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MARIO BALOTELLI

Wild Thing?



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Don't Believe the Hype

Painted as stubborn, fiery and temperamental, Mario Balotelli's reputation arrives several days before he does. Is there any truth or is it easy to paint him that was – if the die has been cast prepare to break it into a hundred pieces...

INTERVIEW: DAVID CLAYTON PICTURES: SHARTON LATHAM/PA

Mario rolls up in his white Gran Turismo Maserati, parks outside the Carrington main entrance and saunters across to the reception.

"Ciao," I say to him as he walks in. "I'll wait here in reception and we can do the interview when you've finished training. Sound OK?"

He nods. "Sure."

And off he goes. I've got two hours to decide what to talk to him about so I have a look at some of the usual places to source material. Mario's website, a few YouTube videos and various articles British and Italian newspapers have prised out of him over the past few years.

Mario, generally, doesn't really 'do' interviews and after an hour sifting through the ones he has done, I'm not that surprised he tends to give them the wide berth.

'The Troubled World of Mario', 'I'm Not a

Bad Boy' etcetera, etcetera I got bored of reading them. It seems people are always trying to unravel the mystery behind the enigma. All deep, meaningful stuff aimed at getting to the 'real Mario'.

Of course, that kind of stuff can be interesting and has a time and a place, but it seems nobody will let him move on from his spats with Jose Mourinho or his occasional show of petulance on the pitch. When subjected to a torrent of racial abuse during a game for Inter a while back, Mario simply put one finger to his lips and advised his dissenters to 'shhhhh!' Maybe they and others should have listened.

So what if he has a high opinion of himself? So what if he's different and doesn't want to be painted as a stereotypical footballer? He likes to go his own way. He's an individual and should be applauded for swimming against the current, not vilified at his every turn. Maybe he does attract the

wrong headlines and attention from time to time, but it's worth remembering he's still only 20-years-old and will make the same mistakes anyone his age might make. It's worth remembering he is also away from his family and friends for the first time, too. Throw in a different culture, language and a new home before we even mention a new club and a totally different style of football to adapt to, and a picture starts to emerge not of a precocious, troubled talent, but a young lad finding his way as well as coming to terms with life outside his beloved Italy.

It's almost time for the interview.

I toss all the notes I've made over the past hour into the bin and scramble a few random questions down. I want this to be different for Mario and different for the readers of ManC.



Why re-hash old stuff? There's a millions things we can talk about other than the same old same old. Besides, if anyone wants to know about his childhood and the fact he is the first black player to represent the Azzurri, it's all out there, already written and available on the World Wide Web.

Unerringly on time, Mario comes back through reception, goes out the door and drops a bag into his car. He returns, slumping next to me on the Carrington reception couch. No time limit is issued and he makes it clear I've got his full attention.

In all honesty, I score a bit of an own goal after checking he's fine to begin. "What makes you laugh, then?" Cristina, his sister and sometimes advisor has now arrived and is sat one seat along.

"Why do you guys always ask the same question?" he says, shrugging his shoulders. "Why am I always asked about not smiling?"

"That's not what I meant," I counter. "I ask all the lads what makes them happy."

But I can see he thinks he's going to be answering the same things he's answered a million times. The problem is, I meant who makes him laugh and what does he enjoy away from football? Then why didn't I say that? Like I said, own goal. I may have been one down early on, but there was plenty of time left to turn things around.

"Maybe I should have said what do you like to do away from the game? Your interests and passions – that kind of thing. Do you like X-box?" Bingo. His eyes light up.

"Yeah," he smiles.

"Any good?"

"Better than you!"

I suggest I'd give him a run for his money.

"I play Pro-Evolution. That's my game. I don't play FIFA 11 because I've always played Pro-Evo since I was a kid."

Does he ever play as himself – and is the Mario on Pro-Evo better than the real thing?

"I don't know because I only ever play as Real Madrid – or occasionally Barcelona. I sometimes play for money – I know I shouldn't, but I've been known to stake £10 against my opponent to spice things up a bit.

"I have Call of Duty, too, but I don't really play it that often. I don't like it as much. I also play Rainbow Six Vegas, which is similar to Call of

I NOW HAVE SOME GOOD FRIENDS HERE IN ENGLAND, TOO. MICAH RICHARDS IS LIKE A BROTHER AND I SEE HIM SOCIALLY A LOT AND I SAY WE ARE TWINS

Duty but again, I don't use those games very much."

He likes his electronic games fix, but while he likes Facebook, he's not only not keen on Twitter, he doesn't even know what it is. "Twitter? No, that's not for me. I like Facebook but there are 1,700 people out there claiming to be me. That's quite a lot and there are lots of fake profiles, but there is only one official Mario Balotelli Facebook page. I update my page once or twice a week and it's a good way to keep in touch with my friends and family back home. "I miss them all, but I don't want to talk about that because I'll jump on a plane and go and see them! I'm joking - I now have some good friends here in England, too. Micah Richards is like a brother and I see him socially a lot and I say we are twins."

I tell Mario Micah says he is the better looking twin and he just shakes his head and laughs. "Twins are the same – how could that be?" He adds he has lots of friends in the squad he sees outside training and as the players begin to drift out towards their cars, it's clear he's a popular member of the squad with most stopping to chat with him or have a joke.

Before Mario arrived, I did get a tip off from Cristina about something very close to Mario's heart. He loves animals, and dogs in particular, so talk shifts from games consoles and friends to a little character he's been missing since he came to England. "What can you tell me about Lucky?" I enquire.

He smiles: "Lucky? Who told you about that? Yeah, Lucky is my dog but he's still in Italy. It takes six months to bring a dog into England from abroad so I'm still waiting. I plan to bring him back with me for the start of next season."

I ask where he found his faithful pal, knowing in advance he'd rescued him from a dog's home.

"He was a stray that was found wandering the streets, so they took him to the kennels. I was looking for a dog and when I went to the kennels, there he was. He's like a black Labrador – I think. I paid them some money and named him Lucky."

Surely, then, one of City's record buys has found the time to visit the Manchester Dogs Home in Harpurhey?

"Yeah, I've been," he smiles. "Only once, but I couldn't take one home. I



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love Lucky too much and it wouldn't be fair if and when he finally comes over."

I ask if any recognised him on his trip to North Manchester. And whether he drove there in his hardly inauspicious Maserati?

"No, I went in a Jeep and parked in the yard. I hadn't been in England that long so I don't think any knew me at that time. I like cats too, but not as much as dogs. I love them."

I tell Mario our family faithful hound came from Harpurhey's finest.

"His name?" he asks "Paddy," I reply. "He's not with us anymore."

"Dead? That's a shame." We move on.

I ask if it's true that he likes to visit Knowsley Safari Park near Liverpool, as was reported recently. "Yeah, I've been there," he says. "I was taken around in a Jeep – it's not a good idea, I think, to drive a white Maserati into the monkey enclosure.

"I liked it there and I fed the sea lions, got to see the lions up close. In fact the zookeeper allowed me to get in the water so I could see what the sea lions could do and

what exercises they make them do. I was very lucky because they gave a sort of private, customised tour of the park."

Mario shows me a couple of pictures on his phone of a lioness, sea lion and a monkey who appeared to have come too close. He is planning a visit to Chester Zoo in the near future, too.

Another of Mario's prized possessions is a quad bike, currently gathering dust in the garage of his city centre apartment. There aren't many opportunities to ride quads down Deansgate so has he been able to use it?

"I have. Once. Around the apartment car park – that's about it. I need countryside to drive it properly, but I don't know when or if I'll be using it again."

It's been tough for Mario to settle in Manchester, but he's getting there.

"It's very different here," he says. "At first when I arrived I was missing Italy and my family a lot. More than I ever imagined I would. I was very homesick, but I'm a lot more settled now and I'm getting used to being in England and living in Manchester. I'm here to play football, first and foremost. I have a nice apartment with a great view of the city and I'm ▶



“OUR FANS ARE VERY LOUD AND NEVER STOP SINGING BUT WE NEED THAT AT HOME, TOO, BECAUSE THAT’S WHAT THE PLAYERS LIKE.

doing OK. I’m around the city more and getting to know different places and that has helped.”

Talk of home and his family leads to a discussion on Mario’s school life, where he showed tremendous promise from an early age and was encouraged by his father to play football for various junior teams. He excelled at junior level and discussed a possible move to Barcelona, but the fact he couldn’t qualify for Italian citizenship until he was 18 scuppered that move and eventually Inter snapped him up.

“I went to a commercial school that mainly concentrated on sport,” he recalled. “I studied Economics and languages – a bit of everything in fact. I enjoyed swimming, athletics, martial arts and basketball.”

I tell Mario his English is very good but he shrugs it off. “It’s not so good. At school, most people spoke English all the time and I used to listen - English, English, English and I suppose I just picked it up because of that.

“I played football most of the time and got into trouble with my parents because I would play football with my brother in the house and we used to smash ornaments and things but we just had to play. We lived in an apartment and used to play in the corridor outside our home. Coradi is older than me and he thinks he’s a better player than me – no chance. My other brother didn’t like football back then – he does now, though.” Can he ever see himself passing on his skills to children in some kind of coaching capacity?

“Me? No! Never,” he laughs. “I love kids and I will happily play football with them, but I cannot teach them anything – it’s just not me.”

Rapidly switching direction again, I ask what each of his numerous tattoos represent and initially with a little reluctance, Mario begins to explain what each design really means, but it’s a task he warms to as he goes along, even revealing one of his tattoos is about his family – something sister Cristina had no idea

about.

He points to his right arm. “This one is the happy mask and on my other arm is the angry mask. This is a lion, because I have the same spirit as a lion and I have another, here (pointing to his left arm), that is friendship and family – these five characters represent my mum, dad, sister, brother and brother.”

Cristina looks surprised to hear this.

“He just asked me if I liked the new tattoo when he had it done – he never told me what it meant,” she says – but she is clearly happy her brother has decorated himself in this way.

Mario explains why there is also a gun design around his family symbols. “It is a mafia warning,” he smiles. “It means if anyone touches or harms my family, they will pay for it.” He means it, too.

He also has a Champions League tattoo for his success with Inter, plus his initials behind each ear and signature on his upper arm. Fashion and looking sharp are clearly part of Mario’s make up – as are designer shades, colourful footwear and a selection of intricately designed haircuts.

“I used to have a barber in Italy,” he says. “He’s still my barber but I use a guy in Manchester, now.” He racks his brain. “It’s erm... do you remember where I crashed my car into that BMW the first time? Right outside the shop.”

It’s Chester Road, in case you were wondering or fancied nipping in for a ‘Balotelli’. While on the subject of roads and cars, I ask if his fortunes have improved behind the wheel after his accident last year, adding that it must be safer to drive in England than it is in Italy where the locals have a reputation for driving somewhat erratically. “Safer here than in Italy?” he protests. “No, you guys are crazy. Why does everyone else drive on the left and people in England have to drive on the right? It doesn’t make sense.”

I point out Australia, New Zealand, Cyprus and South Africa all drive

on the right, too. “Yes,” he agrees, with a hint of mischief, “but you are still strange, not everyone else! I like English people. You guys are different and like to do things differently, which is fine by me.”

What about the City fans? He commented recently that their support warmed his heart, especially after the three goals he scored against Aston Villa over Christmas. Does he like the White Stripes’ Seven Nation Army tune that accompanies the song ‘Mario Bal-o-telli, Mario Bal-o-telli!’?

“They have a song for me, too? I’ve never heard it but I do concentrate on the game while I’m playing. I’m not saying I never hear the crowd at all, but I haven’t heard that yet. I will listen out for it now. While on this subject, I’d like our fans to sing more at home and be louder.

“When we play away from home, our fans are very loud and never stop singing but we need that at home, too, because that’s what the players like. I like Blue Moon but we like it noisy in our stadium so that’s my advice to them – more noise please!” Finally, while Mario didn’t seem to enjoy his time working under Jose Mourinho at Inter, he has a great working relationship with Roberto Mancini, his first boss at Inter and the



manager who gave him his first break at senior level.

Mancini has said Mario needs to do better in recent interviews and speaks perhaps more harshly about his young charge than he does other players.

A little less protective, in fact. Is this almost a father/son type relationship between manager and player?

Mario allows himself a wry smile.

"Maybe, a little," he says. "He believes in me and always wants me to give my best and he gets angry if he feels I haven't played as well as I can. He has a strong character and I am, too, so sometimes we clash and are a little stubborn, but it's fine with me because he's the best manager I could have right now."

Did he ever see his boss play? "Yes, he was a great player. But I'm better!"

On that note, I suggest I've kept Mario long enough. 45 minutes in fact. He shakes my hand and says it was a pleasure before heading off at his usual breakneck speed towards the exit. He'll attract more negative headlines in the future, no doubt and he probably won't deserve them.

When and if you see them, just remember: don't believe the hype – chances are it won't be true