

GARY THACKER

OUT

OF THE

BLUE

Chelsea's Unlikely  
Champions League Triumph



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## Mourinho 1.0 to Mourinho 2.0?

*'Of all the European finals I covered –  
Champions League, Cup Winners' Cup,  
UEFA Cup and even Inter-Cities Fairs Cup  
I think the devastation of defeat was more  
poignant in Chelsea's case than any other.'*<sup>2</sup>

John Helm

THE RUN to Moscow had been taken over, midstream, by Avram Grant, when the tenure of José Mourinho had come to an end. As has been the case with many of the clubs managed by the Portuguese, the established pattern whereby early success is inevitably followed by discord, disagreement and dismissal applied at Stamford Bridge. After delivering back-to-back Premier League titles in 2004/05 and 2005/06, plus an FA Cup triumph the following year and two League Cups, by the 2007/08 season the downslope had definitely been reached.

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<sup>2</sup> Helm, John – commentator for ITV television on the 2008 Champions League Final, interview with the author.

That season's Champions League campaign had opened with a dispiriting 1-1 home draw against Norway's Rosenborg. It marked the end of the road. Mourinho left, with the club issuing that most universally inappropriate statement on 20 September 2007, announcing that the departure had been 'by mutual consent'. Rumoured to be a personal friend of Abramovich, Grant had been employed by the club as director of football since 8 July of the same year. Perhaps the owner had seen the writing on the wall with the incumbent coach, and was getting his ducks all lined up for when the inevitable parting of the ways happened. When Grant took over the manager's chair – in a move that was echoed some years later, when Roberto Di Matteo was brought in to work as assistant to André Villas-Boas – the club promoted Steve Clarke, former player and coach under Mourinho, to the position of Grant's assistant. Well known to the players, and respected, it was a shrewd decision that helped lubricate the wheels of change.

Whatever the case of that, Grant was shrewd enough to appreciate that there was precious little wrong with the squad that a little soothing of bruised egos and installing of a confidence that had wilted under the dog days of Mourinho's reign wouldn't solve. Adopting a 'steady as she goes' sort of philosophy, with Clarke very much seen as the training ground leader, Grant's calming hand on the tiller saw Chelsea recover from the stuttering start of their Champions League campaign to reach Moscow where, but for that slip by Terry, the Israeli may well have achieved legendary status at the club, and certainly retained his position.

As it was, the rain that had poured down on the Luzhniki Stadium pitch, slicking up the playing surface and leading to Terry's missed penalty, also washed away Grant's tenure as manager. Whether merely the victim of inclement weather

and ill fortune or not, the Abramovich temptation to change managers was always on a hair-trigger setting.

With Grant gone, Chelsea cast their eyes over to South America, and their gaze alighted on Luiz Felipe Scolari. ‘Big Phil’ as he was widely known had been the scourge of England under Sven-Göran Eriksson, defeating the Three Lions with Brazil in the World Cup of 2002 when his *Selecao*, and Ronaldinho in particular, destroyed the myth of David Seaman having ‘Safe Hands’ during the quarter-final in Shizuoka. Two years later, now coaching Portugal as they hosted the 2004 European Championship, it was another last-eight elimination for England at the hands of Scolari as his team won through in a penalty shoot-out. Then, to round out the trilogy, at the 2006 World Cup another quarter-final, another penalty shoot-out saw Scolari prosper again, and England sent home as their spot kick nemesis struck again in Gelsenkirchen.

In typical Chelsea fashion it was both an ambitious appointment and an adventurous one. Although widely experienced in both South America and the Middle East, Scolari had never previously managed a European club, and there was plenty of controversy about the timing of the appointment’s announcement. The Brazilian was still working with the Portugal team, strongly involved in the European Championship, when Chelsea broke the news. It’s unclear how much disruption it caused in the Portugal ranks, but it can hardly have helped matters.

If the coach’s departure was less than harmonious with his players, there was a not too dissimilar reaction from the squad he joined. The spine of the Chelsea team had several strong characters, not least Terry, but also Lampard, Petr Čech and Didier Drogba. Grant had succeeded – at least in part – by cajoling and encouraging, rather than challenging

and contesting. Scolari wanted to bring in his own way of playing and expected the squad to adapt to it. In this particular club, it was a forlorn pursuit.

A difficult period in the Premier League radically weakened the Brazilian and, on 9 February 2009, following a 2-0 defeat at Liverpool and a dreary goalless draw at home to Hull City that left Chelsea in fourth place, seven points adrift of leaders Manchester United, Abramovich's trigger finger twitched again. Scolari was sacked. He had made a strong start to the campaign, going a dozen games without defeat, and had progressed through the group stages of the Champions League and reached the fifth round of the FA Cup. The club's form in the Premier League had fallen away badly, however, and just three wins in the last nine games had sounded the death knell. It was only the second time in a coaching career spanning 26 years that the Brazilian had been dismissed and, other than a brief period in Uzbekistan with Tashkent club FC Bunyodkor, he would not coach in Europe again.

In another of those so carefully worded statements that superficially says much, but means little, the club declared, 'Felipe has brought many positives to the club since he joined and we all feel a sense of sadness that our relationship has ended so soon. Unfortunately, the results and performances of the team appeared to be deteriorating at a key time in the season.'<sup>3</sup>

Old favourite Ray Wilkins was brought in on a brief caretaker basis, with rumours abounding of Chelsea seeking to poach former hero Gianfranco Zola away from West Ham United. Other names mentioned included another former player, Didier Deschamps, along with Eriksson,

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3 'Chelsea sack Scolari after seven months at Stamford Bridge', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2009.

Frank Rijkaard and Roberto Mancini. When the decision was announced, however, Abramovich had gone back to his Russian connections for a temporary solution.

There had been stories circulating for a while that the salary of Guus Hiddink as the Russia national team manager was being met by Abramovich; some even suggested that the figure amounted to some £3.4m.<sup>4</sup> There was therefore some measure of effective persuasion when the Chelsea owner sought permission from the Russian FA to ‘borrow’ Hiddink for the remainder of the season.

The Dutchman’s time in charge was brief, covering just a few months, but in that time he quickly became hugely popular with both players and fans at Stamford Bridge. Despite the poor form that cost Scolari his job, Hiddink was in an upbeat mood when interviewed by Chelsea TV on 12 February. ‘[The club] are in several races: the FA Cup is there, the Champions League and also the league. There is a ten-point difference [if United win their game in hand] but if you look in the past at this league, and other leagues as well, some things can happen during the final stages of the championship. All three roads are very important: the next game [in the FA Cup at] Watford, and then Aston Villa and Juventus, and then you go on the path of the Champions League and that is so attractive. The club has the experience to go to the final.

‘When I was at Real Madrid, we did not win the league title. I haven’t worked in England, which is considered the biggest league in the world, so [winning the title] would be a huge achievement. We try to go for this title, yes. I am not just here to add to my experience with the club

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4 ‘As Chelsea feel pinch, Roman Abramovich dips into his pocket to pay Russia £3.4m for coach Hiddink’s salary’, *Daily Mail*, 4 December 2008.



and the Premier League. I want to see results as soon as possible.’<sup>5</sup>

That upbeat approach was precisely the tonic that the club had been looking for. Someone was needed to drag it from the pit of disillusion into which it had been gradually sinking, and the new man delivered the required dose of positivity. Hiddink would garner due reward. His first game in charge saw a 1-0 win at Villa Park, followed by a home victory over Juventus in the Champions League propelling Chelsea into a last-eight confrontation with their old adversaries, Liverpool.

The first leg visit to Anfield produced a 3-1 victory, with a brace from Branislav Ivanović and a strike by Drogba outweighing Steven Gerrard’s early goal. In the return leg, a pulsating roller coaster of a game back in London saw an epic 4-4 draw, and Chelsea had qualified for the semi-finals of the Champions League. In the previous round, Liverpool had beaten the mighty Real Madrid in both home and away legs, accumulating a thumping 5-0 aggregate win. Defeating Rafa Benitez’s Liverpool team was a huge psychological lift. Suddenly the sullen clouds enveloping Stamford Bridge were blown away. Was Hiddink the ‘Golden Guus’?

For a while, it seemed there was little Hiddink could do wrong. Chelsea travelled to Barcelona and returned with a highly creditable goalless draw. Back at Stamford Bridge, a thumping volley by Michael Essien seemed to have paved the way to victory and a hasty return to the Champions League Final. A second-half red card for Eric Abidal only looked to confirm the flow of the game, but with no less than four worthy penalty claims denied by Norwegian referee Tom Henning Øvrebø, the single goal was a fragile lead and when

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<sup>5</sup> Chelsea TV, 12 February 2011.

Andres Iniesta fired home an injury-time equaliser, the full cost of what Chelsea fans considered to be Øvrebø's glaring errors of judgement was exposed.

Were they errors? Whatever the case, there was clearly no excuse for the abuse and threats the official received from a section of brutishly aggressive fans. A few years later, Øvrebø accepted he had made mistakes in the game. Interviewed by *Marca*, he confessed, 'It was not my best day, really, but those mistakes can be committed by a referee, and sometimes a player or a coach. Some days you are not at the level you should be. But no, I can't be proud of that performance.'<sup>6</sup> So many years after the event, it offered the coldest of comforts to Chelsea and their fans. The club was denied the opportunity to contest their second consecutive Champions League Final against Manchester United.

There was a measure of compensation as Hiddink guided Chelsea to an FA Cup Final against Everton and a 2-1 victory delivered some tangible reward for the Dutchman's brief tenure in the capital. The Premier League ended with Chelsea in third place and qualifying for the Champions League but, despite Hiddink suffering just one defeat in his reign – a 1-0 loss to Spurs – the gap to Manchester United, who won the title, remained stubbornly at seven points. In his time at Stamford Bridge, Hiddink would record an impressive win rate of 73 per cent. To put that into perspective, it was higher than that achieved by Mourinho despite his successes and trophies. At the club's final home game of the season, a 2-0 win over Blackburn Rovers, incessant chants from the crowd for Abramovich to 'sign him up' were both complimentary, but ultimately pointless. Hiddink was committed to returning full time to his job

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6 'Øvrebø after Chelsea vs Barcelona: That night we had to change hotels', *Marca*, 18 February 2018.

with Russia, and Chelsea had already lined up the man to lead them into the following season.

The new man at the helm was Italian Carlo Ancelotti. The former AC Milan coach had led the *Rossoneri* to two Champions League triumphs, plus a brace of Serie A titles, and an Intercontinental Cup success. If Abramovich was looking for a coach with a winning continental pedigree, he'd found his man. Following the path taken with Steve Clarke and Avram Grant, the popular Ray Wilkins was installed as the Italian's assistant. It was a logical appointment as Wilkins had played alongside Ancelotti during his three-year spell with Milan. The new season would see the club achieve a success that had eluded them for their entire existence so far, but also endure a defeat that planted the seeds of doubt that would grow into full flowering with the coach's dismissal at the end of 2010/11.

Domestically, the 2009/10 season was a story of success, if not outright dominance. Aside from a League Cup fifth-round defeat on penalties against Blackburn Rovers in December, Chelsea scooped up all of the domestic trophies available to them. There was an early taste of what was to follow when, during the traditional curtain-raiser to the season, they overcame Manchester United on penalties to win the Community Shield at Wembley. It hardly compensated for the loss to the same club back in Moscow, but at least it got the season off to a good start, and set a trend that would see the club secure both the Premier League title and successfully retain the FA Cup, breaking records along the way.

In the league, Chelsea set a new mark for the most goals scored, netting 103 times across the 38-game programme. They also broke the record for the most home goals scored, with Stamford Bridge fans seeing their favourites hit the back of the net 68 times, and their final goal difference

of +71 was also a record. The statistics are an empirical confirmation of a season that saw Chelsea redefined as a team playing ebullient, entertaining football with the ever-smiling Ancelotti, left eyebrow perpetually raised, offering up the image of a kindly, knowledgeable uncle and, at the same time, softening the hard-edged image of the club as one that had merely purchased success and had no true style or history.

The former accusation was something fans of opposing clubs, displaced by the new ‘fastest gun in town’, often threw at Chelsea fans. There was of course some measure of truth in Abramovich’s largesse allowing Chelsea to elbow their way to the top table of English football, but it also ignored the fact that other clubs that had dominated in recent times – Manchester United, Arsenal and to some extent Liverpool and Blackburn – had done precisely the same thing. Under Ancelotti though, while it would be stretching things to say that Chelsea became liked, it’s true that they became ‘less disliked’.

On 3 April, Chelsea visited Old Trafford for, as the season played out, what proved to be a pivotal game in deciding the fate of the league title. Despite a late goal from Federico Macheda offering a glimmer of hope, earlier strikes from Joe Cole and Didier Drogba had given Chelsea a lead that Sir Alex Ferguson’s team just failed to overhaul. On 9 May, the last games of the season saw Stoke City visit Old Trafford, and Wigan Athletic travel to Stamford Bridge with Chelsea holding a one-point advantage. United delivered on their requirement, defeating the Potteries side 4-0, but their efforts were rendered irrelevant by Chelsea rattling in eight goals to secure the title. Six days later, the Double was confirmed as the Blues overcame Portsmouth to retain the FA Cup.

If all seemed rosy in the Stamford Bridge garden, three months earlier a rare defeat had set forth a chain of events that would see the club hierarchy begin to doubt whether Ancelotti was the right man for the job. The loss of that Champions League Final of 2008 had seen the club come so close, so very close, to achieving Abramovich's stated dream and following that agonising defeat, it seemed that all coaches would be judged by success or failure in that competition. The Russian oligarch was a man used to getting what he wanted. He had laid out a sizeable measure of his personal fortune to provide different coaches with the means to achieve the desired end, and he expected, he demanded, results.

Ancelotti's Champions League campaign had begun well. Chelsea had skated through their initial stage undefeated and topped a group comprising Porto, Atlético Madrid and the Cypriot club, APOEL. As a group winner, they would play a runner-up in the round of 16 and, as the wild caprices of fate would have it, they were drawn against Internazionale who had finished second behind Barcelona in their group. Currently coaching Inter was none other than a certain José Mourinho, who had moved to the *Nerazzurri* after leaving Chelsea. The old saying is that revenge is a dish best served cold, and in this tournament Mourinho would enjoy exacting revenge on both Chelsea and Barcelona. The Catalans had scorned his approach to take control when they opted for Pep Guardiola instead, and then, for good measure, defeated the Portuguese's Italian club in the group games.

Chelsea visited Milan on 24 February 2010, and despite falling to an early goal from Diego Milito, Salomon Kalou equalised, before Esteban Cambiasso gave Inter a 2-1 lead to take to Stamford Bridge on 16 March. Despite having much of the attacking play in the return leg, Chelsea fell to

a goal from Samuel Eto'o entering the final ten minutes of the game. They failed to find an adequate response in the remaining time and were eliminated. For the first time in four years they had failed to at least reach the quarter-final stage of the competition.

The higher cost to be paid, however, was that Ancelotti was perceived as having been out-thought by the man Chelsea had dismissed years earlier. Mourinho had exacted his revenge on the Stamford Bridge hierarchy and would take similar vengeance on Barcelona for shunning him. In the semi-final, Inter defeated Guardiola's team both home and away, before completing the perfect job interview by guiding his team to success in the final at the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu, before being appointed as coach to Real Madrid. Despite the fact that Mourinho's ultimate success in the Champions League would have caused envious angst at Stamford Bridge, given his domestic success, Ancelotti had banked sufficient goodwill to, at least temporarily, offset the doubts raised by the defeat to Inter, and Mourinho's triumph.

The new season began hopefully. A 6-0 win at home to West Bromwich Albion on the opening day was followed by another half-dozen without reply away to Wigan Athletic. Perhaps not the most challenging of opening fixtures, but 12 goals scored and none conceded was wildly encouraging. There then followed home wins against Stoke City and Blackpool, and away at West Ham United. Going into the sixth game of the season, Chelsea had garnered maximum points, having scored 21 times, and conceded a single goal. A 1-0 loss to Manchester City seemed to burst the balloon though and in the next 15 games, up to the middle of January 2011, they would record only five league victories.

On the day following the fourth of those five wins, on 11 November, Chelsea announced that Ray Wilkins's contract

with the club would not be renewed and that he was leaving with immediate effect. Apparently, totally surprised by the decision, in a statement issued on his behalf by the League Managers' Association Wilkins initially claimed that he had been the victim of 'undoubtedly unfair dismissal' and would take legal advice in an attempt to reach 'an amicable solution'.<sup>7</sup> On the first day of December, however, *The Telegraph* reported that Wilkins announced that he had reached a 'harmonious conclusion' with the club. Whether that conclusion included a gagging clause on Wilkins was unclear, but the real reason for his dismissal has been shrouded in doubt ever since. It seemed a strange decision, and hardly helped matters on the pitch.

Chelsea had led the league table for most of the first half of the season, but once they lost top spot to Manchester United they would not redeem it again as results and performances tailed off badly. Three games from the middle of January brought hope with successive victories and, on the last day of the transfer window, reinforcements arrived. A British record-breaking transfer fee priced Fernando Torres from Liverpool, and he was joined by two signings from Benfica, David Luiz and Nemanja Matić.

Signing Torres, then widely regarded as the top striker in Europe, appeared to be a major coup, destined to reignite the club's ambitions. Sadly for Chelsea, the player who travelled down the M6 from Merseyside to London was a much-depleted talent from the one who Rafa Benitez had signed from Atlético Madrid and had scored 65 goals in a shade over a century of league appearances for the Anfield club. He wouldn't score his first goal for Chelsea until 24 April when, on a rain-sodden Stamford Bridge

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7 'Ray Wilkins: I was unfairly sacked by Chelsea', *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2010.

pitch, he notched the middle goal in a 3-0 home win against West Ham.

A 1-0 defeat at home to Liverpool blunted the short run of success, but Chelsea then won eight of their next nine league games before rounding out the season with two losses and a draw. Success in Europe may have saved the Italian, but after a solid group stage and a less than impressive round of 16 win over FC Copenhagen, a quarter-final loss to Manchester United eliminated Chelsea. The final league game at Goodison Park brought a 1-0 defeat and the unseemly spectacle of Ancelotti apparently being dismissed in the corridors of the Everton stadium. After returning from the post-match press conference, the coach was met by chief executive Ron Gourlay outside of the media suite and told that he was being relieved of his position with immediate effect. It seemed to be an unnecessarily harsh and insensitive way to deliver the news. Typically, Ancelotti responded with grace and humility, 'I accept the decision and respect it. I am proud of the job I did but now I must think about my future. In my mind I would like to stay in the Premier League – that is my first choice.'<sup>8</sup>

Although it was in different circumstances, there was a similar feeling about the club when Ancelotti left as there had been after Hiddink's brief, but happy, tenure. What had been achieved initially should surely have been the catalyst for more success, but it wasn't to be, and Chelsea began the search for a new manager.

Unsurprisingly, one of the names bandied around in the press was Hiddink. A return to Stamford Bridge, on a full-time basis, looked an appetising prospect for Chelsea fans. Other names rumoured to be linked with the post included

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<sup>8</sup> 'Chelsea sack Carlo Ancelotti within an hour of defeat by Everton', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2011.



Marco van Basten, Didier Deschamps – again, and Harry Redknapp. One name, far less well known than so many of the other contenders, began cropping up though with increasing regularity – André Villas-Boas.

When 16 years old, Villas-Boas happened to be living in the same apartment block occupied by Bobby Robson during his successful spell as coach of Porto. As football-obsessed as any teenage boy, the story goes that Robson's neighbour would surreptitiously slip notes through the letterbox of the coach's door, offering advice on tactics, team selection, and how the performance of the Porto team could be improved. At one stage, he even 'sought him out on the stairwell to protest against Domingos Paciencia's omission from the first team'.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike any number of coaches who would have given short shrift to such gauche approaches and, the typical gentleman that he was, Robson not only tolerated the over-enthusiastic teenager but also befriended him and encouraged his ambitions, eventually taking him on as a member of the club's coaching team working on player observation and analysis. Perhaps Robson had discerned something worthy in Villas-Boas's comments, or perhaps he recognised a nascent talent fuelled by enthusiasm for the game.

Villas-Boas's talent developed and Robson arranged for him to study for a UEFA coaching qualification in Scotland, and to supplement his studies by observing training and coaching sessions at his old English club, Ipswich Town. The assiduously committed Villas-Boas passed every test and progressed through the C Licence at just 17, the B Licence the following year, and the A Licence before his 20th birthday, before achieving the Pro Licence. At the

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9 'José Mourinho and André Villas-Boas: how the inseparable duo grew apart', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2013.

tender age of just 21 years old, Villas-Boas was appointed to be head coach to the national team of the British Virgin Islands in the Caribbean.

Robson may have had a similar feel for the man who had been appointed as his interpreter when he joined his first Portuguese club, Sporting Lisbon, in 1992, later co-opting the young José Mourinho into his coaching setup, who then followed the former England manager to Barcelona. When Robson left the *Blaugrana* and moved briefly back to PSV Eindhoven, and then on to Newcastle United, Mourinho stayed in Catalonia, developing his education under new coach Louis van Gaal, before moving to Benfica as assistant to Jupp Heynckes and then taking over from the German.

In what would become a regular occurrence for Mourinho, a dispute with the club's directors led to him moving on and, after a brief stay with Uniao de Leiria, he was appointed to coach Porto, where he was reacquainted with Villas-Boas who was then working with the club's youth teams. The new coach recalled the successes of his former colleague and invited him to create an 'Observation' department at the club, scouting opposition teams and compiling dossiers on individual players. It was an offer the young and ambitious Villas-Boas readily accepted.

Villas-Boas's copious data fed into Mourinho's meticulous attention to detail and he became an integral part of Mourinho's team of assistants, often being referred to by his boss as 'my eyes and ears'.<sup>10</sup> Much as Mourinho had with Robson, Villas-Boas became a constant companion and valuable asset to the new head coach, following him on his travels to west London, and then on to Inter. As with so many of Mourinho's professional relationships though,

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<sup>10</sup> 'José Mourinho and André Villas-Boas: how the inseparable duo grew apart', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2013.

what began as a successful collaboration, ended with a falling out.

Speaking in the Netherlands, at ASPIRE4SPORT and the Aspire Academy Global Summit in 2016, Villas-Boas recalled the early days and the success, ‘In my formative moments, working with José was the best time of my life. I was able to learn many things and working with him takes you to another level.’<sup>11</sup> He later added, ‘I wanted to be like him, know everything that he knew and absorb all the information he was giving.’<sup>12</sup>

It was while working together in Milan, however, that their relationship began to break down. The ambitious Villas-Boas was anxious to progress his career. For Mourinho, the value of his assistant was solely in the role to which he had been allotted. ‘Then you fall on the wrong side of José and that’s when things change and you realise that you’ve been blinded by someone,’<sup>13</sup> Villas-Boas explained.

While the post with Mourinho was an intensely useful finishing school for Villas-Boas, the younger man also saw it as a stepping stone to the things he wanted to achieve as a head coach himself. When he sought to expand his role on to the training field, there was resistance from Mourinho. Was a measure of Inter’s success attributable to the influence of Villas-Boas on the training field? The idea of moving Samuel Eto’o into a wider attacking position was a tactical stroke of genius but whose idea had it been? ‘The notion that it was [Villas-Boas’s] idea to play Samuel Eto’o wide at

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11 ‘André Villas-Boas was “blinded by love” of José Mourinho’, skysports.com, 4 October 2016.

12 ‘André Villas-Boas was “blinded by love” of José Mourinho’, skysports.com, 4 October 2016.

13 ‘André Villas-Boas was “blinded by love” of José Mourinho’, skysports.com, 4 October 2016.

Inter, rather than Mourinho's, has been mooted in Italy,'<sup>14</sup> *The Guardian* reported. The problem was, of course, that in Team Mourinho, there's only room for a single Special One.

In early 2009, a chance for Villas-Boas to move on to the next stage of his rapidly developing career appeared to present itself. Back in Portugal, the directors of SC Braga were looking for a new coach as Jorge Jesus was leaving to take over at Benfica. Initial contact from the club led Villas-Boas to conclude that this was the role for him, and he informed Mourinho that he wanted to leave Inter. Unfortunately, no firm offer came from Braga, who appointed Domingos Paciencia – ironically the player who Villas-Boas had harangued Robson about omitting years earlier – instead.

A chastened Villas-Boas returned to Inter, frustrated, but hopeful that the events would convince Mourinho that he was worthy of an expanded role. Such hopes would be quickly dashed. Instead, if anything, his role was diminished. Perhaps it was Mourinho's way of exacting some kind of penitence for a perceived betrayal of loyalty. Those who perceive the Portuguese as arrogant and vindictive, and there are more than a few who acknowledge that they dwell in that camp, would readily believe that possibility. Alternatively, it may just have been a reorganisation that had little, if anything, to do with the apparent aspirations of a member of the coaching staff, and bore no malice at all. Whatever the case, it's difficult to see the relationship as anything other than now being on a one-way journey to divorce.

On 3 October of the same year, with his club struggling at the foot of Portugal's Primeira Liga, the Académica de Coimbra coach Rogério Gonçalves resigned. The club

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<sup>14</sup> 'José Mourinho and André Villas-Boas: how the inseparable duo grew apart', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2013.

briefly installed Ze Nando as his temporary replacement, but would cast their eyes across to Lombardy for his permanent successor. Seeking a quick answer to their woes, they made a firm approach to Villas-Boas, offering him the position of head coach. The nature of football tends to be that opportunities to take over a club only occur in times of trouble, often deep trouble, but Villas-Boas was hardly put off by the enormity of the task of taking over a club yet to register a single win in the season, and approached Mourinho about moving on. This time, perhaps with the new support team structure in place following his earlier reshuffle, Mourinho wished his assistant well, and waved him on his way, with seemingly sincere good wishes. ‘There was little hint of the subsequent animosity between the pair in the leaving of Italy,’<sup>15</sup> it was reported. Ten days after Gonçalves had resigned, Villas-Boas settled into the vacated chair. Four days short of his 32nd birthday, he was head coach of a top-tier football club. If the job was a test then it was one he would pass with distinction.

Just four days after Villas-Boas arrived, Académica enjoyed their first victory of the season, defeating Portimonense SC 2-1 in the Taça de Portugal. Although they would be eliminated in the next round, it set the tone for the remainder of the season. When the league programme was completed on 9 May 2010, the young coach had guided his club from the near certainty of relegation, and without a win in the first two months of the season, up to a comfortable mid-table 11th position, and ten points clear of the relegation zone. The amazing turnaround in fortunes had hardly been achieved by Mourinho-esque ‘parking the bus’ tactics, or

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<sup>15</sup> ‘José Mourinho and André Villas-Boas: how the inseparable duo grew apart’, *The Guardian*, 26 September 2013.

as they say in Portugal by playing *antijogo*. Villas-Boas had introduced a fluid attacking style that had transformed the way Académica played. During the time he had been in charge, the 37 goals they scored was only bettered by the top five clubs in the league, and this was after their dreadful opening two months of the season. The stock of the young coach had rocketed, and bigger clubs began to cast covetous glances towards the Estádio Cidade de Coimbra.

In the same season, Porto had secured the domestic double and their coach Jesualdo Ferreira had been lured across the border to La Liga and Malaga. Ferreira had been hugely successful in his four years at the Estádio do Dragao, winning three Primeira Liga titles, and lifting the Taça de Portugal twice. His time in Spain would contrast dramatically. After nine games, with his team Malaga lying in 18th position and without a victory in half-a-dozen games, he was sacked. Back in Porto though, it meant there was a vacancy for a head coach to start the new season, and the young, enterprising manager of Académica de Coimbra was selected for the role.

If there had been doubts about Villas-Boas, perhaps being merely a big fish in a small pond while staving off relegation at Académica, they would be dispelled by the success he enjoyed at the Estádio do Dragao. Joining in June, within a couple of months he had netted his first trophy by overcoming Benfica 2-0 in Portugal's version of the Community Shield. As in many countries, these season-opening games are rarely seen as being particularly significant as an indicator for the campaign ahead. On this occasion though, that should very much have been the case.

There have been suggestions that it was this first season at Porto that led to the rift between Mourinho and Villas-Boas, with the former apparently resentful of the younger

man's success and considering that it may even eclipse his own reputation with the club. Porto may have been the Dragons, with Benfica the Eagles, but with Mourinho, it may well have been a case of 'the ego has landed'. If the former Porto coach had expected, or even willed his former assistant to fail, he would be roundly disappointed. It's difficult to think how Porto's season could have been any more successful than it was.

The season opened with a home game against Paços de Ferreira and despite twice leading by two goals, it ended in a disappointing, although entertaining 3-3 draw. It would be the briefest of setbacks on a journey of glittering success. By the end of the 30-game league programme, Porto had finished no fewer than 21 points ahead of runners-up Benfica, having won 27 games, drawn three and not suffered a single defeat. It was only the second time in history that an entire Portuguese league programme had been completed without defeat and, at 33 years of age, Villas-Boas was the third-youngest man to land the Primeira Liga title and the youngest for more than 50 years.

Across those 30 league games, Porto scored 72 goals, a dozen more than the next best, and conceded a miserly 16, almost precisely half of the next best return, with both Benfica and Sporting Lisbon conceding 31. Unsurprisingly, they also had the league's top two goalscorers. The Brazilian forward, Hulk, scored 23 and Colombia's Radamel Falcao 16. The Taça de Portugal was added to complete the domestic double after a 6-2 romp in the final against Vitória de Guimarães. The success also spread into continental competition. The Europa League was won, with Porto defeating Braga – the club that had considered employing Villas-Boas a few years earlier, before looking elsewhere – 1-0 in the Dublin final.

There seemed to be a path of destiny laid out, wherein Villas-Boas would follow in the footsteps of Mourinho. He had not only emulated Mourinho's success at Porto, but as with the man who was now ensconced at the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu as Real Madrid coach, he had also followed his example of using success on a European, as well as domestic, stage to offer up the perfect job interview. His next position would keep that trend right on track. Before all the celebrations had died down at Porto, the next move on the apparent Villas-Boas inexorable march to success was being taken. On 21 June in Porto, he handed in his resignation and the following day, his new appointment was confirmed, as manager of Chelsea on a three-year contract.

Ryan Baldi is an author and sportswriter for the BBC, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* as well as other magazines and websites. He recalls that the Chelsea motive appeared both obvious and perhaps a little naïve, 'It seemed pretty clear Chelsea were trying, in a less-than-subtle way, to recreate the magic they struck upon with José Mourinho's appointment seven years earlier. Young coach. Tremendous success with Porto. Looked suave in an expensive coat. But that was about where the similarities ended between these two very different characters.'<sup>16</sup>

The reception from the English football press was mixed at best. Ian Ross was a journalist at the time, writing for *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. He said, 'Despite his success at Porto it was generally a case of "who?" when Villas-Boas was appointed by Chelsea. Having worked under Mourinho it was inevitable that the two would be compared. I always had the feeling that despite his convivial nature

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<sup>16</sup> Baldi, Ryan, interview with the author.



there was a veneer of youthful arrogance simmering just below the surface – possibly the result of so many in England questioning his abilities.<sup>17</sup>

There was certainly some doubt among pundits at the time. Alan Addicott, a Chelsea fan, was assistant sports editor at *The Sun*, and was less than convinced, ‘I was never comfortable with the appointment of André Villas-Boas as Chelsea boss. He was brought in after the sacking of Carlo Ancelotti who had, in my opinion, been very well liked and proved that by winning a number of trophies. But as a Chelsea fan, you simply got used to Roman Abramovich changing managers if they failed to bring him what he wanted, the Champions League trophy.’<sup>18</sup>

As with the appointment to head Porto, this was very much a return journey for the man who became the Premier League’s youngest ever manager. At both clubs before taking charge, he had spent a period of time working there under Mourinho. The unique environment at Stamford Bridge was therefore nothing new to him, and he was quick to distance himself from the sort of stance adopted by Mourinho, declaring himself far from being a ‘Special One’, although the club hardly helped matters in that particular pursuit.

On the day of his appointment, an official club statement hailed the new manager and his record of success, underscoring their confidence that he would lead them to ‘greater success in major domestic and European competitions’.<sup>19</sup> As well as reportedly paying some £13.4m to buy out the remaining time of Villas-Boas’s contract with Porto, it was said that he was being paid a £4.4m

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17 Ross, Ian, interview with the author.

18 Addicott, Alan, interview with the author.

19 Chelsea FC statement, 22 June 2011.

salary. There were legitimate reasons for setting the bar so high.

The statement said, 'André was the outstanding candidate for the job. He is one of the most talented young managers in football today and has already achieved much in a relatively short space of time. His ambition, drive and determination matches that of Chelsea and we are confident André's leadership of the team will result in greater successes in major domestic and European competitions. André will bring his coaching experience back to a club he is already very familiar with, having previously worked here for three years. He has always been highly regarded at Chelsea and everyone here looks forward to welcoming him back and working with him.'<sup>20</sup>

Given that under their Russian owner, the club had won eight domestic trophies, reached a Champions League Final and made four semi-final appearances in the same competition, the aspirations were clearly high. An article in *The Telegraph* suggested that the new coach was anything but overawed by the task he faced. With a confidence born of a string of success, it suggested, 'Villas-Boas ... is undaunted and is already understood to have taken soundings from senior Chelsea players.'<sup>21</sup>

As is so often the case in contemporary times with many major clubs, the first interview with the new coach was granted to the club's in-house television station. 'Don't expect something from one man. Expect us to create a dynamic group of everybody getting together, with the fans getting together, with people getting excited with the motivation that is in and around us. It is not about my arrival. It is about

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20 Chelsea FC statement, 22 June 2011.

21 'New Chelsea manager André Villas-Boas – the fast track to Stamford Bridge', *The Telegraph*, 22 June 2011.

the continuous success of this club,' Villas-Boas asserted purposefully, adding later, 'Let's reflect on the success of the past six years at this club and what we have achieved and now what we can achieve in the next six years again. There is no doubt that the challenge for me is to keep winning. I am an individual who has that hunger for success and I want to keep it that way.'<sup>22</sup>

It was a mature and measured statement of intent, confident and proactive, but also inclusive and sharply in contrast to that of Mourinho. At his first press conference though, he was far more effusive, 'I wouldn't be satisfied if we don't win the Premiership. The domestic title is always the priority.'<sup>23</sup> It may have been just the sort of positive approach that fans wanted to hear, but also made the young manager a hostage to future fortunes, and one that would come back to haunt him.

With so many experienced players at the club having well-earned reputations for overly large egos, there was a danger that the young manager would be seen as being promoted above his worth by some in the squad. Ashley Cole was wheeled out to try and allay such fears. 'Age is just a number, he has experience of being at Porto, a big club,' Cole said in an interview with Sky Sports News. 'Hopefully he can bring that glory to Chelsea, but I don't think the age thing is anything to worry about, I don't think the players think about that. He is our manager now and we have to go out and fight for him. Whatever manager comes in we respect him, we are not kids, everyone thinks there are egos at Chelsea, but there aren't and we have to make Chelsea the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with André Villas-Boas, Chelsea TV, 22 June 2011.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/17131298>.

squad of a few years ago and win trophies.<sup>24</sup> Not long into 2012, those words would seem to have a hollow ring.

Somewhat under the radar at the time, but hugely significant as later events played out, Chelsea also appointed Roberto Di Matteo to be assistant to the new man. The Swiss-born Italy international had pursued a coaching career following his premature retirement from playing through serious injury. Joining from Lazio in 1996 under Ruud Gullit, a debut goal against Middlesbrough rapidly endeared him to the Stamford Bridge faithful and he would enjoy a trophy-laden five seasons, winning two FA Cups, a League Cup, a UEFA Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Super Cup, always seeming to save his goals for big occasions. In the 1996/97 FA Cup Final his long-range effort, again against Middlesbrough, after just 42 seconds of play, became the quickest goal in Wembley cup final history. He also picked on what seemed to be his favourite adversaries to score a goal in a 2-0 victory in the 1997/98 League Cup Final, before scoring the last FA Cup Final goal at the old Wembley to beat Aston Villa in the 1999/2000 final. As the fates transpired, it would be his last moment of glory as a player.

Playing in an away second leg UEFA Cup game against Switzerland's St Gallen, Di Matteo suffered a career-ending injury. Just past the half-hour, with Chelsea struggling, Di Matteo went into what seemed to be a regular sort of challenge against the home team's Daniel Imhof. It may have been the angle of the challenge or the way the legs collided but, with no blame attached to the St Gallen player, Di Matteo suffered a triple fracture of the leg. With numerous operations, recuperations and attempted recoveries, he

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24 'Ashley Cole says Chelsea players will respect André Villas-Boas', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2011.

wouldn't play for 18 months and, in February 2002, was forced to concede that his career was over aged just 31.

A move into coaching followed and in July 2008 he took up his first managerial post at MK Dons, succeeding Paul Ince. In his only season there, he guided the club to a third-place finish in the league and into the play-offs, where they would lose out to Scunthorpe United in a semi-final penalty shoot-out. The following summer, after experiencing relegation from the Premier League, West Bromwich Albion sacked Tony Mowbray. Di Matteo was appointed to try and revive the ailing Midlands club and immediately achieved promotion back to the top division. Despite producing an attractive style of football and securing their status in the Premier League, a dip in results – they lost 13 of their previous 18 games – saw him moved out in February 2011. It meant that, when the call came from Chelsea, he was available and willing to take up the offer.

The appointment could perhaps have been seen as a step down for a man who had occupied the top job in his previous posts, but Di Matteo was clearly happy to take up the role and return to Stamford Bridge, as was reported in *The Guardian* at the time. 'Di Matteo, however, insists he will have no difficulties making the transition back to an assistant's role. "It is obviously a challenge for me but I don't anticipate any problems," he confirmed. "I have got experience of being a manager, I know what it is like, and I know what it is to be a coach, so I have a bit of both and I am there to support André and any of the staff, to give what it takes for us to be successful. That's the ultimate challenge."<sup>25</sup>

Di Matteo admitted it was an unexpected opportunity. "[The] call came a bit out of the blue to be honest," said the

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25 'Roberto Di Matteo happy to be No2 to André Villas-Boas at Chelsea', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2011.

41-year-old, who also had an impressive stint as MK Dons manager. “It is mostly based on the fact that he likes my football philosophy and that is why he wants me to be part of his team. I think he likes to play football and be positive and attacking and over the years if you have seen a game or two of the teams I coached I think we played the same way. I liked my teams to try and win games rather than not lose, to build, to pass. He is going to be in charge of it and we are going to be working the way he thinks is the right way to be successful.”<sup>26</sup>

Bringing in a well-respected and popular figure was now a familiar move for Chelsea. It had played out reasonably well in the past, but on this occasion, it would bring the richest of rewards.

With Di Matteo now in place as his assistant, Villas-Boas took charge of his first official Chelsea training session on 7 July 2011. A week later, they would win their first game under the new management in a friendly against Wycombe Wanderers played at Chelsea’s Cobham training complex. Purely designed to offer a gentle reintroduction to match action, and give the new man in charge an opportunity to see his players in what was, at least, a semi-serious game, Villas-Boas offered minutes to no fewer than 23 members of his squad and would have been broadly satisfied with a 3-0 result. The first goal came when Yossi Benayoun controlled a dropping ball in the opposing penalty areas, juggled it a couple of times, and then lobbed his shot over the goalkeeper with four minutes played.

Six minutes into the second period, a pass from Nicolas Anelka saw Torres sweep the ball home for the second goal. The last months of Ancelotti’s reign had been dogged by the

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26 ‘Roberto Di Matteo happy to be No2 to André Villas-Boas at Chelsea’, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2011.

faltering play of the once ferociously deadly Torres, who took 903 minutes to notch his first goal for the Italian. Villas-Boas had needed to wait less than an hour. It was a promising omen. The final goal was added by Serbian centre-back Slobodan Rajković, who finished after a header on by Torres from a Yuri Zhirkov corner. The goalscorer, who had joined the club in 2007, would be a Chelsea player for four seasons but, other than friendly games such as this, would never make a first-team appearance, spending loan spells in the Netherlands with PSV Eindhoven, FC Twente and SBV Vitesse, before being sold to Bundesliga club Hamburger SV for a reported €2m six weeks or so after this game took place. It was a not unusual scenario for young players signed to Chelsea.

The fixture against Wycombe was the first in a series of six games in just 18 days, involving travels to Portsmouth, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, the Thai capital Bangkok, and then on to Hong Kong, before returning to the UK and a trip to Glasgow to round out the fundraising, meet and greet, promotional tour. For all the doubtlessly tiring experiences of travel, the results suggested things were going well. An own goal by former Blue Tal Ben Haim was enough for a victory in Portsmouth, before the party jetted off to Asia. Another single-goal win, thanks to a late Didier Drogba effort, accounted for a Malaysia XI in Kuala Lumpur on 21 July and, three days later, goals by Frank Lampard, José Bosingwa, Branislav Ivanović and Florent Malouda were more than enough for a comfortable win over a Thailand XI.

The party then flew to Hong Kong for the Barclays Asia Trophy. Local club Kitchee suffered similarly, being despatched in another four-goal romp thanks to Lampard, an own goal, plus strikes by Drogba and Daniel Sturridge, as Chelsea reached the final to play Aston Villa. A goal in

the first minute by Josh McEachran gave Villas-Boas's team an ideal start and, when Torres added a second on the hour, the trophy was secured. It meant that the club had scored 15 goals across the half-dozen games without their defence conceding.

The final game before the real business began would take Chelsea to Ibrox and a meeting with Rangers on 6 August. On six minutes, a strike by Nikica Jelavić would puncture the Blues' defence for the first time under Villas-Boas, but a first-half brace from Sturridge and strike by Malouda ensured that the game was still won. Although inevitably half-paced at times, it would be difficult to paint these pre-season encounters as anything but encouraging. The razor-sharp competitiveness of Premier League or Champions League football may well have been absent, but seven games won out of seven can only breed confidence and the new man at the helm would lead his Chelsea team into the more meaningful competition with a sure-footed stride.

Just over a week later, the 2011/12 season would begin. Seven years previously, the club had plucked a relatively unknown manager from Portugal and begun an adventure that would lead to silverware, a brief domination of domestic football and the very cusp of European glory. José Mourinho had delivered trophies aplenty before the trauma and eventual breakdown in the relationship. Could Chelsea feasibly hope to repeat the feat with a manager widely regarded as Mourinho 2.0?