

Berbatov arrives on the big stage

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Dimitar Berbatov will probably have a renewed bounce in his step when he steps on to the pitch for Manchester United today at Blackburn Rovers.

The Bulgarian striker has had a slow start at United since his £30m transfer last month but finally scored his first goals for the club in the 3-0 Champions League victory at Aalborg of Denmark this week. Yet the lanky player with the languid, elegant skills, will not get carried away.

Dreams change but the struggle remains. Once all Berbatov wanted to do was play for CSKA Sofia, the club he had loved since meeting Hristo Stoichkov, their greatest forward, at the age of nine. He battled to achieve that goal and his dreams increased with his ambition. He moved from Bulgaria to Bayer Leverkusen in Germany and then to London club Tottenham Hotspur but dreamed of going yet higher.

Finally, in the seconds before the transfer deadline closed on September 1, the 27-year-old's transfer to United was confirmed. Until this week he had shown little of his talent for his new club but Berbatov, for all his apparent diffidence, has never ducked adversity.

Certainly his mother, Margarita, is sure he will come good at Old Trafford. "I am proud of this transfer as a mother and as a Bulgarian," she insists. "This is a dream come true for Mitko [as she still calls him] and I am so happy that finally his wish was fulfilled. I am sure he will earn a place in the hearts of Manchester United with good performances and by giving his best all the time."

Perhaps any mother would say the same but then Margarita remembers how difficult it was for her Mitko when he left his home town of Blagoevgrad as a teenager to pursue that first dream of playing for CSKA.

Given both his father and grandfather had been footballers, it was no surprise that Berbatov should want to follow suit but it took him time to shine and his first sporting success came in athletics. Those early difficulties, coupled with poverty in an era when queues for milk and meat were commonplace, Margarita believes, made her son stronger.

"All the kids in the neighbourhood had bicycles and Dimitar also wanted one but we could not afford it," she says.

Playing football in borrowed boots and hand-me-downs, he developed such a determination to succeed that when his father offered to use his connections to get Mm a place with the local club, Pirin, he insisted on attending trials like everybody else. Berbatov was accepted into the club but, at that age, seemed slow and a little clumsy and was regularly left out of the youth team.

"If he wasn't in the team, he would come home and not speak to anybody for a day or two," his mother recalls. "It was a tragedy for him but what did he do? He went running and training twice as hard. He had the ambition and will to succeed. We knew then he was a unique character and we knew he would always fight to succeed. I think if he hadn't gone through those difficult periods early in life he would not later have succeeded at CSKA."

Make no mistake, the reserve that can so infuriate fans, hides an inner steel.

Berbatov was 17 when his talent was recognised by Hristo Marintchev, the head of CSKA's academy.

"He was tenacious and ambitious but never showed that in front of the others," says Marintchev. "I knew he had potential for football because his father and grandfather were good players. He worked hard and was responsible about training and school and that was very important. He never missed a class or had problems in any subject at school."

"After he came to Sofia I suggested that he could take the last two grades in high school in one year so he would have one year just for football before he had to do his military service. Dimitar agreed and passed 11th and 12th grades in one year without effort. The next year he concentrated only on football and that was a big help for his development."

Not that Margarita stopped worrying. "One day I went to see him and I saw the saddest picture," she says. "He was in the club dormitory, lying in his bed. It seemed nobody else was around in the whole neighbourhood, only a few dogs. He was listening to some music and looking at the ceiling where I saw he had drawn not some girl but the CSKA logo. That was when I realised how much he loved that club."

Slowly Berbatov became part of a highly rated CSKA youth side that also included Martin Petrov and Stiliyan Petrov, now at Manchester City and Aston Villa respectively.

With coaches still doubtful about his lack of pace, though, it wasn't until he was 18 that he was given a chance in the first team by Dimitar Penev, the coach who led Bulgaria to the semi-finals of the 1994 World Cup. He decided to give Berbatov a chance in a friendly away against a Greek side.

"He slept most of the time in the bus during our trip to Greece," Penev says. "I suggested we should leave him at the border and pick him up on the way back. He played well in the game but nobody told him after that that we wanted him to train with the first team, so it was three days before we found him."

Berbatov did well enough and helped win the Bulgarian Cup in his first season but those were difficult times for CSKA as rivals Levski dominated. Fans were mutinous, and matters came to a head for Berbatov at a derby against Levski in 2000.

Berbatov missed several scoring opportunities and Levski won the game. Fans were frustrated at the whole team but it was Berbatov who bore the brunt of their abuse. Distressed, he threatened to quit football.

"He was devastated," says his mother. "His phone was ringing but he didn't want to talk to anybody. That was maybe the worst moment in his career."

He was persuaded to return but it seems things were never the same at CSKA afterwards and he left for Bayer Leverkusen in 2001 after just 48 starts - and 26 goals - for the club of his dreams.

After that, dreams took rather a back seat as he progressed on a steady upward path, from Bulgaria to the Bundesliga and then to England's Premier League.

His apparent truculence in negotiating a move from Spurs to the European champions has been criticised but the motives behind that desire can hardly be condemned, as his mother points out.

"Mitko gets on well with coaches, fans and team-mates, whatever the media says about him," she says. "He adapts easily to new conditions and people and I'm sure he'll continue with his great performances."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, October 4 e 5, Life & Arts, p. 23.