

“
NOT MANY
MANAGERS
HAVE A LOT OF
IMAGINATION
OR WANT TO
TAKE RISKS
—WHY?
”

ERIC CANTONA

‘YOU NEED
FREEDOM’

JOHN SANDERS



With England not at Euro 2008 and rich foreign blokes buying our clubs, we asked the footballer-philosopher Eric Cantona what's wrong (and right) with our game

➔ It's a swelteringly hot Monday in central London, but one man is managing to look effortlessly cool. As a throng of perspiring journalists swarms around him – like seagulls around a trawler, it could perhaps be said – the elegant figure in a dark-blue pinstripe suit perches nonchalantly on the edge of his seat, oozing *sang froid*. The famous Gallic face is hidden under a lightly greying beard, and the collar on his shirt is (disappointingly) down, but that rigid steel pole of a spine and pensive hand-waving make this intensely charismatic figure unmistakable. Nobody holds court quite like Eric Cantona.

The French footballer turned actor, who set the Premier League alight with his unique mix of magic and mischief, poetry and passion during his firework-filled years at Manchester United in the 1990s, is at the chic, split-level AKA bar, close to Tottenham Court Road. Downstairs, a crowd are ogling the Euro 2008 clash between Holland and Italy. Upstairs, Cantona is being interviewed to promote a new sports betting website (partouche-betting.com), for which he is, handily, a shareholder.

When the press pack has dispersed, Monsieur Cantona unexpectedly chows down a pizza and pops out for a quick fag before it's time for his exclusive chat with *Sport*. “Yes, Sprrrrt,” he nods, aware of our sister mag in Paris. From England's dreary

absence from Euro 2008 to rich foreign owners, the potential departure of Cristiano Ronaldo and that dreaded 39th game, what does Monsieur Cantona think of the state of English football and the league that was once his theatre?

Eric, it's Euro 2008 and England aren't there. Are you sad?

“Yes, it is a big shame. I was very sad and disappointed. For me... [long pause] I feel more English than French when I am watching football. It is a shame because in the last World Cup England lost in the quarter-finals, and they had a great team.”

What's wrong with English football? Why aren't we there?

“Some people say that too many foreign players play in England. I think a club such as Arsenal could work more on young English players. I am surprised because Arsène Wenger worked a lot when he was in France with young players. He does here, but with players aged 18 and 19 from other countries, but not so much from England. Some people say, ‘Yes, but in the '70s and '80s we didn't have many foreign players and we won nothing,’ but you want to give yourself the best possible chance of winning...”

As if to rub it in, an exciting Holland team brimming with technically gifted young

footballers score their second goal against Italy and the crowd downstairs goes crazy. Cantona holds up two fingers to his friend, who nods ‘2-0, Holland’. Cantona raises his eyebrows with surprise, then continues...

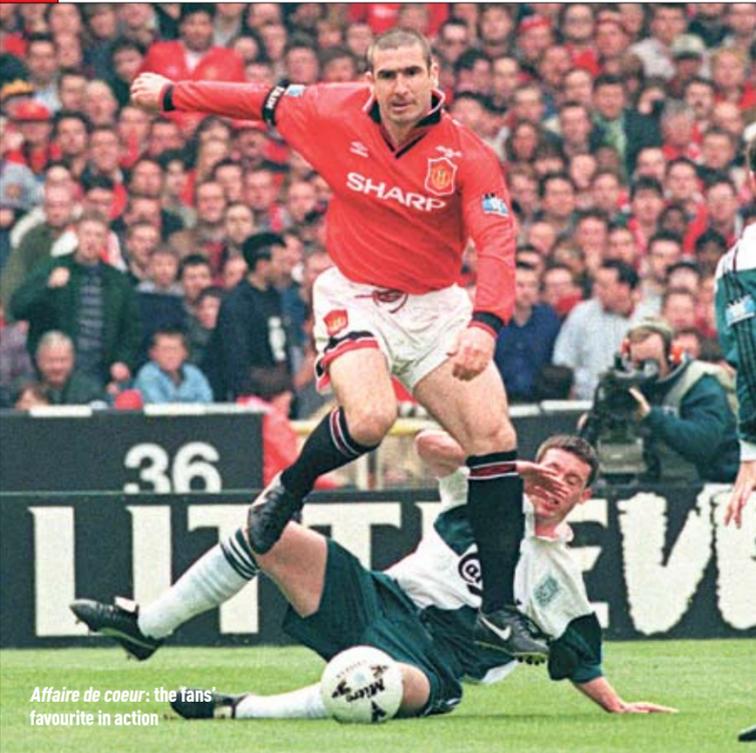
“You need to develop young English players. The big clubs should attract the best young players and mix them with the best foreign players. Like at United. This year United won the double with five foreign players and seven English players. It is very important. And it is an example to all the other clubs.”

You were one of the first foreign players in the Premier League. Could you have imagined back then that the league would one day be full of foreign players?

“In my time? [Long pause] No. But it can be good. Like foreign managers, they bring new formations, new visions, different views. It is good to be open on the world. In my view, foreign players bring good things. But you should find the right balance for success.”

Fabio Capello has said that the England shirt weighs heavily on players' shoulders. But one thing that characterised you as a player was your freedom to express yourself. Why can't our boys do that?

“I don't think that is for all English players, but you cannot just look at the players. You have to look at the managers to understand why some players don't express themselves. Not many managers have a lot of imagination, want to take risks, or give their players the freedom to express themselves. Why? You need freedom. But to have that freedom, you need to deserve it, to earn it. And you deserve it when your teams wins.” ➔



Affaire de coeur: the fans' favourite in action



From seagulls to pigeons: our hero in reflective mood



Cantona became a regular on the beach soccer scene

WHAT CANTONA DID NEXT

Manchester United's philosophical footballer Eric Cantona retired in 1997, aged just 30. He's since become a psychopathic boxer, fat detective and King of England. Let us explain...

- 1997**
Embarked on a new career in acting by playing a bullying boxing promoter in his first major film in France, called *Question d'honneur*.
- 1998**

Sported dodgy facial hair as the French ambassador in the Oscar-winning Cate Blanchett-led flick *Elizabeth*. In the same year, he played a boxer who befriends a talking chimpanzee and a monk in *Mookie*.
- 2004**
Fronted a television advert for Irish Euromillions.
- 2005**
Having become a regular on the beach soccer scene, Cantona managed France to victory in the first FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Brazil.
- 2007**

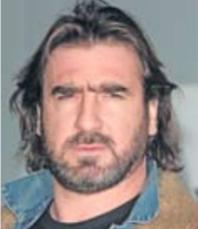
Appeared as a bartender called Alban in *Le Deuxième souffle*, alongside Monica Bellucci.
- 2008**
Plays the tub-thumping King of England in a £2.5m advertising campaign for new sports betting website partouche-betting.com
- 2002**

Directed his first short film, *Apporte-moi Ton Amour*. That year, he was spotted twirling his cane to the tune of *A Little Less Conversation* in the Nike cage football ad, featuring Thierry Henry, Ronaldo and Luis Figo.
- 2003**
Earned critical acclaim after putting on two stone to play the obese detective Richard Selena in *L'Outremangeur*.



Eric Cantona stars in a new TV advert for sports betting website www.partouche-betting.com

FAST FACTS



ERIC DANIEL PIERRE CANTONA
Born May 24 1966
Birthplace Marseilles, France
Height 6ft 2ins
Weight Tends to fluctuate...
Man Utd appearances 191
Man Utd goals 88
Man Utd debut Dec 1 1992 v Benfica (Eusebio testimonial)
France debut August 12 1987 v West Germany
Previous clubs Auxerre, Martigues, Marseille, Bordeaux, Nimes, Leeds
France apps/goals 45/20

So you think managers have to help players to express themselves more?

"Managers have to find ways to give their players freedom to express themselves. How? He must find a way. But most of the managers don't try to play the kind of football that allows the freedom for one or two players to create, to express themselves with total freedom, [cue furious gesticulation] to create, to entertain. That is because the managers themselves need to have a lot of freedom of imagination too [points to his head]. It is difficult to find a manager who can create freedom for his team, like it is difficult to find a great artist."

Would you have enjoyed playing in the Premier League today?

"Yeah, yeah, a lot. It is the best and most exciting league in the world. Especially when you live in France. The league in France is so bad and boring it's unbelievable! I spoke with my friend two weeks ago, and I said it is better to have a season ticket in England even if you go to five games a year than to have a season ticket in France and watch all the games. The best players play in England, Spain, Italy or Germany. And also the managers try to win in a dull way and don't enjoy the game. Boring, boring, boring..."

You were always an entertainer. Is it important that football remains a sport of entertainment? More Man United and Arsenal than Chelsea...

"It's nice to play like this, yes, but it is nice to have different ways of playing football. Like in tennis, when you had a game between Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe, it was a

wonderful game. One played offensively, the other was defensive. But it was a great game, just like when United play against Chelsea it can be a great game. But today, unfortunately, you find more teams like Chelsea than United. But not so much in England. That is why it is still the most exciting championship in the world."

UEFA president Michel Platini has called clubs such as Man United and Chelsea "cheats" because they appear rich but are in huge amounts of debt. What do you think of rich foreigners buying English clubs?

"I don't think the problem is just that England has the richest clubs. Because when the richest clubs were Italian, he never said that. You know, when all the money was in Italy, he never said that. It was the same for Spanish clubs when Real Madrid bought several players. Now the richest clubs in the world are in England. So why?"

"No. I think what he means is more the way you use the money. To find that balance, like we talked about earlier: to work on the young English players and use that money to invest in them. Arsenal should spend a bit more money on young British players instead of foreign players, to breed the best team and also to help England, the national team. That is very important."

What do you make of plans to host a 39th Premier League game abroad?

"Why? What are the reasons? To have more fans around the world? Maybe it is a good idea, but it is not the best idea [shakes his head]. I think it is better to stay here in England. Maybe you need to have this

competition when you are... no [shakes his head more] no, it doesn't respect anybody. I don't think this is a good idea. If it's about money, I would say no. Because the fans – and I am a fan – enjoy this every day. Football is their game. The fans will complain that they cannot go to this game. They need to watch all their games. Especially for reasons of money, no... it is not right."

What do you think of English football fans?

"[Long pause] I think English fans are the best fans. Really, I really mean that [touches his chest]. Because they are behind their team and they try to help them. In Italy and Spain, they are whistling – you know, whistling? [puts his fingers to his mouth] – and booing. They are not real fans. The best fans of football are here in England. That is why

I WILL MANAGE WITH MY OWN STYLE AND A PHILOSOPHY THAT HAS NEVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE

many players love their club. We give a lot to the fans and they give us a lot back. I remember that always. Here in England, as players, we consider ourselves as one of the fans. But not more than one of the fans. We are the same."

Do you still follow Manchester United?

"Yes. Always."

Do you watch Premier League games?

"I don't watch many games but when United play I try to watch the game and I follow all the results."

The fans still sing your name at Old Trafford, 11 years after you retired...

"I remember them. [Smiles] When I hear this... I feel like... I am on the pitch. Many years ago. I am standing there and I can hear them. I hope it will be like this for many, many years. Because I like it."

How have you felt watching Cristiano Ronaldo perform for Manchester United in your old No.7 shirt?

"He is the best player in the world – an artist. He is the best player in the world at one of the best clubs in the world. The way United play is perfect for him and the way he plays is perfect for United. It is a perfect situation."

So what do you think of him suggesting he wants a move to Real Madrid?

"[Shrugs his shoulders and looks away] I do not know his personality. I do not know why he wants to do this. [Long pause] It can be good reasons. If he says that he needs a new challenge... maybe, yes, he is young. But if he

goes for not that reason – for other reasons – then I think he is wrong."

Would you have ever handed in a transfer request at Man United?

"Me? I couldn't [shakes his head]. Never. I could never play for another club. But I am a different personality. I was 30 years old when I decided to retire. And Ryan Giggs, he has been there for 16 years. He is still motivated for Man United after 16 years and he is one of the greatest players and a great man."

Would you like to come back and be a manager one day, Eric?

"One of the reasons I retired was that I lost my passion. I was young, I had a lot of things to learn and do. Now I have started to enjoy these things. Acting. Directing. I will go as far as possible with this. When I feel I cannot go further I will do something else. And I think, then, when it is right... I will be a manager. And I will be a manager in my own way. To return to Manchester United would be an honour. A pleasure. But I must do it in my own style. I will create my own new kind of football – a style, a philosophy of football that has never been seen before. Like an artist."

So the Premier League might see Eric Cantona once more?

"[Raises his arms aloft with thespian extravagance and leans forward smiling] I would love to offer you my vision of football. It is a beautiful vision." 

MARK BAILEY

JOHN SANDERS; GERRY PENNY/AP/GETTY IMAGES; IAN WEST/PA ARCHIVE/PA PHOTOS; CATHAL MCGUINCHY/PA ARCHIVE/PA PHOTOS; VALERY HACHE/AP/GETTY IMAGES; SIPA PRESS/REX FEATURES; MOVIE STORE COLLECTION