

Straits Times Sports - 2007

Mind your language, Capello

By Neil Humphreys

The persistent parochialism of English football reached its delightful nadir this week. On the eve of this morning's friendly between England and Switzerland, the English players were asked to comment on their first training sessions with the Fab man. They were star-struck.

Fabio Capello has won the domestic title with every he has managed – AC Milan, Real Madrid, Roma and Juventus – and picked up the Champions League. But, most impressively of all, he conducted a basic training session in English.

The refined Italian already speaks, reads and writes Italian and Spanish fluently, but the fact that he can now shout phrases like “keep the shape”, “come on” and “bloody hell, ref”, which is pretty much all an England manager needs, was too much for Rio Ferdinand.

Ferdinand, who is qualified to discuss his manager's proficiency in his new tongue because he knows at least 17 more English words than Capello, just could not contain his astonishment.

After the first training session, the Manchester United man practically wet himself. “His English has been surprisingly good,” said an open-mouthed Ferdinand. “He gets his point across well.”

If that is the case, then Capello might well be a step ahead of Ferdinand already, who is the first to admit that he is not the most accomplished after-match public speaker. But if you're in the market for an after-match public event, Ferdinand's your man.

Although he certainly didn't mean to be, Ferdinand's comments almost had a patronising whiff of post-colonialism about them, not unlike the comments many Singaporeans endure when they travel to the west: “You're Asian and you speak English! And you were not born in England, Australia or the United States?! You're Singaporean? Good god, man, does your government know about this?”

New skipper Steven Gerrard was equally taken aback by his manager's linguistic prowess on the training ground.

“I was quite surprised by how good his English was,” the midfielder insisted to the equally stunned English media.

The irony is not lost on anyone.
Gerrard is a Scouser.

The man struggles to be understood outside of Liverpool. He has the makings of a fine England skipper, but he's hardly a Berlitz guide to his mother tongue.

One can almost hear the banter in the England dressing room.

"Ere, 'ave ya erd, like, the new gaffer's English not bad eh? But he don't speak proper English like what we do, eh?"

"Nah, skip, but give it time. Here, do you want tickets for this nightclub I've booked?"

The British media have made a big deal of Capello's English deficiencies.

In the land of bilingualism – English and Loud English – one can almost discern the sniping; the very notion that Johnny Foreigner, even if he does wear designer glasses and understands opera, can learn English in a month is preposterous.

Capello might have picked up Spanish quickly when he moved to Madrid in 1996, but this is English, mate, not one of those funny, foreign languages.

Even one or two English managers, Kevin Keegan in particular, indicated that the language barrier was a concern.

Keegan has a point.

Capello collected a major league championship in seven of his 16 seasons as a coach, but his English is rather patchy. Whereas McClaren, Keegan and Glenn Hoddle won only a League Cup between them in club management, but they do speak English really, really well.

British journalists gathered for the press conferences this week, ready to act as teacher and set the cocky foreign student an English test to fail and Capello spoke to them only in Italian so they couldn't twist his words.

Pure genius.

To overseas followers of the English game, there is a suspicion that Capello will be more easily understood than most native EPL managers in the years to come.

After Derby snatched a draw at Birmingham at the weekend, Paul Jewell discussed the value of earning a point on the road.

The viewer needed subtitles and an A-level in Scouse to understand the Derby boss.

In a thick, barely penetrable, accent, Jewell said: "I've got more points on my driving licence than Derby at the moment."

It was a great line. But Derby supporters (and there must be some left somewhere) can only be thinking, a) why did this man take the job? And b) what the hell does he do behind a steering wheel?

Jewell was actually linked to the England job when Sven-Goran Eriksson stepped down in 2006.

He said he was interested in the post, but the FA insisted they wanted an English-speaking manager.