Everyone, it appears, is trying to please Balotelli. Mancini, who signed Balotelli when he was managing Inter, has taken him for a private heart-to-heart dinner at San Carlo, while Mancini's son, Andrea, is said to have befriended the young star.

If it all sounds as though Balotelli has become a spoilt child, others tell a different story. Foster, one of the maintenance team at Ballotelli's apartment block, says: 'Mario treats me really well, he's a good guy. When I asked him for a signed shirt it was there in no time. He's very kind.'

Alan, who sells the Big Issue outside San Carlo, agrees. 'He often stops to give me a fiver for the magazine,' he says. 'Mario's OK.'

Cynics suggest Balotelli's loyalty to City may not last too long, particularly if the club's transfer window interest in Wolfsburg striker Edin Dzeko bears fruit. But Balotelli says he has no intention of cutting short

his five-year contract, a deal that earns him a reported £5.8million a year after tax.

'I don't know exactly how long I will stay with City but I have the contract and I want to respect it,' he says. 'I want to win the league with Manchester City and I think we can do it this season. We have the players.'

'I want to repay Roberto Mancini, too. Since I was 17 he has been the most important coach in my career.'



Car crash: Shortly after his move to Manchester City, an accident called his driving skills into question

As for Dzeko, Balotelli insists: 'I couldn't possibly say what it would mean for me if he comes. But I can tell you this; he is a really, really strong player.'

So if Balotelli is staying at City, is he learning to speak English? 'I speak English quite well already and it's getting better,' he points out, switching effortlessly from his first language. So why did we conduct the whole interview in Italian?

'You started it,' he says, with a smile. Perhaps he has been using Mancini's English teacher? 'Mancini has an English teacher?' says Balotelli, feigning astonishment.

It is another playful jibe, delivered with affection by a young man who does not always wish to take life so seriously.