

Premiership Headline Makers: DAVID GINOLA

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When John Gregory brought David Ginola and Luc Nilis to Villa Park last Summer, Aston Villa fans could be forgiven for allowing themselves to dream that this season would see them challenging for the top honours. For Nilis, however, the season and his career were wrecked by a horrific leg fracture sustained in September, while transfer requests from Gareth Southgate, Julian Joachim and Ugo Ehiogu did nothing for team morale or stability. And then there was Ginola.

In recent weeks, the flamboyant Frenchman has given Villa a tantalising glimpse of his exotic skills; but in many ways this season has merely reflected Ginola's career as a whole – one of massive but largely unfulfilled potential.

To be fair to the player, he was sidelined for many matches by niggling injuries. Yet it became clear that Gregory was not hugely impressed by his expensive star, even when he was available for selection. Familiar question marks began to be raised about the player's contribution to the team and commitment to the struggle. There were even unflattering comments about his weight.

Ginola probably wondered what he was doing with his life, unable to command a first-team place in one of the Premiership's middle-ranking clubs. But his career has been dogged by similar episodes in which coaches have struggled to accommodate his undeniable talent into their team plans.

Now 34, Ginola made his name in France, first with Toulon and then Racing Paris, Brest and Paris St Germain, where he enjoyed the most successful phase of his career. Under coach Artur Jorge, Ginola flourished and PSG won trophies. He was called up for the French national squad and the future looked good.

Then Gerard Houllier, now the Liverpool manager but at the time the French national coach, famously blamed Ginola for France's failure to qualify for the 1994 World Cup Finals in the USA. Ginola over-hit a centre in *Les Bleus*' final qualifying game, gifting possession to Bulgaria who raced to the other end and scored, claiming a place in the Finals at French expense.

Uncharacteristically, Houllier exploded. David Ginola is the murderer of the team, he raged. He sent an Exocet missile through the heart of French football. David Ginola committed a crime against the team.

The affair effectively destroyed Ginola's international career (he won only one more cap, in 1995), and meant he was excluded from French football's greatest triumph – winning the World Cup on home soil in 1998. This exclusion hurt the player deeply. He is convinced he should have been playing in the team that lifted the trophy, and admits he thinks about missing out on the World Cup every day. 'They stole my dream,' he has said. 'One day I want people to explain to me why.'

Back at club level, meanwhile, Ginola found he could not get on with new PSG coach Luis Fernandez, and he left the Paris club in 1995. He was supposed to join Barcelona, on whom he had set his heart, but the deal collapsed on a technicality. The regulations then restricted clubs to a maximum of three foreigners in the team at any one time. Barca could not sell enough of their existing overseas players and so Ginola was forced instead to look elsewhere. Kevin Keegan was keen to sign him for Newcastle United and Ginola headed to the north-east of England.

He was a huge and instant hit at Newcastle. Keegan's team played exciting, attacking football with a cavalier attitude. Ginola was not expected to work back in defence, and had the freedom to express himself going forward. His dribbling and passing skills left opponents floundering, while his Gallic good looks had much of England's female population swooning.

The inevitable fall-out with the manager occurred when Barcelona came back for the Frenchman and Keegan blocked the move, not wishing to sell his popular winger. Then Kenny Dalglish replaced Keegan at St James Park, and Ginola knew immediately that he did not fit into the new manager's plans. Within six months, Dalglish had sold Ginola to Tottenham Hotspur.

More managerial upheaval awaited him at White Hart Lane. After brief spells under Gerry Francis and Christian Gross, Ginola found himself working for George Graham. It was the start of a turbulent two-year battle of wills and styles which the player could never win.

Adored by the Spurs fans, Ginola could not please his boss. Graham's commitment to the team ethic is legendary; his suspicion of superstars notorious. Although Ginola produced some of the best football of his life at Spurs, helping Tottenham lift the League Cup and winning both the PFA

Player of the Year and Football Writers' Footballer of the Year awards in 1999, Graham remained unconvinced. He substituted the player 36 times in 79 starts and repeatedly demanded more effort, more defensive tackling back and marking. Ginola feels he was unfairly singled out by Graham for criticism. What is certain is that Graham was happy to offload him to Villa for a sizeable fee, despite howls of protest from Tottenham's fans.

Ginola publicly stated that he never wanted to leave Spurs. He expected to finish his career at White Hart Lane and appeared to share the fans' misery when he left. That was perhaps not the best way to start his employment with Villa, but expectations were running high at Villa Park before the season got underway.

Injuries, loss of form and fitness and another manager yet to be convinced mean Ginola's first season in Birmingham has been a largely disappointing one. But his mesmerizing skills have been on show again since Gregory recalled him to the team. He has even chipped in with a couple of goals in recent matches, leaving the fans to wonder what might have been – and to fantasise, perhaps, about next season.

The player himself remains upbeat. He has never doubted his own talent or ability to influence matches single-handedly. He may be misunderstood, but he understands perfectly the joy of playing football. That's all he really wants to do. 'I was once told, Play football for as long as you can, you will never regret it, and I intend to,' he says.