

STORY by Gary Bowerman

# fabio capello

## the man who knew too much

“Like a Hitchcock film,” is how Fabio Capello describes the 2006/07 football season in Spain’s La Liga. He is not being melodramatic. “It was incredibly stressful,” he adds with a slight squint and gently exaggerated laugh that betrays everything about a very testing professional year.

Having left Italian club Juventus in the summer of 2006, following the match-fixing scandal that rocked Italian football, Capello returned to the Spanish capital for a second stint as manager of Real Madrid. The task facing him was immense. The Madrid club was, in Capello’s words, experiencing “a difficult time,” having finally shelved its disastrous galactico era of contracting superstar players on astronomical salaries, a strategy that proved to be no more than an overblown experiment in egotism – and failure. Of the galactico players, only Beckham, Roberto Carlos, Raul and Ronaldo remained, though the latter would soon be sold to Milan. Capello turned to trusted players, bringing in Juve’s Italian World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro and midfielder Emerson, as well as striker Ruud Van Nistelrooy from Manchester United.

Expectations were not high. Real remained mired in its own self-importance and the fans craved a return to trophy-winning normality after three seasons without silverware. Against the odds, Capello delivered. Just as during his previous tenure in 1996/97, he guided the team to the Spanish league title – and released the domestic stranglehold of Real’s arch-enemy, Barcelona.

One week after the season’s dramatic climax, Capello visited Shanghai, combining a holiday in China with his wife and two sons with some promotional support for Xiamen-based Italian boatmaker, Aquitalia, owned by a personal friend. It was an edgy couple of days. He arrived to a media melee at Pudong airport, and later during a boat trip on the Huangpu River was angered by persistent questioning about David Beckham. After being asked one question too many: “Who is more fashionable, you or Beckham?” he snapped and cancelled subsequent media appointments. Later that evening at the Velvet Lounge, he looked tired and irritated.

The next evening he attended a gala dinner at the Jinjiang Hotel, but again appeared uneasy as two gigantic screens replayed one of his television interviews throughout the meal. Friends say he only relaxed for the first time afterwards at one of the Bund’s terrace lounges, where his party danced and drank until the early hours.

Capello’s visit to China followed not only the post-season celebrations, but also a visit to Israel to play a friendly match against a mixed team of Israeli and Palestinian players. And wherever he’s appeared he’s been dogged by unrelenting speculation about his professional future. Indeed, rumor became fact 24 hours after our interview – Capello was fired while still on holiday. This decision, which many believe was privately made weeks if not months before, was seized upon in the Spanish media. *El Pais* summed it up succinctly: “The fight between egos at Real Madrid knows no end.”

Clearly, the hectic schedule, and concern for his job, was taking its toll. “I don’t normally like to talk about football during my holidays,” he says. “But football is my work, and I do know that there is incredible interest here for Spanish and European football, and people always like to talk about the game.”

Local interest in his visit was inflated by a movie screenplay of a Spanish season, characterized by high footballing drama and messy off-field tantrums, tensions and intrigue. Many games were decided by late goals and unexpected comebacks. Real, in particular, hauled itself out of several sticky situations, and after 38 games finished on equal points with second-placed Barcelona, winning the league title due to having a better head-to-head record in games between the two teams.

While all these events might be enough for several Hitchcock films, another of the master’s themes became apparent during the course of the season, that of an innocent man slighted. As we sat in the garden of a lane house in Kangping Lu, Capello looked tanned, relaxed and smiling. Speaking flawless, Madrid-accented Spanish, he looks much younger than his 61 years, but he is clearly wearing the emotional scars of the last 12 months. “I arrived at the end of the season without a single drop of blood left,” he says. “It was an incredible season, decided on the final game in our own stadium. But there were many problems, particularly in the beginning. Fifty per cent of the season was very difficult.”

Capello is referring to the sustained criticism he received from Real’s fans and the media, particularly during the dark days of February and March, when Real trailed Barca in La Liga, and was knocked out of the European Champions League by Germany’s Bayern Munich. For several days, it seemed he was only moments away from being sacked. Newspapers were alive with speculation about who would succeed him: the names of Schuster, Mourinho, Benitez and Wenger were all mentioned in dispatches.

Earlier, in January, Capello had famously enraged Real fans by axing their poster boy, David Beckham, following his announcement that he would be leaving the Bernabeu stadium at the end of his contract to join LA Galaxy. The timing of Beckham’s statement angered Capello – an avowed purveyor of footballing collectivism rather than individual dandyism – and he felt Beckham would not be sufficiently focused to help Madrid recapture its fading glory. To his credit, Capello subsequently yielded to fan pressure and restored Beckham to the starting line up, and – following some stellar performances by the cool blond playmaker – the coach publicly admitted to an error of judgment.

That decision probably saved Capello’s job, and helped spark an on-field renaissance culminating in Real’s 30th league title on June 17th, the day before his 61st birthday. “In the end we won a league that was lost with three months to go, and one million people came to Plaza de Cibeles [in central Madrid] to celebrate,” he says. “And because we overcame Barca, I became the number one friend of the fans.”

If there is a slight bitterness in his tone, it is not channeled directly at the people of Madrid – he adores the city, its culture



Daniele Mattioli

and lifestyle. Rather, it is a battle-hardened response to the ferocious condemnation he received during those long winter days, which he feels was both unmerited and presumptuous. Adding insult to injury was a perceived lack of support from Real club president Ramon Calderon.

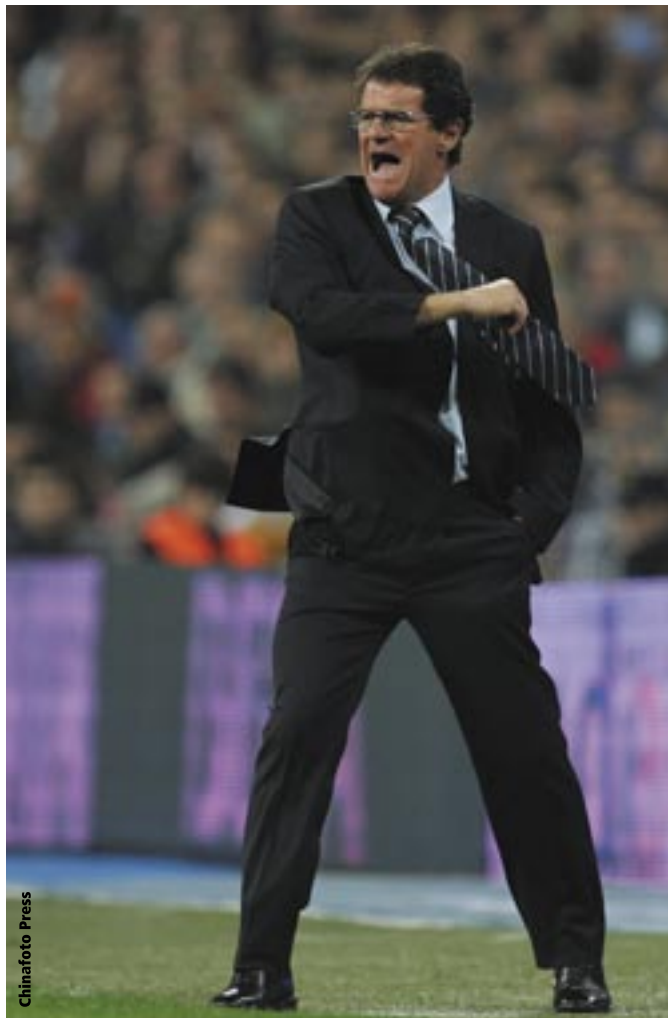
Because of their curious job descriptions – charged with winning trophies, abiding by the financial imperatives of club presidents and shareholders and fulfilling the dreams of fans across the world – most top football coaches are difficult men to deal with. Capello is no exception: a strict disciplinarian, he has a reputation for being irascible, aloof and impatient. He is uncomfortable in the media spotlight and discouraging of those seeking to give him advice. Players who do not yield to his abrasive methodology and clearly defined group-think tactics are often cast aside: Ronaldo, Francesco Totti, Alessandro del Piero and David Beckham are just four football superstars to have felt his wrath. As one Italian fan surmised: "With Capello there is only one way: it's my way or the highway."

It's an approach that garners respect, if not unyielding admiration. Capello's carefully structured style of play often proved indigestible to Real fans, who have feasted for decades on a diet of crowd-pleasing flamboyance from players such as Puskas, Di Stefano, Gento, Butragueño, Hugo Sanchez, Figo, Zidane and Ronaldo.

History books, unlike football fans, are objective rather than subjective, however, and Capello's track record is impeccable. As a player, at 18 he made his professional debut with Spal, moving on to Roma before winning the Italian league with both Juventus and Milan. A tough, uncompromising midfielder, he played 32 times for Italy, scoring the goal that brought a first victory over England at Wembley in 1973. "It was a historic goal, and is a nice memory," he says, "because it was scored at the old Wembley, which has a tremendous history and is considered to be the Temple of Football."

As a coach, Capello has won seven Serie A titles with Milan, Roma and Juventus (though the latter two were annulled in 2006 following the club's implication in Italy's match-fixing scandal), Spain's La Liga twice with Real Madrid, and the European Champions League with Milan. Winning league titles in two of Europe's premier football leagues places Capello's name at the top of many leading clubs' wish list. One rumor suggests he might manage the English national side. He is so frequently asked about whether he will coach Italy that his reply is simply to smile and shrug.

Ten years spanned his two successes with Real Madrid, during which he worked exclusively in Italy. So, how do the two football cultures compare? "They are very, very different," he says. "The mentality of the fans, the approach of the players, the footballing systems, they are all different, as are the styles of club presidents." The pressures on the coach are unrelenting in both countries, however. "In Spain, they talk much more about football than in Italy, especially on the TV and in the newspapers. The supporters



Chinafoto Press

listen to the radio all the time, so the power of the media is very important. In Italy, it's much less."

Having played with and coached the world's greatest players, he singles out five current stars as the most pleasurable to watch. "The most spectacular players for me are the two from Barca: Ronaldinho and Messi," he says, adding the names of Cristiano Ronaldo, Kaka and Zlatan Ibrahimovic to the list. "These are players that can do something different."

I am about to respond that he has not mentioned a Real Madrid player, when he pre-emptively says, "There are also very effective players, like Van Nistelrooy, of course. Without goals you cannot win matches."

How very true. Van Nistelrooy's 25 goals last season – a large proportion of which were scored away from home – made him La Liga's top scorer, and he was directly responsible for more of his team's points than any other player in La Liga.

Media problems aside, Capello says he enjoys being in China – this is his third trip, having first visited 12 years previously as coach of Milan. "I've been to Beijing, Shanghai,

“ El Pais summed it up succinctly: “The fight between egos at Real Madrid knows no end.” ”

Chengdu and Shenyang," he says. "But this trip we will also visit Xi'an and Tibet, which is a dream for us, especially for my wife."

Laura Capello has been an avid supporter of her husband's career and regularly attends home matches, as well as away games in the European Champions League. Traveling together with their children is, Capello says, an annual way of recharging his energies and escaping from the 24/7 circus world of professional football. "For me, it's the most important thing in life, for the family to be together and experience new places and cultures," he says. "We've traveled all over the world, and really enjoy seeing archaeological sites and places of historic interest. That's why we are so excited about the rest of this trip." ■