

CITY SLICKERS

Previously Manchester's second team, City are suddenly the 'richest club in the world'. iQ heads home to see how Abu Dhabi's millions are affecting fans not used to seeing things go their way



Apparently Manchester has seen sales of tea towels go up by 400 per cent

As a Mancunian, it's almost impossible to visit anywhere across the globe without somebody instantly linking my hometown with that of the city's most famous football team. Manchester United may have the international reputation as the world's biggest club, but most residents of the UK's northern capital actually support the city's other Premiership team. While it's nice to have my city recognised by many, constantly hearing the name of your arch enemy can get ever so annoying.

The intense rivalry between United and Manchester City is probably than any other two-team town in England. But it's safe to say that Manchester United have had the

better share of success. They've dominated the Premiership over the past decade, been crowned kings of Europe twice in the last nine years and boast a fanbase that – as I've discovered – touches almost every corner of the world. Manchester City last won a major trophy in 1976. And sadly for City fans, United supporters aren't ones to remain polite about this. The City of Manchester Stadium where the sky-blues play their home games is owned by the local council, and as such labeled 'the council house', by United followers.

But all this could transform in the very near future and the source of the winds of change is from an unlikely source several thousand miles away to the East. Following a deal less than two months ago that turned the

footballing world on its head, the previously unheard of Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG) sensationally announced they were buying Manchester City for around \$400 million from Thaksin Shinawatra, the ex-Thai Prime Minister who had been chairman of the club since June 2007.

In the hours following the announcement there were further explosions when the club snapped up the world's most sought after striker, Robinho, from under the noses of Chelsea for a British transfer record of \$57 million, making the Brazilian one of highest paid footballers in history with a reported \$280,000 a week. As far as making a noise, this was like setting off a foghorn in the ear of every football fan across the UK and beyond.



Sulaiman Al-Fahim adorns a new banknote, showing that even football fans have Photoshop skills

'Going for Berbatov did mean United had to spend more money in buying him'

But this wasn't enough. Within days of the initial purchase agreement being announced, the outspoken frontman for the Abu Dhabi United Group, Dr Sulaiman Al-Fahim, went on a media rampage, claiming that City would finish in the top four of the Premiership this season and announcing an envious catalogue of players on his shopping list once the transfer window opened again in January. The list included three of the Premiership's top stars: Liverpool's Fernando Torres, Cesc Fabregas of Arsenal and United's most coveted player Ronaldo. He estimated the value of last season's top goalscorer at \$240 million. "Ronaldo has said he wants to play for the biggest club in the world, so we will see in January if he is serious," Al Fahim declared, adding that City were going to be bigger than both Real Madrid and Manchester United.

Overnight, Manchester City had become the new Chelsea. Any half-decent player was suddenly being linked with a move to the club for an astronomical fee.

Kaka, Messi and Henry were all suddenly shopping for raincoats as they prepared to swap sunnier European destinations for the North of England.

While all this talk of vast wealth and future purchases created an instant buzz, Al-Fahim should really have consulted City supporters before making the comments he did. Ronaldo may arguably be the best footballer in the world at the moment, but the presence of a

player known for his prima dona behaviour on and off the pitch probably wouldn't have gone down well among the City faithful, who might also begrudge handing United such a vast sum of cash. More importantly, Manchester is a city known for its self-deprecating and sarcastic humour. With their cross-town rivals having had plenty of opportunity to poke fun in recent years, City supporters have built up a comedic defence shield. Such bragging and chest-beating didn't really sit well.

"Some of the early brashness was a bit unfortunate and not really the City way," admits Dave Wallace, editor of club's only fanzine *King of the Kippax*, speaking to me at the café above the Manchester City supporters club. "Everything has been a cock up in the end, so we need to see how it goes."

The early brashness did see City make an extremely cheeky last gasp bid for Bulgarian striker Dimitar Berbatov who was already half way to Manchester United from Tottenham. It may not have succeeded, in fact it may just have been a sly bit of bragging in the face of their rivals, but City's 11th hour offer of over \$80 million did have one outcome that delighted City fans. "Going for Berbatov meant United had to spend more money in buying him," laughs Dave.

Oasis frontman and City's most famous fan Noel Gallagher also used the source of City's new-found wealth to have a pop at the cross-town rivals. "It'll be nice to know that every gallon of petrol a Manchester United fan buys is going into our kitty."

While City supporters will naturally jump at any opportunity to throw something back towards Old Trafford, it seems though that Al-Fahim's initial showmanship didn't sit well with the financial backers of the ADUG, namely Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a senior member of the Abu Dhabi ruling family. On September 24, Sheikh Mansour sent out a well-worded message to City fans that was much

ROBINHO

He may only be 24-years-old, but City's record-breaking signing has already been hitting the back of the net for over 15 years

Even before he could spell his name, Robinho was already scoring goals with his eyes closed. At the age of just nine he put away 73 in one season for an indoor team in Brazil called Portuarios. He later joined the Santos youth programme which was then under the guidance of the legendary Pelé, and signed his first professional contract with the club in 2002 at the age of just 17. By 2004, Robinho was already beginning to court European attention, but things turned sour when his mother was kidnapped and held to ransom for 40 days. Robinho eventually paid the \$86,000 ransom after the kidnappers sent him a video in which they threatened to kill his mother.

In 2005, he headed to Real Madrid, with the Spanish giants agreeing to pay a fee equal to 60 per cent of the buyout clause in his Santos contract, which was 24 million euros. In his first season he made 37 appearances for Real Madrid, bagging eight goals. Robinho's international career began in 2003, in a match that saw Brazil lose 1-0 to Mexico. He played as a reserve in four of Brazil's five 2006 World Cup matches, failing to score, but was in top form for at the Copa America 2007 a year later. For the tournament he wore the same shirt number as his childhood hero Romario, 11, and ended up the Golden Boot winner with six goals.





New chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak is introduced to the City faithful by outgoing owner Thaksin Shinawatra.

more in tune with the club's way of thinking. In the letter he acknowledged the ambition of the club, but said he appreciated that a long-term investment was needed. "We understand it takes time to build a team capable of sustaining a presence in the top four of the Premier League and winning European honours," it said.

Perhaps more importantly, and a relief to supporters, Sheikh Mansour threw his support behind current manager Mark Hughes, a man highly respected for his achievements on the field and considered to be one of the best young coaches in the country. "We will back his judgement in what player to bring in," he said in the letter. "We are building a structure for the future not just a team of all-stars."

This statement quickly nullified any fears that this would be a takeover like Roman Abramovich's at Chelsea that saw the Russian billionaire often dictate the club's signings (case in point: an underachieving Shevchenko). In declaring their support for Mark Hughes, who is known to encourage young talents, the new owners also quashed any worries about the future of City's youth training academy, considered to be the best in the country. The current first team bares testament to an extremely successful programme, with several names – including Micah Richards, Steven Ireland and English

national team member Shaun Wright-Phillips – having risen through the ranks. Again, it's difficult not to make comparisons with Chelsea, where homegrown talent was quickly sidelined to make way for international superstars once Abramovich arrived.

'I don't want my kids to grow up thinking we're never going to win anything'

While Chelsea fans might have difficulty arguing against the claim that they have simply bought success, it's clear that they're not overly displeased about their team's rise up the Premiership. But would Manchester City supporters, fans who have doggedly followed their side through more dark days than most, have any issues should honours suddenly fall their way with thanks to foreign funds? Kevin Parker, secretary of the official supporters' club and a man who almost proudly admits to having attended each and every one of 'Manchester City's Top 10 Most Embarrassing Defeats' as listed by the UK's Daily Mirror

newspaper, quickly assures me that they won't begrudge anything.

"We've been in the doldrums for too long. I've had a season ticket for 33 years now and I'm desperate for a little bit of success. I don't want my kids to grow up thinking we're never going to win anything."

Chelsea may have bought their success, but then so have perhaps Arsenal and Manchester United, either through shrewd business dealings or having the sort of income befitting of the world's most popular club. The general feeling for Manchester City supporters is 'we've waited long enough, it's our time now.'

Dave Wallace echoes the view, adding that the situation before the announcement, when Thaksin Shinawatra had to sell the club, was extremely worrying for fans. "The story was that the whole team was being put up for sale, we'd borrowed \$60 million on next years' TV money and were in a very vulnerable situation. When news came in of the Abu Dhabi takeover, everyone was delighted."

Thaksin's reign at Manchester City may have seen some dramatic improvements for the club (he helped bring in Sven-Göran Eriksson as manager in 2007 and finance the signing of several top-name players in the likes of Brazilians Elano and Jô), but it sometimes didn't feel totally acceptable to fans. When Amnesty International is questioning the human rights record of your owner, even the joy of signing a promising South American striker must seem a little tarnished. Dave admits that attendances fell during this time. "But this time it's been an overwhelmingly positive thing," he says of the new owners.

The first game following the Abu Dhabi announcement added further proof, with many fans showing their support for the new owners by donning makeshift Arab headdresses. Apparently sales of tea-towels across the city had risen by 400 per cent overnight. Interestingly, the game was against Chelsea and with almost his first touch Robinho scored a sublime freekick against the club that were so sure they had signed him they'd already begun selling shirts with his name on the back. Sadly for City, the initial magic was soon quashed by an in-form Chelsea side who came back to win 2-1.

DU BUY OR NOT

The Abu Dhabi takeover didn't just send ripples across the English Premiership, but seemed to have an instant impact over in Dubai. Having unsuccessfully chased Liverpool FC for well over a year, it seemed the emirate, via Zabeel Investments, was going to take control of Championship side Charlton Athletic. A \$35million offer was said to be on the cards. However, there were also

rumours linking Zabeel with Premiership side West Ham United whose Icelandic owner is eager to sell. But at the time of going to press, the news from the UK was that the investment company was now targeting Everton. Who knows who Dubai and Zabeel will be linked with by the time you read this, but it seems they've certainly upped the ante in their quest to join the English Football League.



Words ALEX RITMAN Pictures GALLO/GETTY

But one question remains: why Manchester City? Surely purchasing a team who haven't seen success for three decades isn't the most prestigious of acquisitions for an emirate that boasts a sizeable stake in Ferrari amongst many other investments. With Abu Dhabi's seemingly limitless pockets it could have easily paid far beyond any asking price for the likes of Manchester United or Liverpool.

"I do think that the powers that be in Abu Dhabi think it's the best way to get into a mainstream football club in the English football league. And City really was the only one that was up for grabs," says Donal Kilalea, CEO of the Dubai-based marketing agency Promoseven Sports. It was widely acknowledged that City's previous owner Thaksin Shinawatra was eager to sell (he was due back in Thailand to answer claims of corruption). This purchase was a quick-fire way of snapping up a Premiership club without having to go through the tedious and unsuccessful process Dubai has faced in its hunt for Liverpool.

"I believe that [ADUG] realised that if they went for a football team and succeeded they would get extremely high PR," says Donal. The initial shock purchase alone, along with the swoop for Robinho, has created the sort of front-page publicity that otherwise would have cost Abu Dhabi millions. Also, were Abu Dhabi to take Manchester City to the same level as Manchester United, Chelsea and Arsenal, the rewards would probably be greater than simply buying a club already experiencing

'It's nice to know that every gallon of petrol a United fans buys is going into our kitty'

that level of success. Were City to win the Premiership in the next few years, Manchester would probably declare itself part of Abu Dhabi as a thank you.

Much like the way Abu Dhabi has taken its name to the World Rally Championships via sponsorship of the BP Ford team, Donal believes that behind the deal is a simple desire to promote the emirate. "It's one of the ways that the Middle East works. The members of the royal family all work together to help promote their country. That's probably one of the reasons why Abu Dhabi and Dubai have been successful."

With Abu Dhabi eager to push tourism across the region, the setting up of a Manchester City training facility in the emirate, as has been suggested, could well see a flux of new visitors. "One thing's for sure," says Kevin. "If City go to play in Abu Dhabi, there'll be City fans going there too." With a Manchester United academy already established in Dubai, the bitter rivalry could



The City of Manchester Stadium, poetically dubbed 'the council house' by United fans

soon be extended to the Middle East. The UK's Football Association are currently considering the inclusion of a Winter break in the Premiership season, a move that could see teams like United and City heading over to the UAE. At least this way, City fans would have an opportunity to purchase more authentic headgear rather than raid homework stores.

ADUG's initial intentions may have been to break into the Premiership and promote the Abu Dhabi name, but there have been widely circulated rumours that there are plans to create a City brand of its own to take globally. Shortly after the initial deal was announced, reports came out suggesting a brand was going to be created much like Richard Branson's 'Virgin' that would incorporate energy drinks, cars, phone cards, clothing and food outlets, to name just a few. Whether this was just hype said with similar gusto to Al-Fahim's early statements is as yet unclear.

But one thing that City fans could see soon is the change of their kit. This wouldn't be a move away from their beloved sky blue (which Dave from *King of the Kippax* claims is "a wonderful colour"), but the sponsorship. Manchester City's current shirt sponsor is UK-based travel company Thomas Cook, but Kevin suggests that there are plans to scrap this completely. "They want Man City to be the brand."

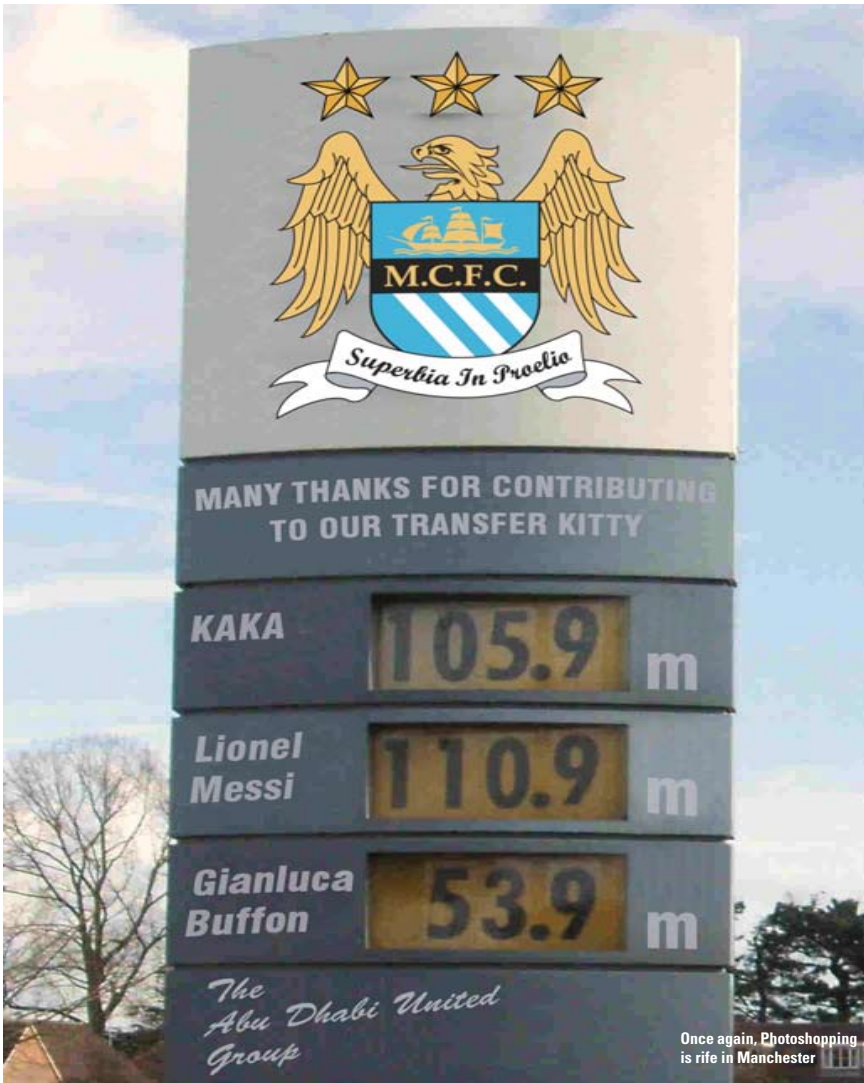
Such a decision would make obvious sense for a club where money is no longer a concern. Having spent millions buying the team and investing in its success, the Abu Dhabi investors are unlikely to want the first brand seen on TV or in print to be that of a relatively small-time travel agency. With the money Abu Dhabi has available, it needn't rely on any income from a sponsor. Leaving the shirt free of advertising would always please the fans as well.

For perhaps the first time in the Premiership, it does seem like the takeover could be almost entirely beneficial for the club. When ginger-bearded US businessman Malcolm Glazer bought Manchester United, he took them straight into debt in doing so. Fans protested in force outside Old Trafford and were infuriated enough to create their own non-league side, FC United, in response.

When Roman Abramovich took over at Chelsea, ticket prices went up and the flurry of international signings created a squad that could barely call itself English. The current international banking turmoil has seen around \$20 billion shaved off Abramovich's stock, something that could certainly affect any future spending plans Chelsea may have. But with Abu Dhabi's vast financial resources and a desire to promote the emirate rather than make a quick profit, it's unlikely ADUG would

HELLO! US TOO!

Abu Dhabi's Manchester purchase seemingly pricked the ears of several football club owners. One of the first to hold their arms aloft and call for Gulf funds was a club just down the road from City, Championship team Burnley, whose chairman Brendan Flood openly invited any Middle Eastern investor to take a look at the side, suggesting \$80 million might be a nice sum to help renovate the club's 126-year-old stadium. As if to throw an extra incentive to the Middle East, Flood said he would happily take players from the Gulf on loan. As yet, there have been no reports that anyone has taken up his offer.



do anything to upset City's loyal supporters or create a negative image. If Sheikh Mansour keeps to the promises he laid out so eloquently in his letter to the Manchester City fans, they should have little to complain about aside from anything that might go awry on the pitch itself. Which, to be honest, they probably expect anyway despite the new investment.

But, despite any of the usual pessimism, on Sunday 21st September something quite remarkable happened at the City of Manchester Stadium. Shortly after a clearly relieved Thaksin Sinawatra introduced Khaldoon Al Mubarak, the CEO of Abu Dhabi investment vehicle Mubadala, as the new chairman to over 40,000 City fans, and just a day before due diligence would be signed on the Abu Dhabi deal, the team went on to thrash visitors Portsmouth 6-0. With six separate goalscorers (including Robinho) and one of the team's finest performances in an age, it was a clear message that the team was already top class; any further inclusions come January would be mere icings on the cake.

And, remarkably for mid-September in the North of England, this spectacle was played

'If City go to play in Abu Dhabi, there'll be City fans going there too'

under a blisteringly hot sun seemingly sent as a welcome gift from the new Arab owners.

It was a day that will live long in most fans' minds. Suddenly, despite years of generally accepting that things would always go pear-shaped, the future looked extremely rosy at Manchester City. Everything seemed like it was about to take a dramatic turn for the better.

Three days later and a little over 24 hours after the deal was signed, the brand new 'richest club in the world' lost on penalties in the League Cup to Brighton, an impoverished side languishing two divisions below them. As Kevin poetically puts it, "this is Man City after all." ★

WANT TO BUY A PREMIER LEAGUE CLUB?

WEST HAM UNITED

Owner: Björgolfur Guðmundsson (Iceland)

Latest: With the current international financial crisis pretty much bankrupting Iceland, the chairman and owner has lost over \$400 million and is said to be desperately looking for a buyer. Indian billionaire Anil Ambani was apparently poised to make a bid of around \$160 million, but is now said to be waiting until the new year in order to get a better deal.



NEWCASTLE

Owner: Mike Ashley (UK)

Latest: Ashley is extremely keen to offload his perpetual underperformers, and has even visited Dubai in the search for a potential Middle East buyer and lowered his initial price of \$700 million to around \$540 million. While the team may be loitering around the bottom of the Premiership, Ashley is offering any new owner a debt-free club.



EVERTON

Owner: Bill Kenwright (UK)

Latest: Kenwright has indicated his eagerness to sell Liverpool's second team by bringing in Keith Harris, who is also working for Ashley at Newcastle, to find a buyer. The club overspent by \$20 million last year, forcing the board to guarantee debts on a 12-month trading deficit of up to \$17 million.



PORTSMOUTH

Owner: Alexandre Gaydamak (Russia)

Latest: Portsmouth have denied they are seeking a buyer but have admitted they would consider offers. Reports suggest owner Alexandre Gaydamak would accept something in the region of \$70 million for the club, but debts and committed costs for players such as Peter Crouch and Jermain Defoe would push the package past \$170 million.

