

EUROPE'S MOST WANTED

Football's deadliest hitman left fans drooling after his goals inspired Spain to Euro 2008 glory. Now, as cash-strapped Valencia prepare to sell, the 27-year-old talks exclusively to FFT about his future

Words Simon Talbot



Maria had been waiting eight hours with her daughter Xano. Behind them, the queue stretched impatiently out of the door and alongside the barriers hastily erected by a police force overwhelmed at the size of the crowd that had descended on a modest hotel in the northern city of Gijón. Across the road it went, over the petrol station forecourt and out the other side. Three thousand people clutching cameras, shirts and posters, all desperate for a glimpse, the chance to meet their idol.

When the coach pulled up and he ambled down the stairs, a look of surprise etched across his face, they started cheering and clapping; when Xano reached her destination, the wait made worthwhile with a photo and a signed shirt, tears began to roll down her cheeks. Maria was literally hopping up and down.

It was April 2009 and David Villa was coming home. The local boy who had left Sporting Gijón as a promising 21-year-old in 2003 was returning a man, a European champion. After a decade struggling in their Second Division exile, Sporting had at last returned to the top flight; almost six years after departing for Real Zaragoza, Villa was about to end his long wait to play at El Molinón again. Camera crews had been dispatched, police deployed and tickets sold out. The city had never seen anything like it. He came as an opponent, the man who would score against them, but it hardly mattered. This was a hero's homecoming.

"I knew they would give me a great welcome," Villa tells *FFT*, "but I never expected anything like that. It was incredible. I'll never forget it and it will spur me on to achieve even more."

"It has been complete madness," admits his travelling companion as they finally board a plane for Valencia after four days of events. It has been like the visit of a head of state.

"Villa," said Sporting's manager Manolo Preciado, "is the best player to play for this club, after Quini." Quini – full name Enrique Castro Gonzalez – finished as top scorer five times and is arguably the best striker in Spanish football history. He describes Villa as "a phenomenon".

Sporting's matchday delegate, Quini was there to greet the striker with an embrace. So were teachers and students from his former school, the diehards from Sporting's Ultra Boys supporters' club, and a packed stadium. Forget the visit of Barcelona or Real Madrid; this was the biggest match of the season in the principality of Asturias.

On the face of it, Preciado's remark appeared as strange as the warmth of the welcome. Villa scored an impressive 38 goals in just 78 games for Sporting, but he left having never played a first division match for the club. He departed as a footballer still to make it.

Yet his reluctant departure allowed the struggling club to survive, fending off its creditors and, with them, administrative relegation to Spain's regionalised, four-division Segunda División B. He also remained a Sporting fan, very publicly identified with the club and the region, keen to share his success with Sporting. "It's not just that they feel part of my success, it's that they are part of my success," he insists. "They have been with me all the way."

And, most importantly, what success he has had. He is the local boy made good. Very good. Outside Gijón, Zaragoza and Valencia, Villa might not boast the media cheerleaders that campaign for Raul nor does he have the charisma of Fernando Torres – he has had to do it the hard way – but there is just no arguing when a footballer is this successful.

Though his name was absent from the list of candidates for the Balon D'Or and the FIFA World Player awards, Villa is possibly the best striker in world football. Even if he does not say so himself. "It's not for me to evaluate my place in the game," he claims. "If people say that about me, then fine. If others do not include me on the shortlists for those awards, that's fine too. I would love to win those awards but it is not something that obsesses me."

Small wonder fans queued outside the Los Ferranes hotel in Gijón and Europe's biggest clubs are already queuing outside his door.

"Torres and I get on well on and off the pitch. We have a good partnership"



Top Turning out for Real Zaragoza
Above Set pieces: another string to a well-strung bow

Last summer, Real Madrid tabled a €45m bid for Villa. Valencia resisted and the player, reluctant to leave under a cloud, stayed. Few doubted he would have liked to sign but, despite a career spent moving around, he has never forced an exit: Sporting gained survival by selling him to Real Zaragoza; needy Zaragoza were delighted with the €12m Valencia paid; but Valencia's new president Vicente Soriano was not so keen. €45m might have been welcome but he would have had a fans' revolt on his hands.

"I am not even thinking about the future. I am thinking about the present – and at Valencia it's a present with a future too," Villa says, adding deadpan, unconvincingly: "I will be at Valencia until such a time as the club says they want to sell me. And no-one has said that."

But if they have not already, they soon will. This summer, Valencia want to sell. Racked by crisis, threatened by bankruptcy, the bank to which they owe over €240m has taken control and the new executive director has spoken of asset stripping – which means players. It is administration without the administrators, a situation in which players have gone without pay.

Not that Villa makes capital from it. "What happens off the pitch doesn't effect us on it," he insists. It's an argument that's contrary to the evidence: the day Valencia's players discovered they wouldn't be paid coincided with a run in which they won just one in nine. "We trust in the club's ability to resolve the situation – it's not for the players to worry about," he says.

It is, however, something that affects them. The entire squad is for sale and Villa is the most valuable of Valencia's assets. Real Madrid have renewed their interest. Barcelona too.

Liverpool, Arsenal and Manchester United have all watched him. Senior players at Chelsea have been told that the striker is a priority. Roman Abramovich is prepared to spend big, very big.

And he should – they all should. You want guaranteed goals? David Villa is your man. According to his international team-mate Xabi Alonso, he is "a born goalscorer: quick, clever and strong, superb with both feet, a man who barely needs a second to release a shot." Perhaps his best goal came against Deportivo de La Coruña, when he scored from the half-way line. On the turn, for goodness sake. And yet he remains commendably unfussy. "Of course I like lovely goals," Villa says, shrugging. "but a goal is a goal."

It's not just about goals, either. Fast, skilful, creative and tough, Villa offers much more. He has played as a left-sided attacker, an out-and-out number nine and just behind the striker. He's played in neat, tidy teams, direct teams and physical ones. He has played alone, in a two and in a three. And he has always performed. In 2006-07 not only did he finish with 15 goals, he was La Liga's top assist-provider too. He creates goals, takes free-kicks and corners, fights defenders and has an eye for a pass. He can head a ball too.

"He is the complete striker," says Michael Robinson, the former Liverpool player who is now Spain's most important pundit. "Villa has absolutely everything."

When he failed to sign for Madrid last summer, coach Bernd Schuster sniped: "Villa lacks ambition." Never one to kick up a storm, Villa was nonetheless irritated. "Footballing ambition is not about your mouth, it is about your feet," he says. "You can accuse me of lots of things – of having a bad day, of missing chances, of many things – but I have always had ambition and always will have. I think I have proved that on the pitch with Zaragoza, Sporting, UD Langreo, and the national team."

The results bear him out. After all, how many players have won a European Championship medal? And yet you can sort of see what ▶



"If people want to talk about me that's great. I'm not going to do it for them"



Be careful what you wish for: Valencia surge towards the jinxed Copa del Rey

THE FALL OF VALENCIA: PART III

Los Ches financial crisis was horribly predictable if you know your history



It's said that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. In which case Valencia must have spent their school days staring out of the window. One of the most striking things about the club's current crisis is that it's all so familiar, but this time there may be no way back.

Copa del Rey successes appear a poisoned chalice. Inspired by Mario Kempes, Valencia won the tournament in 1978-79 and it appeared to be the dawn of a new era. In 1979-80, they won the European Cup Winners' Cup and the following season were on course for the league title until they collapsed in the final weeks.

The collapse was not inexplicable: with Valencia racked by a financial crisis brought on by the rebuilding of Mestalla for the 1982 World Cup, Kempes departed. The following season they just escaped relegation. Two more seasons of suffering ended with relegation in 1985. An austerity project under president Arturo Tuzón saw them recover and promotion followed but history was ready to repeat itself.

Floated in 1992, Valencia started pouring cash away again. They built a fantastic side that won the 1999 Copa del Rey and reached the Champions League final in 2000. But that summer they were forced to sell Gaizka Mendieta, Claudio Lopez and Gerard Lopez. Fortunately, success continued: another Champions League final, two league titles and a UEFA Cup. Yet so did the uncontrollable spending, especially after the majority shareholder Juan Soler installed himself as president in 2004. Coaches came and went – at a cost of €16m in severance payments alone.

Last year's Copa del Rey success was cold comfort when the world financial crisis hit. Valencia had been banking on resolving their debts, already €400m, by selling the old stadium and building a new one. The value of the land tumbled, they had no buyers and few willing to loan them the money. Interest stacked up and players went unpaid. The debt is now €600m.

In previous times of crisis, Valencia sold off their best players in order to stay afloat; this time even the sale of stars like Villa, Silva and Joaquin might not be sufficient. One of Spain's biggest clubs is in real danger of going out of existence.

Villa makes England's best look like a set of training cones





Villa has gone from bit-part player to main man for Spain



Top Could Villa replace Eto'o at Barca? Above Or will he be paired with Torres at Anfield?

Schuster was getting at. Top scorer at Euro 2008, Spain's joint leading goalscorer at the last World Cup, at the time of writing Villa is second top scorer in Spain with 22 goals. Over the last five years, he has scored more La Liga goals than anyone else in Spain, barring Samuel Eto'o. And Eto'o plays for Barcelona.

If Villa rocked up at the Nou Camp, it's hard to imagine that he wouldn't pulverise the records. His international strike partner Fernando Torres, meanwhile, has undoubtedly become a better and more productive player by leaving Spain for Liverpool. Surely Villa too would benefit from a move? After all, wherever he's been – and he's mostly been at relatively limited clubs – he has always scored goals.

In fact, the surprise is that it is only now, at 27, that the biggest clubs are fighting over him. Euro 2008 might have thrust him into the public consciousness, but they merely confirmed what those who watched him closely already knew.

Born in the Asturias pit town of Tuilla in December 1981, Villa is a miner's son who began playing in the junior teams of at local

Second Division B side Union Popular de Langreo as a nine-year-old. Nicknamed El Guaje – 'The Kid' in the local dialect – he might never have begun playing at all after he broke his femur as a very young child. Doctors wanted to operate but told his fearful parents that he could end up a cripple; the operation was aborted and the bone fused.

Villa's mother Dorita might have complained that her son only had eyes for the ball, but his father Jose Manuel Villa (Mel) was delighted. His impact is still visible: few players are as two-footed as Villa. "He would be there throwing me the ball over and over, making me kick it with my left leg when my right was in plaster after breaking it," Villa reveals. "I was four." It wasn't just then, either. He adds: "I can barely remember a single training session when my dad wasn't there. I have never been alone on a football pitch."

Mel's team, Real Oviedo, were not quite so keen: they thought Villa was too small, so instead he joined Sporting's youth system as a 17-year-old. Seventeen B team goals earned him a first-team debut and, at the start of the

2001-02 season, aged 19, he was given a real chance in Second Division. He scored 18 league goals, followed by 20 in 2002-03 and Real Zaragoza splashed out €3m for him.

Any doubts that Villa could cut it in the first division were blown away in an instant. He racked up 39 goals in two years at a side that created few chances and joined Valencia for €12m in 2005 and immediately hit 25 goals, finishing second only to Eto'o in the scorers' chart and just behind Pablo Aimar for assists.

By his own admission, Villa is not very media friendly. There are many other players better at advancing their cause. But, he insists, "that doesn't bother me at all. If people want to talk about me then great; if they don't, fine. I'm not doing it for them."

Besides, there is no arguing with what Villa produces on the pitch. Consistency is the word. Villa can change positions, team-mates and coaches – in one season alone he had four at Valencia – but always with the same result.

In five first division seasons, he never scored fewer than 15, averaging better than a goal every other game. In three of the five seasons, he was among the country's top four players in terms of average ratings. This term, he sits fifth, just six goals off the best goalscoring total in Valencia's history. In a season in which he has gone two months without pay.

It is a record that serves as a genuine target. "It's better not to look at long-term goals but short-term records help," he says. "If you can achieve them then long-term goals come within sight too. It would be fantastic to match Kempes's Valencia record."

Internationally, he has been peerless too. Despite being initially shifted about by Spain boss Luis Aragones, Villa still hit three goals at the 2006 World Cup. His first 20 international appearances, following his already belated debut in February 2005 were all too brief but by Euro 2008, with Raul jettisoned, there was no longer any question over Villa's place in the side. Up front alongside Fernando Torres.

"I like Barcelona's style. It's a joy to play with their little guys with the national team"

Allied to his likely departure this summer, that partnership with Torres has fans at Anfield licking their lips. After completing his hat-trick against Russia at Euro 2004, Villa made a point of running to celebrate with the Liverpool No.9. "I had just scored a hat-trick and I knew people would be talking about me, but I wanted them to see that I had benefited from Torres's work, just as he sometimes benefits from mine. We complement each other very well. We get on well on the pitch and very well off it too. We're a good partnership. We both chase down defenders, put pressure on and fight to create chances for each other. We work well together."

Four goals made Villa the European Championship's top scorer, despite limping off against Russia in the quarter-finals and missing out on the final group game with Spain already through. Under new coach Vicente del Bosque, he has continued to prosper. In 2008, he broke a selection record by scoring 12 in a calendar year, and went six successive games scoring: a new best. He has equalled Emilio Butragueño's total with 25 in just 43 games – from headers to volleys to free-kicks. Against Sweden, he made the winner himself from a long punt up the pitch in the last minute.

"I can play anywhere across the front," he admits. "But I do like to be right at the top. At Valencia, I play a little higher up than for Spain. I'm an out-and-out striker and the striker tends to work a little less but I also have to stop the midfielder coming out and pressure the wings. I prefer that to playing behind the strikers."

"I like Barcelona's style. It's a joy to play with their little guys [Iniesta and Xavi] with the national team and they play the most attractive football around. But in the end, any system that wins is a good system. I like having freedom to move and seek goals. But I can adapt."

Given Valencia's financial situation, it sounds like the hint of an open invitation. However, Villa simply refuses to be publicly drawn on his future, steadfastly insisting he is not even thinking beyond the present.

He has succeeded with a national team that has adopted the Barcelona way, is open to a renewed Real Madrid set for summer elections, and Euro 2008 showed that Villa with Torres works. He has the pace, mobility, touch for Arsenal; and there is little doubt that United have the attacking options to make him comfortable. As for Chelsea, they are prepared to build a side around him.

There is just one problem for English clubs: privately, Villa has made it known that he'd rather not leave Spain. Equally, though, English clubs have one huge advantage: cash. The kind of cash to force Valencia's hand and, with it, Villa's. The kind of cash that Liverpool and Arsenal possibly lack but Chelsea and United certainly boast. The Chelsea chief executive Bruce Buck has admitted that for the right player he would be prepared to pay "huge" money. Villa is the right player.

That is what Valencia, desperate for money, are literally banking on: interest from England would create an auction that, for all Villa's intentions, Barcelona and Madrid might struggle to keep up with – especially if they can offer cash up front. And Villa has shown before his reluctance to leave on bad terms.

It remains a titanic task but negotiate cleverly and with a strong enough hand and England's biggest clubs could find that, just like that sunny Asturian Sunday in April, everyone's a winner: the seller, the player and above all the buyer. Villa is not a man to disappoint those who have invested in him. Just ask Maria and her tearful daughter. ◊



VALENCIA FIRE SALE: EVERYTHING MUST GO!!!

With the creditors closing in on Valencia, David Villa isn't the only first-teamer set for a potentially pricey exit



David Silva
Age 23
Position Winger

The elegant wide man, with a wand of a left foot, could weave his magic for any club with the wonga. **Would suit** Manchester United, Chelsea, Manchester City **Price** £30m



Nicola Zigic
Age 28
Position Striker

Given the right supply, the 6ft 8in giant Serbian could prove a real handful for nervous Premier League back-lines. **Would suit** Bolton, Stoke, Blackburn, Aston Villa **Price** £7m



Carlos Marchena
Age 29
Position Centre-back

A rugged defensive rock who would add some much needed steel and experience to any side that could afford his fee. **Would suit** Tottenham, Arsenal, Newcastle **Price** £8m



David Albelda
Age 31
Position Midfielder

With a wealth of experience, Valencia's club captain could be just the player to plug a porous midfield. **Would suit** Arsenal, Aston Villa, Newcastle **Price** £5m



Raul Albiol
Age 23
Position Centre-back

A Euro 2008 squad player, classy on the ball and reads the game well. But is he tough enough for the Prem? **Would suit** Liverpool, Arsenal, Aston Villa **Price** £8m



Manuel Fernandes
Age 23
Position Midfielder

The spiky Portuguese can do a good job in the middle or out wide, as shown during his spell with Everton in 2007-08. **Would suit** Everton, Portsmouth, Wigan **Price** £10m

WHERE'S VILLA GOING?

The Kid could be coming to club near you this summer

Having been crammed full of Villa facts and stats, the entirely reliable *FourFourTwo* mainframe computer has analysed just where the Spaniard is most likely to be lining up come August

