

JUAN SEBASTIAN VERON: Premiership Player of the Week

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There were clear signs at Old Trafford last week that Manchester United have recruited a player who can inspire them to the Premiership-Champions League double they so covet in Sir Alex Ferguson's final season.

Juan Sebastian Veron produced a masterful performance in a 4-1 thrashing of Everton. It oozed class, including vision, dazzling footwork, accurate passing and high energy – plus a well-worked move with Roy Keane that culminated in Veron's first Premiership goal. His display underlined why Ferguson paid Lazio £28 million for the Argentinian in July. The fee made Veron the most expensive player in British football history, but will be considered a bargain if Ferguson's dream of seeing United re-crowned as Europe's champion club is realised next May in his native Glasgow.

Veron has been described as the one truly world-class player to have graced the Premiership so far. That judgement is harsh on the likes of Cantona, Vieira, Desailly, Zola, Bergkamp, Keane, Beckham, Owen and Gullitt. But there can be little argument that Veron is currently among the top half-a-dozen players in the world. Probably only Zinedine Zidane is more creatively influential in midfield.

A strong and often controversial character, Veron was born into a footballing family. His father, Juan Ramon Veron, was one of Argentina's top stars in the 1960s. Because of the way he swept down the wings, and his prominent nose, he was nicknamed *la bruja* (the witch). *La bruja* scored the winning goal for Estudiantes de La Plata in the two-legged World Club Championship in 1968 – ironically at Old Trafford against Manchester United.

Juan Sebastian soon showed the playing potential of his father and joined Estudiantes, where Ramon was youth coach, at the age of 14. Inevitably earning the nickname *brujiita* (little witch), he forced his way into the first team at 17, then moved to Boca Juniors, one of Argentina's leading clubs, in the 1990s. Converted from a sweeper to an attacking midfielder, he played alongside the likes of Diego Maradona, Claudio Caniggia and Kili Gonzalez before being lured to Italy by current England manager Sven Goran Eriksson, then in charge of Sampdoria.

Veron became a hero in Genoa before transferring to Parma two years later. After helping Parma win the UEFA Cup and the *Coppa Italia* in his single season there (1998-99), he was re-united with Eriksson at Lazio. *Brujita* helped the Rome club win only their second *Scudetto* (Italian *Serie A* Championship) in 2000. However, he became unsettled by legal wrangles concerning the validity of his Italian passport. A court case cleared him of any wrong-doing, but Italy no longer seemed to suit him. He wanted to move on. The Premiership was his preferred destination; the world's richest club his ideal choice.

Ferguson was only too pleased to oblige, and Veron is now entertaining the British public with his skills. He has the competitive edge that Ferguson demands from his players, combined with great self-assurance. Already he has impressed his multi-talented team-mates with his ability to take a game by the scruff of the neck and dictate the play, as he did against Everton.

Ferguson regards Veron's impact at Old Trafford as similar to that of Eric Cantona, while United's fans have been enchanted by *bruji*'s exquisite ball control and first touch, shooting ability (including from dead ball situations) and willingness to tackle.

He has dovetailed smoothly in central midfield with captain Roy Keane, who believes the addition of Veron, Ruud van Nistelrooy and Laurent Blanc has significantly strengthened the backbone of United's team. The rest of the Premiership and Europe have been warned.

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