



## BEHIND THE SCENES

As these previously unpublished family photographs of Mario Balotelli show he supports various causes including a children's refuge in the favelas of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil. 'He loves being with people who don't judge him,' says his sister

## REVEALED: THE COMPLEX AND WONDERFUL WORLD OF MARIO BALOTELLI

What makes the City striker such an arresting character? **Ian Herbert** talks to those closest to him and uncovers the man behind the myth

**M**ario Balotelli cast his eye around the Prestbury mansion once occupied by Robinho – the airy rooms, outlying fields and rack of remote control panels all took his eye – and wondered if the home comforts of a Cheshire life might be just the thing for him. It was his Italian friends, knowing him as they do, who asked the Manchester City striker how he would deal with all that rural isolation. "We couldn't see what he would do out there all alone," says one of them. "There are hours to kill for a footballer and we saw it becoming so solitary for him."

They were right. Balotelli heeded the advice and has settled instead in a ninth-floor penthouse flat, where the little congratulatory notes stuck to his door by his neighbours – and their bottles of wine presented at Christmas – attest to the way he seems to be settling. At first, City tried to find out the 20-year-old's interests to help him fill his days. They learnt of his interest in wildlife and the Italian is consequently now more acquainted with Knowsley Safari Park than any other Premier League footballer. But Balotelli has found his own way. "He has never wanted

his life to be run for him," says his sister, Cristina, an accomplished journalist now helping him navigate his way through the pitfalls attached to English celebrity status. "He does things his own way."

The emotional draw towards his old home life and to his parents back in Brescia has hardly been surprising, given their huge role in helping him through his challenging early years – a full picture of which can be revealed by *The Independent* today. The couple he has come to call father and mother are Franco Balotelli, a retired former warehouse supervisor in the pasta trade, and his wife Silvia, originally a nurse by profession and an indefatigable foster mother through much of her married life.

But the surname he carries on his No 45 shirt at City is one which was legally denied him until 2008, such was the protracted nature of his wait to be legally adopted by the Balotellis from his Ghanaian parents, who rarely showed up during those years.

The Balotellis – whose own three children, Corrado, Giovanni and Cristina were growing up when they learnt about Mario – thought their days of fostering were behind them when social services pleaded with them to care for the child, who was only two and a half but had undergone a series of operations at a local

hospital. Franco had already retired from the warehouse and the couple were not wealthy. But they returned from a family holiday resolved on making him a part of their lives. The court decree under which he was fostered was renewed every two years until he was 18, which did not help the sense of permanency which the Balotellis created for him.

Balotelli's first memory of his new home was running and sliding down a long corridor, shattering several of his mother's vases along the way, and it was the absence of attention and affection in his life until that time which seems to have dictated his pattern of behaviour. "I'd be in the bathroom drying my hair when he'd appear at the door, turn the light off and run away," Cristina recalls. "It was the attention he wanted."

The relationship with his adoptive mother – in Manchester this weekend, just as she was after defying snow-delayed flights to join him in Manchester on Christmas Day and witness his first City hat-trick against Aston Villa three days later – has become one of extraordinary depth. "For a long time, he could not sleep without her there to hold his hand," his sister adds. "He hated to be alone. To an extent, that's how he still is. He has always needed company, though we see the difference that



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Cristina Balotelli on her brother



Manchester is making, in giving him independence and helping him to mature."

His mother's firmness when needed instilled discipline into his life. Balotelli tells a story of how one day she forbade him from attending football training in Mompiano because of his behaviour. But he crept out and made the journey from Brescia anyway – taking 50 minutes on

foot. By the time he arrived, his mother had called the coach of the team – who sent him straight back.

Franco Balotelli has been the one with the endless patience, driving his adoptive son to football, scouts, karate, judo, basketball, athletics and swimming. He was also the one who, within a year or so of the young boy joining the family, would be found in the midst of endless afternoon football matches with him in the parks of Brescia. The striker would have tried athletics or martial arts, had a career in football not been forthcoming for him. His brothers, both much older than him, have also followed and supported him closely since his career began at Lumezzane, near Brescia, at the age of 11.

Though his family life became a settled one, the colour of his skin has been a more intractable problem. The racism he experienced as a player at Internazionale was overt – Juventus were ordered to play a match behind closed doors a few years ago, such was the racist abuse – but as a child it manifested itself in Balotelli feeling that he was invisible. "Two things were close to my heart, like all boys at a certain age: girls and getting attention," he reflected in one of the few interviews he granted in Italy. "But it was like I was transparent. I'm no Clooney but I couldn't explain it why I was ignored. My

friends explained. They told me people didn't like blacks."

Football has offered some great sources of strength against that affliction. Lilian Thuram, another black player with experience of Italy, has been one, though Balotelli has never revealed what advice the former Juventus defender offered. Balotelli has spoken out against racism when he has needed to, though his crusades have been reserved for a different, eclectic mix of causes which have absorbed him over the past few years.

One of them is a Brazilian refuge for destitute children and women in the Brazilian favelas, where Balotelli spent the Christmases of 2007 and 2008. Cristina recalls the latter as a time when he was at his happiest. "His friends and brothers went out there too and I remember he was so animated, playing football barefoot on the beach. It showed his love of being with those who are close to him. It showed his love of being free, among people who don't judge him and whom he feels are as straightforward as he is."

The same can be said of the WWF summer camp he joined at Sicily's Zingaro Nature Reserve two years ago – not the typical close-season break for an Inter player. Absorbed by the time he was having with friends of his own age there, he cancelled his flight home and made the

day-long train journey with them all, instead. "The most distinctive part of his personality is his playful character," says Cristina. "He loves to joke and play around."

The type of absorption which will contribute much to his contentment in Manchester seems to be unscheduled, like that long trip north through Italy. It was the same last May when he encountered two young representatives of the campaign to stop the use of child soldiers at a hotel in Milan, ahead of a conference. It turned into a two-hour private conversation with Bosnian Zlata Filipovic (who lived with the bombs during an adolescence in Sarajevo) and the Sudanese John Kon Kelel (who was kidnapped and forced to fight in his own country for seven years). The plight of child soldiers has become a cause Balotelli has taken up again this month.

It is a story which confounds the simplistic characterisation of Balotelli as a perpetually angry individual with nothing to smile about. "There are contradictions in him but like many people, often the bullishness is there to cover a weakness," his sister reflects. Another friend says: "Those who come to know him realise the kind of person he really is. Manchester has not been the easiest city to get accustomed to and is not as busy as London."

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Cristina Balotelli on her brother's difficult early years

You do feel a bit like a fish out of water at first. That's because Italians are used to a better climate and a different language."

Different cars, too. His family's advice that he own a right-hand drive model has been heeded after an altercation with a BMW in his left-hand drive Audi RS. The Manchester Christmas markets, where he bought the memorable five-pointed woolly hat he wore the night City played Everton, have long gone and there's not been much call for the quad bike he enjoys but life does seem to be developing.

So now for the biggest challenge – to shake off the knee injury which has so truncated Balotelli's season and emerge as a genuine force, starting against Notts County in the FA Cup tomorrow. City sent him to the Green Mountains of Vermont, under the care of knee specialist Bill Knowles, as much for the focus on recovery that isolation brings, as for Knowles' own work. Mancini, desperate to find any way to get him fit, knows that life off the field counts for nothing until he is delivering on it.

"He is a young man learning to live away from home," his sister concludes. "Success for him and the team on the field will make so much difference but he has just needed time to adapt. He has settled and now he is just desperate to prove what he can do when he plays."

