

"If only I'd been born in a Latin country"

It's not easy being a free spirited No10 in a country where that role isn't part of the footballing tradition. The trick, Chelsea star Joe Cole tells Alison Ratcliffe, is to blend idealism and realism

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Has Joe Cole sold his soul? In return for a couple of league titles, a Carling Cup and who knows what other riches to come, he has sacrificed a whole heap of razzle-dazzle to become the epitome of modern football efficiency. In the interviews Joe Cole gave at West Ham United, he emerges as a quiescent youth, invoking the 'mysticism' of Zinedine Zidane over David Beckham's statistically greater efficiency, warning of the dangers of defending too much, and insisting that true bravery lies not in flying into tackles, but in having the guts to persist with creative trickery.

The new Joe Cole sounds, at first, very different. "No team wins anything with ten players," he intones. "Maybe ten years ago you could have one playmaker just playing when he has the ball; now you have to play when you have it. The best players get the balance right. It's no good scoring 15 goals from midfield if you finish third or fourth in the league. You need to defend, create goals, score goals and keep the ball. You can't expect to be a free spirit."

So that's the football purists told. In person, there's no hint of latent flamboyance. Slight, neat and close-cropped, Cole is muted in tone and clothing, though he speaks with engaging earnestness. If you want to chart his fall from innocence, there are handy milestones along the way. His first Premiership goal recalled the dashing football of yesteryear, coming in a 5-1 win over Bradford in 2000. The 'luxury' tag reared its head in a West Ham cup defeat to Spurs in 2001, where his defensive lapses led to two goals. In 2004, he had scarcely accepted his Premiership man-of-the-match champagne after scoring the only goal against Liverpool when José Mourinho tore into him for not helping his team-mates close out the match. A year later pundits purred over his rounded display in the Champions League victory over Barcelona.

The same faltering progression marks his England career. Hailed as heir to Gazza, he became a feature of Sven Goran Eriksson's shambling friendlies, a non-starter at Euro 2004, and finally one of the 2006 World Cup's few positives. Cole was initially most effective in tandem with Michael Carrick at West Ham. He now feels that players in the Carrick mould are eclipsing his cherished No10 spot.

"You now have players like Milan's Andrea Pirlo who sit very deep. When he was playing for Italy Under-21s he was in behind the strikers. The way tactics are now, sometimes you have to come deep and look for searching passes. Football's more athletic, more intelligent. Tactics are better. To find spaces it's essential to have wide men, or a deep-lying playmaker – rather than playing 20 or 30 yards up the pitch where it's congested."

Cole is eloquent on the subject of tactics. Before our interview he sits at a block of desks in Chelsea's media building with Sunday newspaper journalists crowded round. He parrots platitudes into the cluster of Dictaphones, only opening up when someone jobs in a tactical conundrum. As we start to unravel the mixed up world of an English No10, he is similarly expansive.

Since England managers Ron Greenwood and Bobby Robson struggled to incorporate Glenn Hoddle, the English have regarded the No10 with almost as much suspicion as they view the euro. Relations between Cole and then West Ham boss Harry Redknapp cooled when Redknapp had second thoughts about playing Cole in the hole. Redknapp's successor Glenn Roeder then proclaimed: "There is no role for a free spirit in top-class football."

Cole blames his failure to settle in any one position on this English distrust of No10s. "I've always played more as a regular midfielder – in England they tend not to use that sort of football. Sometimes I feel if I'd been born in a Latin country I may have been coached better to play in that role. I've had to learn it myself from watching all the greats. I love the Latin culture of football. In England it's not such a big thing to wear No10. But in Latin America it's always given to the playmaker. That's the reason I wanted it when I came to Chelsea. I've been playing wide now for two years. But I'm a footballer – so long as I'm contributing to the team I'll play in any position."

Contributing to the team. This is where Mourinho comes in. Cole credits him as the first person to dissect his game and reassure him as a tactical sum greater than its parts. He's been, he says, "a massive influence". Managerial faith is especially important for a player of Cole's ilk. "A No10 has to be creative and prepared to take risks," he says. "Some games you try something and it doesn't come off: it's difficult to have real consistency playing in this area. So you need a manager who believes in you and the system. And you need belief in yourself."

For all Cole's new-found pragmatism, he still sounds enthralled by the aura of the No10 shirt. He recalls his boyhood heroes with awe. "Obviously I've got the Maradona videos, but Roberto Baggio was the No10 for me. I loved watching him at the 1994 World Cup and for Juve."

"Two of the great No10 performances were Zidane in the 1998 World Cup final and again against Brazil at the last World Cup. He's the top player of our generation, if not the greatest ever. Look at any sport: judged on times and you can see it's got better over the years. Football's the same. So Zidane is probably the greatest ever. I never played against him, which is a big regret. I was so close in the Euros, but I didn't come on... maybe there'll be a testimonial down the line. I never had a chance to play with Gazza either. He's another of my heroes."

In his head, Cole knows the game now demands the discipline that Mourinho preaches. But in his heart, he doesn't sound completely convinced.

"I'd like to be given a run playing at the head of a midfield diamond," he says. "Obviously I haven't played there for years now. But if I got a run and could settle in, I know I can affect the game from there. You're getting up close to the box and you're linking play..."

Should any Mediterranean coaches have a vacancy for an incurable Latin-lover, there may be a caged free spirit waiting to be liberated in SWE. ★

