

Bruno Fernandes: Manchester United's new signing used Post-It Notes to learn Italian and takes a 90-minute nap after lunch every day... and can play a bit too



By Jack Lang (author/jack-lang/) Jan 29, 2020

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Bruno Fernandes has been a darling of the gossip columns for so long that you have almost certainly absorbed some of his best moments by now, even if only by oblique internet osmosis.

You will have seen the laser-guided through balls, the ballerina footwork, the finishes pinged into the net from every angle imaginable. A midfielder does not score 33 goals in a season without kick-starting a whole cottage industry dedicated to compiling his highlights and setting them to abysmal music.

Yet while those videos capture plenty of what makes Fernandes such an alluring player, they do not tell the whole story of the man for whom Manchester United are paying an initial fee of €55 million to sign from Sporting Lisbon. There are hidden depths, attributes that elude a first glance. To speak with those who know him best is to hear rave review after rave review; it is instructive that many of them focus not on his technique but on his mentality.

Fernandes is driven, serious, wholly committed to squeezing every last drop of goodness from his talent. “He wants to be the best,” says Cristiano Giaretta, the man who took him from Boavista’s academy to Novara in 2012 and while those words might ring hollow when applied to other footballers, Fernandes has always backed his ambition up with action.

This is a player who left his family and girlfriend behind at 17 to try his luck in Italy; who listens to criticism and uses it as fuel for growth; who religiously watches every single one of his matches back, in its entirety, the moment he arrives home from the stadium. Even if it’s three o’clock in the morning. Even if he played badly. Especially if he played badly.

That professionalism is complemented by his understanding of football’s internal rhythms. Like the best boxers, he knows exactly where an opponent’s weak spot is at any given moment and how he can expose it. He is, says Giaretta, “cruel” on the pitch. He roams and he prods and he tries things. In this age of pass-completion rates, we often equate good decisions with safe decisions but Fernandes is different, a risk-taker. Just don’t mistake those gambling instincts for a lack of smarts.

“When I speak about Bruno Fernandes, what comes to mind is the intelligence of the boy,” says Francesco Guidolin, who managed the Portugal international at Udinese. “He was, above all, very clever — both as a player and as a person.”

Giaretta is even more emphatic. “I’ve been working as a sporting director in football for 15 years and I never met a more intelligent guy,” he tells *The Athletic*. “I never found another one like him.”

Fernandes grew up in Maia, a neighbourhood in Porto’s industrial northern sprawl. His football skills were honed on the streets, his development accelerated by the six-year age gap between him and his brother, Ricardo.

Fernandes looks like he'd blow away in a light breeze even today — as a boy, he was barely there. But what he lacked in stature, he made up for in pluck. “We were all older but he was never scared,” Ricardo once told *Diario de Noticias*. “He would go past players like it was nothing, doing all these dummies. It's the same today: he has no fear of anything.”

Aged seven, he joined local outfit FC Infesta. His displays at a regional youth tournament caught the eye of Porto and Boavista, who both made approaches. Porto most likely expected their greater clout to win the day but Boavista offered something that their neighbours did not: minibus travel to and from training. Neither of Fernandes' parents could drive and the minibus was enough to swing it.

Over eight seasons at Boavista — punctuated by ‘loans’ to Pasteleira, a neighbourhood satellite team — Fernandes made steady progress. He usually played in midfield but was also tested as a ball-playing centre-back. He hated it but was good at starting attacks from deep. He was competitive, flinty and surprisingly robust in the tackle. When Fernandes started to fill out — everything is relative — Boavista knew they had a real prospect on their hands.

“That little kid could dribble past the whole world,” Remulo Marques, the club's former vice president, told *MaisFutebol* in 2017. “He was full of fight, a real leader on the pitch. The only thing he needed to work on was his shooting. That was the only thing between him and stardom.”

The end product would come later. First, Fernandes headed to Italy, in a move he once admitted was “a bit strange”. Novara were a middling Serie B team and did not have a major overseas scouting operation. The transfer came about because Giaretta, the club's sporting director at the time, was willing to take a punt on a personal recommendation from Fernandes' agent.

“He told me it was worth taking a look at this young player at Boavista, so I went over there,” Giaretta recalls. “I went there and he impressed me with his technique. He was really good in one-on-one situations. His decision-making was also excellent.

“The only thing that didn't convince me at the time was his physique. He's not exactly a wardrobe today, of course, but back then he was very, very light. But he showed more character than other players of his age. He had personality on the ball: he always wanted it. Everything flowed through him.”

Giaretta returned to Italy and told Novara's president, Carlo Accornero, that he had found a "mini Rui Costa". It is a comparison he stands by eight years later. "They are midfielders but they are also finishers," he explains. "Bruno likes to get in behind, with or without the ball. This is a good quality. He also shoots well from long distance, like Rui Costa did. They're very similar in style."

A €40,000 fee was agreed between the clubs. Fernandes was keen. While his parents feared that it might be too big a move at his age, they were not going to stand in his way.

His first few weeks at Novara were testing and tear-stained. Fernandes spoke basic English but that was not much help in Italy. He was lonely and homesick and he briefly considered chucking it all in. But his family provided support from distance and when his girlfriend Ana — now his wife — agreed to go over and keep him company, he resolved to dig in.

Off the pitch, that meant learning Italian. He set about the task with typical determination and creativity. Giaretta recalls visiting his apartment and seeing Post-it Notes stuck to every single item. Fernandes had put them up as visual reminders to help him learn basic vocabulary.

"They were everywhere," laughs Giaretta. "'Tavolo' on the table, 'sedia' on the chair, 'frigo' on the fridge... it was really smart. After one month, he could already speak Italian. His attitude was superb. Even at 17, he had such a strong character."

When he joined Udinese the following summer, he was fluent. Guidolin was blown away. "He had only been in Italy for a year but he had adapted really well," the former Swansea City manager tells *The Athletic*. "He spoke our language beautifully."

By that stage, he had also made giant leaps as a footballer. Novara's original idea was to play Fernandes in their Primavera (under-19) team while he settled in but that plan became obsolete in a matter of weeks. He was simply too good for youth football. His senior debut, against league leaders Empoli, only proved the point. "He had an amazing game, fantastic," recalls Giaretta. "He played with the same personality, the same courage that he had shown with the Primavera side."

The fans loved him. So too the local press, who took to calling him "the Maradona of Novara". By the end of the season, Juventus and Inter Milan were sniffing around. It was Udinese, though, who made the most convincing case, offering regular football. They

could also point to a track record of turning promising young foreign players — Alexis Sanchez, Juan Cuadrado, Roberto Pereyra — into stars. It was apparent to anyone with eyes that Fernandes was on a similar path.

Guidolin loved Fernandes. He loved his technique and his application. He loved the quiet grace with which he negotiated the step up to Serie A. Mainly, he loved his appreciation for the nuances of tactics. Not every teenager can take detailed instructions on board, let alone stick to them, but Fernandes could. “He was young but I knew that he understood everything I told him,” says Guidolin. “That is very important for a manager.”

Fernandes was capable of playing in a number of positions. He needed to be, too: Guidolin moved him around, playing him out wide, as a box-to-box midfielder — like Fernandes’ personal role model, Joao Moutinho — and as a No 10.

It is testament to Fernandes’ versatility that he looked — and still looks — comfortable in all of these roles. He says he prefers to play centrally but even when he does, he enjoys drifting wide to create overloads. He is naturally two-footed, which helps, and then there is his ability to interpret a game on the fly. Fernandes sees football as jazz; he respects structure but refuses to be limited by it.

“He is so smart that he is able to find his best position during a game, depending on how it pans out,” says Giaretta, who later joined Fernandes in Udine. “He is able to work out where he needs to be to best help his team.”

At Udinese, that tended to mean one thing: playing where he could be of most assistance to Antonio Di Natale, the side’s leader and attacking talisman. The two enjoyed a good relationship across three seasons but Di Natale’s most significant contribution to the Fernandes story might just have been the dressing-down he gave his team-mate in 2015.

“Bruno Fernandes annoys me,” Di Natale told *Gazzetta dello Sport*. “He’s only young but he has more ability than any of us. He has incredible feet but, sometimes, he drifts through games.”

Those words stung but Di Natale had a point: Fernandes decorated matches but rarely dominated them. When he left Udinese, it was telling that his next move was sideways, to Sampdoria. There, he took the No 10 jersey previously graced by Roberto Mancini but his

influence remained fitful. There was no major outcry when he returned to his homeland after one year at Stadio Luigi Ferraris.

His attacking balance sheet told its own story — 130 games for Udinese and Sampdoria had yielded 16 goals and 16 assists: solid numbers, especially for a player of his age but hardly earth-shattering. Fernandes knew this, knew that Di Natale had been right. When he joined Sporting Lisbon in the summer of 2017, he made a public promise to score more.

How do you explain a 33-goal season from midfield?

If you're Fernandes, you laugh and claim the secret is the big bowl of Chocapic cereal you eat every morning. Members of his family have a better explanation: they say it is down to his commitment to rest and recuperation, exemplified by the “sacred” 90-minute nap he has after lunch every day. You don't make lung-busting late runs into the area all season long without knowing how to recharge your batteries, after all.

There is his set-piece expertise, strangely untapped in Italy. Fernandes is a killer penalty-taker, the little skip in his run-up reminiscent of Jorginho. He practises free kicks like his life depends on it. Former team-mate Andre Galdes nicknamed him ‘The Maia Cannon’ due to the power of his ball-striking but there is precision there, too.

Then there are the more nebulous factors: confidence, momentum, belonging. It helped that Fernandes felt valued in Lisbon from the moment he stepped off the plane. His transfer was the result of a personal request from coach Jorge Jesus to the Sporting board and it was immediately apparent that he would be a key cog in the team.

“At Sporting, he became the main man,” explains Diogo Pombo, who covers the club for O Expresso. “He was the magnet in every attack, the player everyone always looked for. He is a player who is willing to take risks in the final third: he has an explosive shot on him and he seeks to use that as often as he can.”

Given licence to roam and dovetail with striker Bas Dost, he finished his first season with 16 goals to his name. It was a giant leap forward and set the stage for the historic campaign that followed.

It is important to note that Fernandes did not just shine on an individual level in 2018-19, he helped drag his club out of the dark depths of a crisis.

In May 2018, a group of around 50 Sporting fans — angered by the club's failure to qualify for the Champions League — broke into their training complex in Alcochete. Some had knives and steel bars. They smashed up equipment. They also attacked players and staff; Dost needed stitches in his head. It was, understandably, a deeply traumatic experience for everyone involved. A month later, seven senior members of the squad unilaterally terminated their contracts, citing "just cause". There could be little argument from the club.

Fernandes was among those to walk away but by July he was back, signing a new contract and promising to lead the club into a brighter future. "It was a bad time and it left a mark," he said. "But it's over and this is a new Sporting, a new page."

Sporting were palpably grateful. "He's a special case — not just as a player but also as a person," said president Sousa Cintra. "He has a friend for life here." And while some fans initially questioned Fernandes' motivations — there were rumours he had secured a big pay-rise — he soon provided the doubters with 33 reasons to forgive and forget.

That would have been a remarkable return for a settled team. At Sporting, a football club that does a passable impression of an active volcano, it was miraculous.

If Fernandes hoped for a quieter life after that, he was to be disappointed.

First came last summer's prolonged dalliance with Tottenham Hotspur — the only team Fernandes was willing to talk to, despite widespread interest in his signature after the UEFA Nations League. "I thought it was a good moment to leave," he told Record in December. "Tottenham was the one team that ticked all the boxes for me."

Spurs were willing to pay €60 million. Sporting wanted €70 million. There was to be no acceptable middle ground.

It is tempting to view the months since through the lens of that disappointment. There have been fits of pique, most notably an amusing strop after being sent off against Boavista in September. CCTV footage showed him booting a door inside the Estadio da Bessa.

When a bemused security guard challenged him, Fernandes didn't hold back. "Fuck you," he shouted. "I'll pay for the fucking door! Go fuck yourselves!"

Bruno Fernandes loses temper after red card



A couple of weeks later, an audio recording of Fernandes laying into his team-mates was leaked to the press. "There are players here who haven't got the right attitude," the midfielder said. "They don't want to be here. If they don't want to play, they should go fuck themselves."

This, though, is just what Fernandes is like. He is passionate, sincere, unafraid to make his feelings known. "He always has to have the last word," his brother once told *Diario de Noticias*. "It's been like that since he was a boy. It doesn't matter if he's speaking to the president, his coach, or anyone else. He can't keep it in. If he feels there is something wrong, he has to say it."

Fernandes' own reaction to the secret recordings only rammmed home that point. "It was nothing that I didn't say in the changing room after the match," he told *Record*. "Some people are scared of speaking up but I don't have a problem with it. It's who I am."

England has always been the promised land for Fernandes. Even as a teenager, he had it all mapped out. “I see myself in the Premier League,” he said during his time at Novara. “It is the most beautiful championship; for the stadiums, for the fans.”

Aesthetics aside, he will be under no illusion that this represents another step up and a big one at that. Now 25, he will not be able to hide behind the veil of youth. Potential is not enough at this stage in his career. He has waited for this opportunity. If he does not grasp it, there is no guarantee that he will get another.

Fernandes is clever enough to understand this, to know that his big move comes with its own side order of pressure. United are paying Sporting Lisbon €55 million upfront and that could rise to €65 million with achievable add-ons such as Champions League qualification. A further €15 million will be owed if more speculative targets are met, such as Fernandes being awarded the Ballon d’Or and United winning the Champions League.

Which brings us full circle, back to that hard-edged mentality. Is it probably not exactly what *Gazzetta dello Sport* had in mind when they called him a “crystalline talent” but then Fernandes has always been different, a rare marriage of the durable and the dazzling.

Giaretta, one of the first to be beguiled by Fernandes, says he is not remotely surprised that his former protege has come this far. “I knew him too well for that,” he says. “Bruno had all the qualities — mental, individual, technical — to reach the top, top level.

“If you can’t have great expectations for a player like that, who can you have great expectations for?”

(Photo: Patricia De Melo Moreira/AFP via Getty Images)

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