

Samba sets up for the last dance

What became of a teenage sensation?

Sunday February 13, 2005

The Observer

He was supposed to be the spearhead to be the spearhead of England's assault on the 2006 World Cup. Such was the hyperbole surrounding 14-year-old Cherno Samba that during one weekend four years ago he knocked all the established Premiership stars off the back pages. The tabloid frenzy around the wunderkind from Peckham was matched only by that of agents looking to get a slice of the most sought-after English talent of his generation.

And after learning of his prolific scoring exploits, including 132 goals in 32 games when he was just 13, the Premiership's big guns homed in on the England Schoolboys' forward, with Liverpool showing the biggest interest.

Five years on, and after the 'big move' never materialized, Cherno finds himself starting again. Having been released by Millwall in the summer, without a first-team appearance to his name, the 19-year-old is three months into a four-year 'development contract' with Cadiz, who are top of the Spanish second division.

For both the boy and his family, who had arrived in Britain from Gambia in the early 1990s, the experience has been a chastening one. Speaking at the family's modest south London flat, Cherno's father, Al-Hajie, shakes his head when he thinks about what his son has been through.

'It was when Cherno got called up to England when he was 13 that all the newspapers first started to get in touch. I had to change my phone number twice because of it. I didn't want everyone to have access like that.

'Agents started giving Cherno cards and asking him to tell me to contact them to talk about representing him. One of them offered me £25,000 to look after my son. I found it strange. I thought I should be paying them to look after my son.' For Cherno, then just a regular student at the local comprehensive school, it was hard not to react to the attention.

'There were many agents trying to get me. They were ringing my school and turning up at my house. They tried to bribe me by offering me gifts and money. I was the most wanted kid in England at 14 and I became arrogant with it. I thought, "I've made it, I'm the best player in the world, and no one can talk to me",' he says, recalling the heady days.

Al-Hajie was working as a chef and admits thoughts of getting his hands on the money began eating away at him.

'I was earning £1,000 a month and I must admit the offers of £10,000 and £25,000 to represent Cherno were tempting. But in the end I thought that wouldn't be to Cherno's advantage. I said to myself it's haram [forbidden in Islam] to take a bribe. I felt if I took the money I would be betraying my son. So we chose somebody we could trust.'

That man was Harry Gebber, a football coach turned agent, who had known Cherno since he was nine. Gebber got Cherno and other players from Nottingham FC to go to train with Millwall when they gave him a job on their coaching staff. But when it came to signing academy forms at 14 the Sambas felt it was time to move on. After all, as Al-Hajie recalls: 'My son was going to be a star.'

Though reluctant to agree, Millwall allowed Chernov to tour prospective suitors, saying they would demand compensation.

Having spoken to, and visited a number of clubs, Chernov chose Liverpool because 'they showed they wanted me the most'. After a week-long trial, Chernov was back at school when he got a call on his mobile. It was Michael Owen.

'When Owen called it was a thrill. I was on a bus coming from school and he phoned me in front of all my friends. He said I should sign for Liverpool because it's a great club and it would be good to play alongside me. My mates couldn't believe it. They were phoning Harry [Gebber] to ask him if it was true.'

The move never materialized. Millwall say they were prepared to let the player go, but it was the player's representatives that stymied the move. Sports lawyer Mel Stein, who had been chosen by Gebber to broker an agreement, said it was Millwall's reluctance to name a price that meant Chernov's move was doomed.

'Millwall didn't come up with an asking price,' says Stein. 'It could have been anything at a tribunal. Clubs didn't want to be caught out. Somebody could have had a nasty surprise if they let it go to tribunal without having an idea of what Millwall wanted.'

Some clubs felt that tribunals had set fees far too high, so Liverpool pulled out. Samba stayed and Millwall got what they wanted, but at a price. For the first time, the club promised to award a 14-year-old academy player a guaranteed two-year contract when he turned 17.

'We wanted the boy to stay. Those were his demands when he signed an academy contract with the club and they were completely against our policy,' says Nicky Milo, youth academy director at Millwall. A return to the young Lions was not what Chernov thought would happen. After all he was the future 'golden boy'. The meteoric rise first floundered and then went into reverse.

Chernov admits he had lost his appetite for the game.

'I felt tortured. My football went out of the window. Whether you are 10, 15 or 38, when a move to big club falls through, you get low. I started to question myself and there were times I tried to quit football. At 14 I played for the under-17s. I was still playing for the under-17s when I was 17, which means I didn't improve my football.'

Milo questions Chernov's desire. 'He may have wasted his first two years with the club. People had overtaken him in terms of physique, development and commitment. He's a very nice and approachable boy, but did he genuinely give it his best shot or did he leave it a bit late? It wasn't his entire fault. He was too young for it all to be his fault. Maybe we are all to blame a little.'

The one constant throughout Chernov's career has been his involvement with England's various squads. He has represented every team from the under-14s to the current under-20 side, which he played for on Tuesday night against Russia at The Valley. He was substituted 13 minutes before the end having missed a pair of good opportunities.

For Gebber, the man who has coached and represented Chernov for the past decade, there is no place for recriminations.

'Chernov came in the public light too early and as a young boy everything got too much for him. I feel his football wasn't developing because he felt he had made it. I didn't think I did anything that I shouldn't have done. I was just there to support him for whatever he wanted and I was there for

the boy. Everybody can pass the buck, but the bottom line falls with him. If he was good enough clubs would have taken him,' says Gebber.

Millwall's decision to release Chernozhukov in the summer, as soon as his contract was up, passed without fanfare. And attempts to get a deal with Coventry, West Bromwich Albion and Leeds all failed. But just when it looked as though Chernozhukov Samba's career as a footballer was finished at 19, salvation came from Cadiz, although he has not yet broken into the first team.

Looking back on his time in the spotlight, Chernozhukov says: 'I'm glad everything happened to me when I was young. I had to grow up fast. But I've learned from that. It made me a stronger and better person and realizes that you can be at the top one minute and the next minute you can be the lowest person on earth. Now I know to be humble, no matter how good you are you have to work for things.'

Despite the setbacks, ambition still burns bright for the Peckham boy. With his confidence returned, he says: 'I don't care what anybody says, I have got the talent. I will work hard and I will make it.'

Chernozhukov: The Headlines

DECEMBER 1999

Fergie in £2m chase for ace kid Samba, 14!

MARCH 2000

Golden Boy: Houllier Bids £1.5m for 15-year-old

Millwall Slam Kid Snatchers: Paphitis Blasts Liverpool

The Boy Aged 15 with a Price Tag of £1.5m: Soccer Clubs Clamour to Sign a New Star (But he's Got to Take his GCSEs First)

APRIL 2000

The Only Way is up for Samba

SEPTEMBER 2000

Samba Opts for Arsenal