

Mario Balotelli begins to repay Roberto Mancini's faith in him

- Manchester City's Italian striker comes off bench to score
- City battle to overcome Everton's defensive tactics

Premier League 2011-12

Manchester City 2 Balotelli 68, Milner 89
Everton 0

Andy Hunter at Etihad Stadium
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Mario Balotelli embraces Roberto Mancini after scoring against Everton soon after coming on as a substitute.
Photograph: Jon Super/AP

For once Mario Balotelli made the right choice as he celebrated a watershed moment for Manchester City and potentially his own career with the manager who has indulged him more than any other. One Italian embraced another on the touchline, the Everton

resistance was broken and Roberto Mancini seized the moment to whisper in the goalscorer's ear. "I told him to stay wide, then get inside the box when we attack and work for the team" – hardly a Mills and Boon moment but at least the £24m striker is listening.

It would be premature to claim the penny has dropped for Balotelli on the basis of one well-struck, highly significant but ultimately deflected goal. All that can be said with certainty is that the time has arrived for the 21-year-old to repay Mancini's consistent and often tested faith. On Saturday that process commenced.

The City manager displayed telling confidence in the Italy international an hour into the ordeal of breaking David Moyes's tactic of parking an entire bus depot here. City required fresh inspiration in attack plus someone to drag Everton to the channels. Mancini summoned Balotelli and left Carlos Tevez, the finest striker in the Premier League last season, stewing on the bench, alone with his thoughts and with no one to blame for his demotion in the striking order beyond himself. Balotelli – "he loves Manchester City and English football," his manager pointedly remarked – duly played the instrumental role in Mancini's first victory over Everton, sweeping Sergio Agüero's back-heel into the corner of Tim Howard's goal via the chest of Phil Jagielka and working tirelessly for the greater good.

"Usually when he scores he is unhappy," said Mancini, illustrating the paradox perfectly. "For Mario it is normal but in a game like this I think he knew he scored an important goal for us. That's just him. But inside I think he's happy always. I think he wants to show supporters it's normal for him to score."

His work rate and willingness to follow Mancini's instructions were not the only signs of maturity that City have witnessed in Balotelli of late, according to James Milner, who said the striker's failure to start a Premier League game this term has not provoked any problems within.

Milner, the second City substitute to beat Howard when he converted David Silva's glorious pass in the final minute, his first league goal for the club, said: "I don't think anyone is happy when they are not in the team. That is what you want. Mario hasn't shown it. He trains hard every day and goes about his business like everyone else does. He has not stepped out of line or shown his disappointment in any way."

Asked whether the perception of Balotelli as a gifted but eccentric individual is fair, Milner replied: "That is pretty accurate. He is a top-quality player. You forget how young he is. He has done a lot in the game already. You can see his quality every time he comes on. He only needed half a chance and he took it. He is a massive part of this squad."

But no player currently matches the importance to City of Silva. Moyes interrupted his stride out of the stadium to shake the hand of the Spanish midfielder and offered a genuine "well played". The Everton manager had already paid Silva the compliment of detailing the impressive Jack Rodwell to man-mark "City's biggest part", as Moyes described him, and his concerns proved justified. Two minutes after Balotelli's breakthrough Rodwell asked his manager whether he should abandon his duties and support Everton's belated efforts to attack. He was told to stay. Rodwell looked to the bench again in the closing minutes and was instructed to advance. Seconds later Silva intercepted Royston Drenthe's careless pass, spun away from three blue shirts and threaded Milner through for City's second.

"He did not leave me alone," said Silva. "It's strange to mark like that in the Premier League. It was a new experience for me. That has never happened to me before. I don't know if it is a compliment or not but I know I was in their plans. It's good for me to continue in this vein and that we took three points from a difficult match. They defended very well but we also played well and got the victory. We're very pleased knowing that in these difficult matches if we keep on winning and doing what we are doing, we'll be in the running [for the title]."

The Rodwell experiment succeeded for Moyes, though it will test Evertonian patience should his overall game plan continue against Liverpool's suspect defence on Saturday. City's own reserves will be stretched, too, should others follow the Craig Levein coaching manual but at least now, having broken the Everton hoodoo, they know they have the options to respond. Moyes's anger was reserved for the inconsistent refereeing of Howard Webb, who failed to punish Vincent Kompany for anticipating Tim Cahill's foul with a dangerous challenge of his own. The Football Association has confirmed that no retrospective action will be taken.

Euro watch

Bayern Munich 3 Bayer Leverkusen 0 Goals by Thomas Müller, Daniel van Buyten and Arjen Robben as Bayern warmed up for City on Tuesday

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