

“He had ten staff on there. It's, like, a five-bedroom boat. There was a chef there 24 hours... people looking after you. Jet skis – two stand-up jet skis, one normal jet ski, a banana boat, fishing rods... It just had everything – everything you wanted.”

It's refreshing to hear a Premiership footballer sounding dazed in the face of someone else's affluence as John Terry remembers his 'thank-you' holiday aboard Roman Abramovich's yacht. “We're lucky we've got this great life because of football, but that takes it to a ridiculous level.”

Affluence is not as evident when you're waiting in the Chelsea media building. Terry, I was assured by various members of the Chelsea staff, trains hard, likes to have a massage afterwards and is generally the last player to leave. So there is time for me to take it all in: probably an old Sunday football club building, a floor like your old school gym, tatty upright piano in the corner and a shabby kitchen where countless mud-caked Sunday-morning sloggers must have paid 50p for a brew. The red and gold chairs set out for the press conference look incongruous.

It seems fitting to talk to Terry here. One of the more grounded footballers you could hope to meet, he's wearing a plain polo shirt, jeans and trainers – and a huge diamond-encrusted watch. Where he's come from (a council estate in

Blues clues

How did John Terry emerge, almost overnight, to become one of Europe's best defenders? Alison Ratcliffe asks the man himself...

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Barking), how far he's come and how lucky he is to be here are something of a recurring theme: from memories of getting into trouble for storming out of a school careers meeting after he refused to consider any job prospects outside professional football, to recollections of life as a Chelsea trainee.

“We had to clean the toilets, the changing rooms, pick up the kit after the older players and clean their boots. I cleaned Wisey's boots. He always looked after me. He gave me £25 every time he scored – back then I was on about £46 a week. He didn't score many, but it came in handy when he did. That got me out for the weekend when I was younger.”

Luck certainly played a part in Terry's journey to becoming the first defender to be named PFA player of the year since Paul McGrath in 1993. “One day in the youth team we were struggling for centre-halves. I was quite tall and big then and the youth-team manager said, ‘Do you mind just slotting in for today, you'll be back in midfield next week.’ I said, ‘Yeah, course, no problem. We were playing Barnsley. We won 3-0. I had one of those games where everything went right for me. He said to me, ‘Next week I'm going to play you there again and we kept winning...’” The 16-year-old Terry impressed Gianluca Vialli by kicking the then Chelsea manager from behind and bellowing at

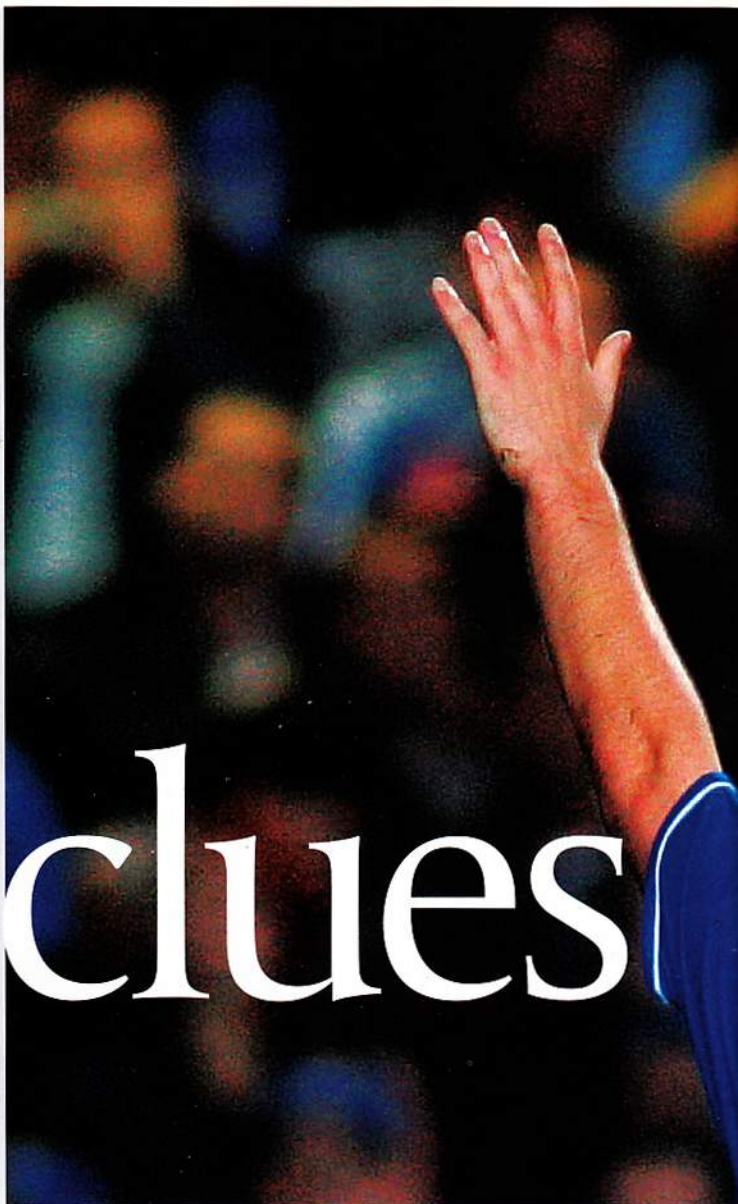
the seasoned pro in his very first training session with the first team. Vialli gave him his debut at Southampton on Boxing Day, 1998, but it was under Claudio Ranieri that he flourished.

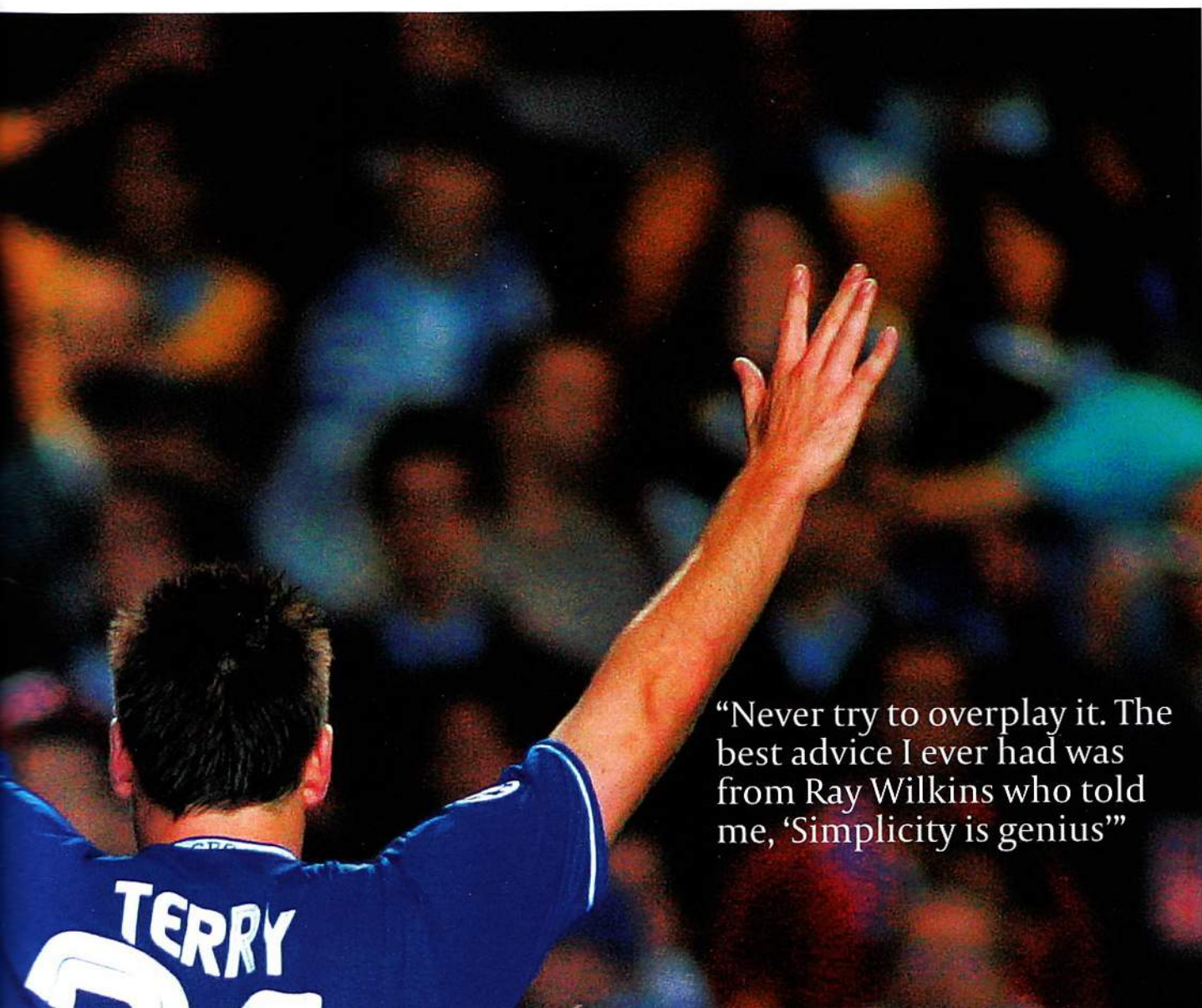
“I noticed him in my first week at Chelsea,” says Ranieri. “I watched him play for the reserves. He was unbelievable. He won all the high balls and played as if he had Chelsea in his blood.”

Which he doesn't quite, since he grew up in a family of Manchester United fans. “United were the best team at the time and when you're a kid you know what it's like...” He did though resist the Reds' advances, despite being invited for trials, lunch with his heroes and to watch first games at Old Trafford. Staying on at Chelsea, he received a daily drip-feed of invaluable advice from World Cup winners Frank Leboeuf and Marcel Desailly and, he says, Michael Duberry.

His contribution to last season's UEFA Champions League was notable as much for his headed goals as for his defending. His four-goal tally matched Ronaldinho's and he scored the winner that killed off Barcelona in the nine-goal soap opera of a tie in the last 16. Yet it all ended in a deathly quiet away dressing room at Anfield, with Terry crying with a towel over his head.

It's an uncharacteristic feeling for a player more used to





"Never try to overplay it. The best advice I ever had was from Ray Wilkins who told me, 'Simplicity is genius'"

Only five more John Terrys....

The actor, starred in Stanley Kubrick's anti-war movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

The animator and cartoonist and inventor of comic-book aviation hero Scorchy Smith.

Camperking, in fact the owner of John Terry Camperking and the "king of Australian campervans" as he likes to call himself.

The lawyer and a partner in the Wellington, New Zealand, office of patent specialists Baldwins Partners.

The highway engineer and, in his spare time, president of the Fort Worth Songwriters Association for whom he writes songs of love, broken hearts and growing up in Texas.

bolstering team spirit. Terry paints an intriguing picture of himself marshalling Chelsea's millionaires: "Certain things I take on myself - we might go karting, paint-balling. I organise where to be picked up from, what time we get picked up and make sure everyone's there. It's part of being the captain and I quite enjoy that side of it." It's the English lads, apparently, who have to be hassled because they never turn up on time.

Those organisational qualities are recognised by another stickler for a well-drilled defence, George Graham. "Some people doubt defenders can play, but that's crap," says the former Arsenal boss. "Terry can play and he's a born leader. He doesn't have to be beautiful on the ball. He's got qualities artistic players don't have." Mourinho, who hasn't stopped showering praise on Terry, is convinced he has a cultured side. "John knows where the passing channels are normally open," Mourinho says. "He can find people with short passes and has good vision to play the long ball. He is the perfect player. At this moment John is fantastic."

But Terry makes no bones about coming from the bread-and-butter school of defending. Asked to name the three best European centre-backs, he ignores the claims of such artful types as Alessandro Nesta or Rio Ferdinand and asks if it would be OK to pick ex-players. Assured that it is, he says without hesitation: "Tony Adams, Steve Bruce and Gary Pallister."

He may appreciate the no-nonsense approach, but he still has his own footballing philosophy: "Never try to overplay. If I need to kick the ball into the stand I will. The best piece of advice I ever had was from Ray Wilkins: simplicity is genius." ★