With Guy Roux, the facts are as remarkable as the legend

Managing Cantona? Revitalising Scifo? Turning an amateur club into a European powerhouse? No task was too great for Auxerre's **SAVVY SUPERHERO** *in the dugout*

WORDS ALISON RATCLIFFE

Several French journalists have likened Guy Roux to an escapee from The Adventures of Asterix: cartoonish, yet with an appealing mélange of personality traits – part Obelix, part Getafix, part Dogmatix, and a good dose of the comic's eponymous hero.

Auxerre is France's 199th-largest town. It has Chablis, charcuteries and churches, and fewer than 40,000 inhabitants. Only a gargantuan personality could raise the club from France's regional amateur fourth tier to the last eight of the UEFA Champions League and within sight of a UEFA Cup final. Over 44 years, AJ Auxerre's self-proclaimed "enlightened despot" presided over 15 European campaigns, including seven in consecutive seasons in the 1990s, a domestic double in 1996 and three further French Cups. Serge Mésonès, captain when they were promoted to the top flight in 1980, describes the club as "an accident of history, a living paradox".

Roux's coach at amateur side Limoges in the 1950s described him as "a visionary midfielder, but too slow. He wasn't strong enough, and his right-foot shot was mediocre, but he had marrow". Already very self-aware, 23-year-old Roux offered himself as player-coach to Auxerre in 1961. He asked for a salary of F600 (£68) a month and promised to save every last cent. As Auxerre couldn't even afford to heat the dressing room, the directors said yes.

A NEW HOPE

If you believe Roux, the tactics that took Auxerre into the upper echelons of Europe were born, rather prosaically, around this time. After returning to his post at Auxerre in 1964 following his military service, he had planned to follow the "dissident" zonal marking pioneers. "But I was losing too many matches because of the incompetence of the linesmen, who had a very poor grasp of offside situations, which are common with zonal marking," he said. "I didn't want my career to depend on them. So I went back to man-marking."

Save for the very last campaigns of his tenure, Roux deployed a 4-3-3 with a man-marking defence and a libero-stopper central partnership. Nothing could be more Roux than founding a lifetime's tactical strategy on an inveterate mistrust of match officials.

Yet this may also be an example of the way he has been mythologised. He rarely bothers to correct the media's cartoon version of his character and seems to revel in all the fables about his eccentric management techniques. He is seldom short of a tall tale, once claiming to have convinced François Mitterrand to talk to the British government after Eric Cantona's kung fu kick and reminiscing about the time Fidel Castro offered him an island if he agreed to promote football in Cuba.

"My wheeler-dealer image? Everyone shapes that part, like the young journalist who turns up to do his article, thinking: 'I'm going to do up a portrait of Guy Roux.' Well, I help him along a bit," Roux once admitted.

Roux's modest office at Auxerre is the reflection of a coach driven by success, but who always put his players first

Behind the smokescreen you find a recruitment policy that combines typically Roux-esque savvy with serious investment. Auxerre's strategy under Roux was based on four core tenets: nurture, refinement, rehabilitation – and Poland.

Auxerre's first Polish player, goalkeeper Marian Szeja, arrived in 1974 with the club still in Ligue 2. Thereafter, 12 Polish players wore the white jersey when Roux was in charge. Among them were Jozef Klose – Miroslav's father – part of the side that reached the Coupe de France final in 1979 and gained promotion the following year, and striker Andrzej Szarmach.

Szarmach's moustachioed door-to-door salesman look belied his exceptional class. A member of the golden Polish side that finished third in the 1974 and 1982 FIFA World Cups and won silver in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, he was among the generation squirrelled away by the Polish regime until the age of 30. But this still left him time to become

"WE GOT TOLD OFF, WE WORKED LIKE NUTTERS. WE HAD AN ADVENTURE THAT WILL STAY WITH US FOR LIFE"

the Bleu et Blanc's all-time top scorer with 100 goals in 157 games between 1980 and 1985.

In the 1990s, Auxerre became the place where great players went for rehab. The first of Roux's restorative miracles was Enzo Scifo. The Belgian prodigy had fallen from the heights of FC Internazionale Milano via FC Girondins de Bordeaux when he came to Stade Abbé-Deschamps. Two seasons later, Auxerre had reached a UEFA Cup quarter-final and third in the league. Scifo was the undisputed star of the Belgian side at the 1990 World Cup and had earned a move to Torino FC.

By 1995, Roux's renown was such that Laurent Blanc's agent rang to say his player would accept a pay cut just to sample Auxerre's regenerative waters: the team won the domestic double, Blanc a move to FC Barcelona and a renewed career with France.

Roux discovered and refined many youngsters from within France – Lilian Laslandes, Jean-Alain Boumsong, Benoît Cheyrou – but Auxerre's European exploits, and the financial security of the club, were hewn from their astonishingly productive academy.

The club found itself in the top flight in 1980, with the prize money for reaching the previous season's Coupe de France final rattling in the vaults. A new player or an academy? Hindsight makes the choice sound obvious. The proportion of first-generation graduates from ➤

"LIFE TURNS ON STUPID TRIFLES. GESTURES. ROUX'S WAS A GESTURE OF LOVE. HE UNDERSTOOD ME"

la pyramide varies depending on whether you believe effusive graduate Basile Boli (100%), Roux (80%), or then academy director Daniel Rolland (70%). "Usually, out of a group of 15, if a third of them make it you'd be delighted," says Roux.

Four of the first generation became French internationals: Boli, Pascal Vahirua (brought back from Roux's Tahitian holiday), William Prunier and Cantona. "It's what saved the club," says Rolland. In under a decade there were 30 graduates, and enough profits from player sales to expand the academy facilities to become the envy of Europe. Auxerre have won seven youth Coupes Gambardella.

Even when compared to Barcelona's La Masia academy, Auxerre's was a model of continuity. With one coach eternally in place, playing a 4-3-3 formation that underwent only the subtlest of alterations and a team barely tinkered with, positional dynasties grew up, buttressed by academy products. The left-wing spot was handed down through only five players in 23 years from 1980 – 14 of those accounted for by academy graduates Vahirua and Bernard Diomède. Only four keepers kept goal in the 25 years following Auxerre's promotion, three of whom learned their trade at the academy.

The Eastern European imports were also important to Roux's tactical dogma: "My No6 [defensive midfielder] took care of the opponent's No10, my No8 [linking midfielder] was the midfield fulcrum, and higher up I had a playmaker, two wingers and a centre-forward, who had to be kept supplied with crosses. The fox in the box was a scarce animal in our league 20-25 years ago compared with other countries. Eastern Europe had more of them, often better and always cheaper."

Vahirua remembers the counterattacking style fondly: "[We were] constantly focused on attack, getting behind the defence and crossing. Sure, we conceded goals, but we scored them too. It's what supporters expect: spectacle."

LOVE AND DISCIPLINE

"We were the first at the pyramid," says Boli. "We had an adventure that will stay with us for life. One fine day in 1981, we all found ourselves at Auxerre, where there was nothing. We got told off, we worked like nutters. It was unforgettable. You always remember your first love! I had Canto on the phone yesterday. Or else it'll be La Prune [Prunier]. It's important – they're friends."

Boli hints at one of Roux's contradictions – his famous *paternalisme*, which implied both fatherly love and legendary discipline. The academy's first golden generation, led by Cantona, bought old bangers and used them to play dodgems on the local tip. Perhaps it was

ROUX'S ALL-TIME XI

After Guy Roux's departure, AJ Auxerre fans voted for the following all-time XI in AJA Magazine. It contains the correct number of defenders, midfielders and forwards to populate the Icaunais' traditional 4-3-3 – albeit not necessarily in their rightful positions.

Bruno Martini
The Handel-loving, Goethe-reading academy graduate kept goal for Auxerre with unshowy dependability for ten years, and for France for three years from 1990. He was voted European goalkeeper of the year in 1991.

Laurent Blanc
The most stately if fleeting in Auxerre's pedigree line of liberos (only 24 games), le Président began his stint with an injury lay-off. When he returned, the team progressed and won the 1986 title. Blanc then opened the scoring in the Coupe de France final before waving goodbye.

Philippe Mexès
The academy graduate debuted at 17. A sophisticated technician with a penchant for tanning and showmanship, the libero glowed as Auxerre won the 2003 Coupe de France before a move to AS Roma.

Jean-Alain Boumsong
Beside every great libero, Auxerre have had a great stopper. Boumsong, with his university maths and science diploma, was an important influence on Mexès on and off the pitch.

Basile Boli
Burly stopper Boli arrived in the first academy intake with brother Roger, before moving to Olympique de Marseille to score the winner in the 1993 UEFA Champions League final.

Enzo Scifo
The great promise of RSC Anderlecht at 18, Scifo wilted at FC Internazionale Milano, withered at FC Girondins de Bordeaux, but returned to form at Auxerre. A UEFA Cup inspiration in his first season, he finished third-highest league scorer in his second, though deployed as playmaker behind a centre-forward.

Corentin Martins
"Auxerre owe Corentin a lot," Roux once said. Martins made the play during their 1990s European heyday and double-winning season, as well as scoring the first goal in the UEFA Cup semi-final comeback against Borussia Dortmund.

Yann Lachuer
Lachuer, the last in the line of classic Auxerrois playmakers, departed his second spell a year after Roux. He moved to Paris Saint-Germain after an eye-catching 1997/98 season but returned to slide tidy passes to Djibril Cissé in 2001.

Djibril Cissé
The club's second-highest scorer topped the Ligue 1 charts in 2002 and 2004. He has called Roux "a very important man, both inside and outside football". Roux was even prepared to abandon his trusty 4-3-3 to maximise Cissé's talents.

Eric Cantona
Cantona made his debut on 5 November 1983, alongside Polish forward Szarmach. "I knew little of Szarmach," he says. "But I was reassured by his simplicity, his kindness and his humility. I discovered what it meant to be a footballer of great talent, but also a man who had class."

Andrzej Szarmach
According to Roux, "The greatest player I've had the pleasure of coaching."

A life in pictures

Auxerre idol Guy Roux, man and boy, player and coach

With François Mitterrand during the 1981 French Presidential campaign (above); posing with a football at Limoges as a youngster – his coach called him "a visionary midfielder, but too slow" (above right, in white).

Cantona, who says he was swayed by Roux not making him pay for his own shirt, signs for Auxerre in 1981 (above); Roux celebrates with the team as they lift the Coupe de France in 2005 (left).

Roux sits and watches in his trademark beanie hat and tracksuit top (far left); at Clairefontaine with Roger Lemerre, Aimé Jacquet, Henri Émile, Henri Michel, Pierre Mosca, Robert Herbin, Arsène Wenger, Jean-François Jodar and Gérard Houllier (below).

the only place where Roux had forgotten to enlist a spy: he had one at every toll point on the motorway to Paris, scanning for would-be party animals. Just to make sure, he checked the temperature of players' bonnets in the morning and monitored their odometers.

For some years, one of the most treasured artefacts in the club academy was the 'Boli-Cantona table' – a billiards table purchased from the players' fine after one of Roux's nightclub moles spotted them celebrating a win. One of the many TV ads which feature Roux playing up to his reputation shows 'the breeder of champions', as France's satirical puppet show Les Guignols dubs him, harassing a young recruit all the way to success and silverware. The unfortunate player returns from the trophy celebrations with a stunning companion only to find Roux hiding under his bedcovers.

CONQUERING THE INVINCIBLES

Though Cantona rubbed up against the "paramilitary regime" ("Having said that, you learn how to make your bed. Now it's a reflex. My wife appreciates it."), he highlights Roux's softer side as he recalls why he chose Auxerre over OGC Nice – a much bigger club with much brighter city lights: "[Nice] want to recruit me. And there's a bloke who says: 'The team pennant is ten francs.' To ask a kid for ten francs! I took the first train home. At Auxerre there's a guy called Guy Roux. He offers me pennants and shirts. He understands I'm just a kid. Life turns on stupid trifles. Gestures. That's a gesture of love. After that, Guy Roux went on the same way. Everyone was having a go at me. Guy Roux arranged an apartment for me. He knew how to understand me. I have a lot of respect for him."

When one of Roux's toll-booth spies noticed that Cantona was shuttling 600km to visit his future wife in Aix-en-Provence, the coach loaned him to nearby FC Martigues before moving the couple into a house he had just built on his family's ancestral land near Auxerre. Years later, Djibril Cissé, who also referred to Roux as "un papa", asked him to be his best man.

Nothing softens tough love quite like European football. Auxerre made their UEFA Cup debut in 1984/85, and lost in the first round. The next season they beat AC Milan 3-1. "When the Italians arrived at Abbé-Deschamps, they thought it was the training ground, and asked where the match would be," says playmaker Jean-Marc Ferreri. "At 1-0 to them after four minutes, it was a bit like a training game. By contrast, Virdis's goal liberated us." Chastened, the Rossoneri won the return 3-0.

After Cantona's move to Olympique de Marseille, the reborn Scifo propelled Auxerre to the UEFA Cup quarter-finals in 1990. In 1993 the Ajaïstes missed out on silverware by a fingernail's width. PFC Lokomotiv Plovdiv and FC København were dismissed 9-3 and 7-0, R. Standard de Liège and holders AFC Ajax beaten 4-3.

Auxerre lost the first leg against Borussia Dortmund 2-0 but cancelled out the deficit at home to take the tie to spot kicks after a period of extra time in which both sides had a man sent off. Ten were taken, ten were scored. Auxerre's next kick was missed by (academy product) Stéphane Mahé, who had returned after a serious car accident five months earlier. L'Equipe's verdict: "You died with your boots on, as they say in the Wild West."

When Auxerre finally qualified for the UEFA Champions League in 1996/97, the black and yellow gates slammed in their faces again in the quarter-finals. Dortmund, with 17 internationals and Ballon d'Or winner Matthias Sammer, triumphed in the first leg 3-1. Auxerre fans still mull over a Laslandes bicycle-kick goal that was disallowed for a high boot just before half-time, with the score at 1-0. Fans arriving for the return at Abbé-Deschamps under icy rain were, at Roux's request, handed a piece of paper requesting "exceptional support".

Auxerre's exceptional attacking energy was all dashed against Dortmund's solid defence and their dream died when Lars Ricken scored on the counter for the visitors.

One more dash to the UEFA Cup quarter-finals followed the next season, before Auxerre returned to the UEFA Champions League in 2002. Again, the academy had provided: Philippe Mexès, Cissé and Olivier Kapo won Coupes Gambardella in 1999 and 2000.

They may have been too green for UEFA Champions League knockout qualification, but they were too talented for Arsenal FC's 'Invincibles' in October 2002. Their 2-1 victory was the Gunners' first home defeat since March, Auxerre the first team to breach their goal in Europe that season.

As if resigned to the beginning of the end, Roux now tolerated a 4-5-1, a legacy of the 2000/01 season when he briefly moved upstairs, handing the team to Rolland. The morning after Auxerre's 2005 Coupe de France win, he gave up running the team for good.

So finished the long-running comic-book serial of an old-fashioned *héro bien français*. For years, the public chuckled along with their salt-of-the-earth bumpkin, in his legendary beanies and outdated tracksuit. They smiled at his money-saving ways, indulged his rants at players and referees and tutted indulgently at his more tyrannical excesses.

Roux chuckled with them and had the good sense not to remind them that he was the face of football management video games in France, that he had travelled to 13 World Cups and such curious corners of the planet as Cuba and Tahiti.

A documentary crew once filmed him taking players on forest walks and absorbing the force of rocks through their palms. "I'm quite a believer in the earth's energy," he said. It takes more than two dimensions to take an amateur club to the dizzying heights of Europe. ★