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## Why Always Mario?

By Catherine Mayer and Stephan Faris / Manchester and Rome

This game won't turn out well for Mario Balotelli, but Manchester City's star striker is always watchable. A Mohawk adds a bristling inch to his strapping frame, and even by the balletic, fast-paced standards of top-tier football, he moves with a mesmeric grace, twisting past defenders without losing speed. Sometimes he attracts attention for the wrong reasons too. Eighteen and a half minutes into the Oct. 20 match with West Bromwich Albion, his tackle on an opponent is deemed a foul, and the referee brandishes a yellow card. A further infringement risks earning a red card, banishing Balotelli and leaving City a man short. He knows he ought to accept the decision as surely as everyone watching knows he will not. And soon enough he is arguing with the referee, returning at the halftime whistle to remonstrate with him again until a teammate roughly pushes the player away.

Whether on the pitch or in private, Balotelli seems to generate energy rather than burn it. Dramas flare around him; passions ignite. When he isn't playing, he fidgets. But if called to take a penalty, at the very peak of pressure, he turns icily calm. Since signing with the English Premier League club in 2010, "Super Mario" hasn't missed a spot kick at the goal. (Lionel Messi, Barcelona's most prolific scorer and winner of this year's European Golden Boot award for racking up the most goals in the season, had a success rate from penalties of 82%.) "It's just like a game of mind, me and the goalkeeper," says Balotelli of his perfect penalty record. "Me, I know how to control my mind." The secret lies in his distinctive stuttering run-up to the ball, so different from his usual fluidity. He waits for the goalkeeper to guess at the likely trajectory of his shot and in that fraction of a second aims into the opposite corner of the net. "When the goalkeeper moves before me, it means that in this game of mind he lost," he says.

[\(Video Exclusive: Mario Balotelli Opens Up to TIME\)](#)

Last season, Balotelli helped the Blues — nicknamed for their team colors rather than the three miserable decades they spent in the doldrums — win the league title, England's most important football trophy. Better yet, City did it by snatching victory from its relentlessly successful red-shirted rival Manchester United. City has invested in a squad of top players since the club's acquisition by Sheik Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, a member of Abu Dhabi's ruling family, four years ago. From the start of the season in the summer of 2011 to its cliff-hanger finale in May, Balotelli repaid his reported \$38.5 million price tag with 13 goals, two of them against United in a 6-1 drubbing that signaled City's new-moneyed resurgence. After his first goal against the Reds, Balotelli lifted his shirt to reveal a second shirt, emblazoned with the words WHY ALWAYS ME? His critics interpreted the slogan as a boast, an example of the arrogance they think disfigures his play. He says, on the contrary, the message was a plea to those critics and to the paparazzi who trail him off the pitch: "Just leave me alone."

It's a vain hope for a 22-year-old burdened with instant recognition in Europe and swelling fame far beyond the continent. He fascinates because — penalty shoot-outs aside — he is unpredictable. He should be scoring more goals (his tally put him at 10th place in the rankings of Premier League players last season, behind City strikers Sergio Aguero and Edin Dzeko). He should be creating more opportunities for colleagues like Aguero and Dzeko to score. His play can infuse his teammates with vigor or simply distract them. City's manager — and his longtime mentor — Roberto Mancini leaves Balotelli on the substitutes' bench with increasing frequency, worried about how the mercurial wunderkind will perform. Pundits fill airtime and columns discussing whether

Balotelli is more trouble than he's worth.

[\(MORE: Scoring the Goals That Sank Germany, Balotelli Says it Loud: He's Black, Italian and Proud\)](#)

Red and yellow cards, the sky blue of City, the deeper blue of the Italian national side, the Azzurri, for which he first played in 2008: reports of Super Mario and Bad Mario, Balotelli's alter ego, are always colorful. There is the vivid flair of a prodigy, signed with the top Italian football club Inter Milan at the age of 16. There are flashes of brilliance and scarlet mists of self-destructive anger, dark moods and a grin of heart-wrenching sweetness, lurid tabloid tales and retina-searing photographs of his off-pitch fashion choices. And every frame is shot through with another color that in the internationalized, diverse world of sport might be expected to matter not a jot: the color of Balotelli's skin.

The first black player to represent Italy at major tournaments, Balotelli's early appearances provoked monkey hoots and a chant that speaks volumes about his country of birth: "There's no such thing as a black Italian!" Balotelli, of Ghanaian descent, was born in Italy and has never visited Africa. The racism continues, even as Balotelli's popularity has grown in tandem with his goal tally for Italy. As Italy prepared to meet England in the Euro 2012 championship, the national sports daily Gazzetta dello Sport published a cartoon depicting Balotelli as King Kong, the giant ape's prehensile legs clasped around the top of Big Ben. Amid protests, the Gazzetta issued an aggrieved statement: "This newspaper has fought any form of racism in every stadium." Italy may not be color-blind, but a wide strain of Italian culture seems blind to the sensitivities around color. When Balotelli delivered two goals against Germany in the semifinal of the same competition, another leading sports publication, Tuttosport, celebrated his achievement with the headline LI ABBIAMO FATTI NERI, literally "We made them black," a pun on bruising — and race.

Balotelli marked the victory against Germany, which propelled Italy to the final, by running to the crowd barrier to embrace his adoptive mother Silvia, a tiny, white bird of a woman, her face creased with pride and love. It is an image that goes to the heart of Balotelli's complex and engaging personality, and it speaks, too, to the questions that have barely begun to be tackled in Italy and continue to roil English football. The striker is a fascinating study in his own right, because of his talent and his turbulence, but Balotelli's is also a story about Europe and, above all, about identity.

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In conversation with TIME, he by turns charms and perplexes, unexpectedly thoughtful but sometimes contradicting himself within a couple of sentences. For Balotelli's life is all about apparent contradictions: Can he be a star and a team player? Madcap and trustworthy? What does it mean to be black and Italian? A national hero and subject to national prejudice? Balotelli's success or failure in reconciling these elements will determine whether he fulfills his potential to shine as one of the greatest sportsmen of the age or flames out like a supernova. And though he declares he has no interest in being a role model, that he just wants to play football, his success or failure will resonate through the constituencies that see in him a reflection of their own struggles or the personification of their own hopes and fears.

### The Italian Job

Football superstardom is most often bestowed on the very people least equipped to deal with its temptations and stresses: young men, rich in cash and testosterone, poor in judgment. Balotelli doesn't match that template. Unlike many footballers, he has brains in his head as well as his feet. At school he was good at mathematics; he considered studying sports science at university. Nor does he lack an understanding of what his priorities should be. "I have to train hard every training session.

And give everything on the pitch," he says. "You have four or five things that the manager asks you to do, then you have to play like you can play and give everything."

There is no doubting his sincerity. But there is also no doubting his capacity to say one thing and do another, as those closest to him ruefully admit. The Internet is saturated with "Crazy Mario" lists, detailing antics on and off the pitch. A fair number of the latter have been embroidered by tabloid newspapers (he didn't drive through Manchester dressed as Santa Claus, handing out money; he didn't buy everyone in a Manchester pub a drink or pay to fill up the tanks of every car at a Manchester gas station) but his erratic behavior during matches has been remorselessly documented on TV and YouTube. There's an entertaining clip in which he struggles to put on a training bib (a moment inevitably dubbed Bibotelli) and more serious incidents in which he compromises his team's chances. During City's 2011 exhibition match against L.A. Galaxy, for example, he cleared the last defender, then pirouetted before attempting and failing to kick the ball backward into the goal.

### [\(LIST: Eight Players to Watch at Euro 2012\)](#)

A hyperactive child, who regularly demonstrated his nascent football skills by deliberately kicking his ball through the glass pane of a door in his home, he has ripened into a hyperactive adult. "He's always busy with lots of activities. He's doing something and then he has an idea, and he wants to do something else. He has one thought, and he has 100 thoughts after it," says Cristina Balotelli, his adoptive sister. "You make an appointment with him, and he changes twice."

Like her two brothers and her parents, she is protective of the vulnerable boy, still easily glimpsed in the full-grown man, who joined her family after a difficult start in life. She praises how quickly he learned English, his instinct to avoid the flattery and flummery that his celebrity brings. "He's a bit of a mix," she says. "He's smart, he's mature, but at the same time he doesn't want to grow up." His agent, Mino Raiola, describes him as a "free spirit" and "a Peter Pan, in the positive sense."

One key to Balotelli's reluctance to put away childish things seems easy enough to locate, in an early life lacking in childish pleasures. Born in 1990 in Palermo, Sicily, to Ghanaian immigrants named Thomas and Ruth Barwuah, Balotelli spent most of his first year in the hospital, as surgeons conducted a series of operations to fix an intestinal malformation that threatened to kill him. Such medically enforced separations in infancy can create enduring feelings of abandonment, and Balotelli has indicated in interviews that he has just such feelings. But he traces them not to his time in the hospital but to the decision of the Barwuaahs, by then living in cramped quarters with another African family in Brescia, northern Italy, to place him in care after his release from the hospital. He wasn't yet 3 years old when he ended up with the foster parents who would later adopt him, the Balotellis. "They say that abandonment is a wound that never heals," Balotelli told *Sportweek*, the weekly supplement of *Gazzetta dello Sport*, in 2008. "I say only that an abandoned child never forgets."

These days Balotelli does not discuss his birth parents; his birth mother, according to Britain's mass-market *Daily Mail*, has moved to Manchester to be near the only one of her four children whom she did not raise. The footballer may himself become a father soon. His ex-girlfriend Raffaella Fico, a reality-TV star in Italy, is pregnant with a child she says is his. Asked what kind of a parent Balotelli imagines he will be, he pauses as if to give this important question due consideration. "I think [my child will] need a mother who knows how to say no," he says eventually. "Maybe because as a small child, I suffered so much. And so I'll love him so much that maybe I won't be able to say no."

In Silvia, Balotelli found stability and a mother who says no. Balotelli says he listens to her advice and takes her reprimands to heart. When he took to bleaching his Mohawk, she relayed complaints

to him from parents in Brescia that their kids were following suit. He gave up the dye. He describes her as "protective. She talks a lot. She's always right, almost always right. Patient. This is the character of my mother. For me my mother is everything."

It is the most Italian of sentiments, but Balotelli has been officially Italian only since 2008. According to Vittorio Rigo, Balotelli's attorney, the Barwuahs opposed Mario's adoption, and he had to wait until he was 18 to become a Balotelli — and an Italian. "Until that moment, he retained Ghanaian citizenship and missed the opportunity to represent Italy at the Beijing Olympics by just a few months," says Rigo.

The Balotellis accepted Mario from the moment they met him. Italy, the land of his birth, has not yet fully embraced him. In 2009, the Torino-based Juventus football club was penalized after its fans spent a match hurling racist abuse at him. Later that year, when Balotelli was out in central Rome, a stranger threw a bunch of bananas at his feet. "When I wasn't famous, I had a lot of friends, almost all of them Italian," he says. "The racism only started when I started to play football."

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#### The Home of the Blues

That may be, in part, because Balotelli started to play football at the moment when Italy, buoyed by the false boom of the euro zone's party years and needing young workers to fill the deficit left by its rapidly aging population, became a magnet for economic migrants. In a photograph of Balotelli's grade-school football team, his is the only black face. It was an experience he repeated when he joined the Italian national under-21 team in 2008. His inclusion in the side reflected wider social change. Italy has become more diverse, and it has done so more rapidly than many other European countries. In 1990, the year of Balotelli's birth, just 1 Italian resident in 100 held a foreign passport. Today, that number is 1 in 12. Many of those migrants are black; many hold menial jobs. But a black middle class is also emerging as the children of migrants, born and raised in Italy and sometimes referred to as the "Balotelli generation," enter the workforce. Balotelli, the most prominent black Italian, has become a symbol of his country's uneasy transition.

Football stadiums across Europe provide pitch-side views of demographic change — and the hostility that change sometimes still provokes. English football has recently been riven by ugly incidents. Premier League club Chelsea's John Terry received nothing more than a fine and a four-match ban for racially abusing another player, provoking a storm of protest and a debate about how to eradicate racism from the sport. Other countries have yet to open that debate in earnest. Italian and Spanish football have long been plagued by a small number of fans throwing abuse and missiles at black players. England's Oct. 16 under-21 game against Serbia continued as Serbian fans made monkey noises at black English players and ended in an on-pitch brawl.

To Balotelli's eyes, Manchester's multiethnic vibrancy looks pretty good. "In England," he says, "everybody is equal." That perception isn't backed by the evidence. If Balotelli wants to see proof of social divisions, he need only take a short drive. A booklet handed to new signings by Manchester City's player-care department advises its stars to look for housing in the lushest, richest triangle of Cheshire, the lush, rich county abutting the west side of Manchester. Alderley Edge "has an elegance and style, which transcends the ephemeral nature of celebritydom," declares the booklet. It fails to mention the Cheshire village's status as the second least deprived area of Britain in a list calculated by a charity called the Church Urban Fund. City's stadium in east Manchester, by contrast, is situated near Collyhurst, the fourth most deprived area of Britain.

### [\(MORE: Manchester City: Will Summer Shopping for Players Decide Next Season's League Title, Too?\)](#)

A chunk of City's new Middle Eastern wealth is being channeled into improving its neighborhood. That largesse goes down well with City fans, who have always taken pride in their club's homespun integrity. They dismiss United supporters, especially those born outside Manchester borders, as "glory hunters," seduced by the Reds' cabinets full of silver cups. The Blues' faithful, by contrast, have stuck by their team through the leanest of times. Ed Owen, chief executive of the British medical charity the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, and a City devotee since boyhood, remembers watching City win England's third most important domestic tournament. "I thought at the time that's what life was going to be like supporting Manchester City. I never tasted that again until last year," he says. "The worst moment would have been a cold Tuesday night in 1998, going to see City play Wycombe Wanderers in the old Third Division, to see City lose 1-0, which sent City to 10th place in the division."

On a rainy fall day, beneath clouds so gray that dawn bleeds into evening, City's training ground still feels pretty bleak. But Balotelli's white Bentley Continental GT brightens the scene, negotiating the narrow drive past a holding pen full of damp autograph hunters and hinting at the transformative impact of Sheik Mansour's money.

Balotelli parks between the supercars of his gilded colleagues and heads to the changing rooms to prepare for the morning training session. He's come to work in gold-glitter trainers and diamond ear studs, but not the fur-trimmed white cardigan with a skull picked out in rhinestones that he's pictured wearing in many of that day's tabloids. He lopes into reception, passing beneath the billboard proclaiming ABU DHABI TRAVELLERS WELCOME that would seem guaranteed to confuse anyone arriving at the facility for the first time. A 10-year, \$643 million sponsorship deal with Abu Dhabi's government-owned Etihad Airways has inscribed the carrier's logo on the players' shirts and their stadium, while City's improved performance inscribed the club's name on the FA Cup, England's most important knockout competition, in 2011 and the Premier League trophy the following year. Three months into the new season, City is ranked third in the league, just after Chelsea and United. Nobody would dismiss its chances of overhauling its rivals by the spring, to carry off the Premiership for a second successive year. "People say, 'You must feel that it's not quite the real thing, [Mansour] paid for success, and that must devalue it.' I've never felt even an iota of that," says Owen.

The sheik has only once braved the Mancunian climate since he picked up the Blues in 2008 for \$241 million in a fire sale as Thai authorities investigated corruption allegations against the previous owner, Thailand's former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. But Mansour's investment has lured others from sunnier reaches: Yaya Touré from the Ivory Coast, Pablo Zabaleta from Argentina, David Silva from Spain. In 2009, the Argentine striker Carlos Tevez traveled just a few miles, decamping from United to join City, but later blamed the weather for a bout of blues at the Blues that saw him take unauthorized leave from the club. (He has now rejoined the side.) Last winter he returned to his native country to bask on the beach and in the glow of celebrity, explaining to a chat-show host what he didn't like about Manchester. "The weather, everything. It has nothing," he said.

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Balotelli attempts a more positive gloss on life in England. The rain doesn't bother him, he says, "because I never go out ... so it can rain as much as it wants to, and I'll be in the house." The local paparazzi regularly disprove that notion of a stay-at-home Mario by tracking him to nightspots. Even indoors, he isn't necessarily safe from getting into the scrapes that have raised his profile and risked lowering his game. The night before City's vital clash with United last October, the fire brigade answered an emergency call out to Balotelli's rented Cheshire mansion. A firework, set off inside the bathroom, had started a larger conflagration. He expiated any guilt for the incident — which he blames on an unnamed friend — three times over, with his two goals against United and

by fronting a public-service campaign encouraging the safe use of fireworks.

Like the irrepressible child who kept kicking his football inside the house, the adult Balotelli doesn't have a straightforward relationship with authority. He respects some of its representatives and depends on them — after his family, Mancini, whom he describes as "like a father," has been a key figure in his life — but he doesn't always obey these parental figures. In his 2008 Sportweek interview, he wondered aloud about his tendency to react to provocations on the pitch "and how much it has to do with the abandonment." José Mourinho, now at Real Madrid, endured a fractious relationship with Balotelli when the Portuguese coach managed Inter Milan. Both men now appear to see the funny side. "I could write a book of 200 pages [about] my two years [at] Inter with Mario. But the book would be not a drama. The book would be a comedy," Mourinho told CNN. Balotelli concurs: "I think we were two funny people together." He adds, "But the main character would be him, not me."

As Mourinho's predecessor at Inter, Mancini spotted Balotelli's potential, giving the player a spot on the adult team when he was only 17. It was Mancini who later tempted Balotelli to City. These days Mancini seems unsure about his protégé's future. "Every day I say to Mario I've finished my patience, every day," says Mancini. "I've known Mario for six or seven years, and he played the first time in the first team with me. And for this I know very well him, and I can say that his talent is incredible." That talent, Mancini fears, is undermined by a lack of focus. "He needs to think only about his job, that he plays for a very important team, that he is to have good behavior always. Because the career of a player is very short."

#### A Problem like Mario

City is probably about as friendly a Premier League club as it is possible to find, as good a surrogate family as a player could hope for. Its wealth is too recent for its backroom staff to have acquired airs and graces. Founded in the 19th century by the daughter of a vicar aiming to lure blue collar Mancunians out of pubs and into a healthier form of social activity, the club now faces the challenge of keeping its charges out of pubs and in good health. "Nobody can predict what life will throw at you during the early hours of the morning. Whether it's neighborhood disputes, press invasion or seeking a solution for a domestic issue, we are here for you around the clock," promises the player-care booklet.

For Balotelli, a stranger in a strange country, support from City is critical in helping him handle the fireworks that so often seem to explode in his eventful life. He has formed a bond with Patrick Vieira, a former top footballer who has played in England and Italy and has taken on the job at City of nurturing upcoming talent. "I love Mario, and I get frustrated with him sometimes because of the mistakes he makes," says Vieira. "But he's a lovely, gentle person with a big heart."

Vieira identifies one hurdle for Balotelli in a cultural difference between English and Italian football. Balotelli is sometimes painted as a prima donna, focused too much on his goal tally and too little on team play, but Vieira explains that "Italian strikers are not used to defending. Mario is not used to tracking the defenders. Italian strikers have to score goals, but in England we ask them to work for the team, to defend. Mario hasn't had this football education."

The larger hurdle, though, is Balotelli himself, with his astonishing gift for football and his bewildering ability to compromise that gift. "Sometimes I have a discussion with him, saying 'Why are you doing all these stupid things because that's not you?' And he laughs, because he knows it's the truth," says Vieira. He has made a wager with Balotelli that the young player will behave himself this year. He declines to name the exact terms, but it's surely far from a safe bet.

And it's far from a safe bet that Balotelli's fans want their idol to learn to behave, or that it's entirely

in his financial interest to do so. He may not yet be judged the world's greatest footballer — and he may never realize his potential — but he's already international football's greatest character, magnetic, funny, surprising and marketable. His question "Why always me?" inspired a track by the Ghanaian-born British rapper Tinchy Stryder. Balotelli and Stryder later collaborated with sportswear manufacturer Umbro to produce a shirt bearing the slogan. There's a chant that City supporters take up when Balotelli comes out to play: "He does what he wants, he does what he wants. Balotelli, he does what he wants."

"We'd hate him if he wasn't playing for us," says Blues fan Owen. "We love him because he's ours. Because he's so fantastic a player but so crazy. If he played for United, he would be the absolute hate figure. He's flashy, he's arrogant, he's brilliant — and he's ours." The last point may not be true for long, if Mancini's patience runs out or Balotelli's impulses take him elsewhere. Raiola declines to comment on a fresh flurry of speculation that his client is considering a return to Italy to play for A.C. Milan, but adds, "That Mario is in demand is not in question." And the decisions Balotelli makes won't just determine the colors he wears or whether he plays in rain or sun; they could shape or destroy his legacy, give him the stability to succeed or help him to squander that amazing talent. Balotelli, like his club, his country and his continent, is in transition. Nobody can predict how the game will end.