
The number

Peter Glynn and Noel Blake, FA National Coach

Gianfranco Zola had all the attributes of a great number 10. The diminutive Italian tells The Boot Room what is needed to succeed in the role and why the number 10 has not always been a priority in England.



Gianfranco Zola, quite rightly, takes his place alongside Messrs Bergkamp and Cantona in the list of foreign talent who have imported footballing treasures to these shores. Masters of their trade, schooled in delicate artistry and flair, many believed such players were otherworldly to the stock player of mid-nineties English football. Here were fusions of the playmaker, maverick and deep-lying striker.

To say there had been none before that fulfilled this role would be to do a grave disservice to many greats in the English game. The role, however, has not always been a priority in England. In Europe and South America it is deeply ingrained in the games cultural fabric, where the best talent would grow up with a number 10 stuck to their back.

“The reason why the English, develop fewer of them [the number 10], is because historically you have been set-up with two strong strikers, two sitting midfielders and two wingers. You never used to play the ball through the middle. What you used to do was play the ball on the sides [wings] and cross the ball to the tall player,” explained Zola, one of the finest proponents of the play-making art.

The diminutive Italian’s arrival at Chelsea in 1996 was catalyst for a more expansive style of play at Stamford Bridge. With Ruud Gullit in charge of the managerial reigns, the man who wore number 25 but who embodied the spirit of a number 10, was given the licence to create. Something he was accustomed to growing up and playing the game in Europe.

“In Italy and Spain they ask for different things; they want the quality man to be behind the strikers, to get the ball and feed strikers with a sliding ball. So it’s a consequence of your style.”



For many the Italian walked on air at Stamford Bridge



Zola successfully graduated with The FA UEFA Pro-licence in June and having been strongly linked with a number of managerial vacancies over the summer, will be hoping for a return to management soon.

Gianfranco Zola Profile

- Gianfranco Zola scored 193 goals in a club career which saw him play more than 600 games.
- His most celebrated periods were enjoyed at Napoli, Parma and Chelsea.
- Between 1996 and 2003 Zola played 229 games for Chelsea scoring 59 goals.
- In November 2004, Zola was awarded an OBE – Honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire in a ceremony in Rome.
- His audacious back-heeled FA Cup Goal against Norwich in the 2000/01 season prompted Claudio Ranieri, Chelsea manager at the time, to say: “He is a wizard and the wizard must try.”
- Zola’s coaching career began as assistant manager of the Italy U21 side, from there the Italian went on to be West Ham first-team manager between 2008 and 2010.
- After a disappointing run of results at Upton Park, Zola was sacked in June 2010

“You needed to have the skilful players on the side. That’s why you developed players like Chris Waddle and Kevin Keegan. I’m a hundred per cent sure that if they were born in Italy or in Spain they’d be playing in a different place, because the style of play is different,” said the former Napoli and Parma forward.

In his excellent documentation of the history of tactics, *Inverting the Pyramid*, Jonathan Wilson underlined the effect that Zola and another elusive deep-lying striker had on the English game. “The remarkable impact on English football of Eric Cantona and Gianfranco Zola was largely the ability to drop off and play between the lines, confusing English centre backs,” wrote Wilson.

Zola’s arena consisted of the pockets of space that exist between midfield and attack; uneasy patrolling areas for unsure defenders. With fewer Makelele-shaped barriers attempting to throw a blanket over such artistry, it was here that the pocket-sized Italian found a blank canvas in which he could dart, pirouette and impart his craft. His contribution soon manifest as silverware. During six and a half years at Stamford Bridge Zola won The FA Cup twice, the European Cup Winners’ Cup and the League Cup. He was also crowned Footballer of the Year in 1997. It was with little surprise that the popular Italian was voted Chelsea’s all-time best player in 2003.

Those fortunate enough to share the training ground with him probably felt his impact the strongest. Stories about afternoons curling endless free-kicks into the top corner of a goal guarded by bemused youth team goalkeepers have been elevated to the almost mythical.



“In Italy and Spain they want the quality man to be behind the strikers, to get the ball and feed strikers with a sliding ball.”

Although it is hard to envisage, Zola once played the role of gawping youngster himself. Understandable, when the subject of his admiration was reserved for a certain Diego Armando Maradona.

“Not only was Maradona an inspiration for me but I could get ideas from him. When I first went there [Napoli], I saw him do things that I didn’t even know it was possible to do. So for me it gave me something to work on and something to visualise and something I had to do. Obviously, I couldn’t do everything he was doing because Maradona was such a good player, but it took me on a different level because somehow he made my borders [of imagination] bigger.”

It’s no surprise that Zico and Platini complete Zola’s list of other inspirations. Concoctions of deceptive movement and deft and delicacy in possession, all were players who were transformed into icons; all with number ten on their back.

“You have to let the imagination and creativity of a player develop. If he is trying something constructive, you’ve got to let it go. The number 10 in Italy is all the time given freedom; because we knew he could do something special. He has to have trust and belief in himself and be brave and try things.”

Zola is concerned that creativity is often stifled by criticism.

“Sometimes you have to try things which are difficult. [But] i’m sure there will be the players around him, that if you do something wrong, they’ll be telling him off and criticising him. Because sometimes when you try a difficult thing you risk, and sometimes the result is not right,” added the former West Ham manager.

To be afforded a glance into the workings of a great mind is rare. But it’s here, amidst fertile pastures, that Zola believes the seeds of performance can grow.

“Work a lot on the imagination. If you want to do something, if you want to get better and better, you have to picture what you want to do,” concluded the Italian.

There are few better to impart advice.

Maradona toys with a posse of Belgium defenders at the 1982 World Cup in Spain



“The number 10 in Italy is all the time given freedom; because we knew he could do something special.”