

Being a Manchester City fan no longer exercise in futility

After spending hundreds of millions, Manchester City is ready to make a run to the top of the English Premier League

Don Markus, The Baltimore Sun

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Phil Cragg has lived all over the world, but his heart still belongs to his hometown and the long-suffering football team he has followed since childhood.

Being a fan of Manchester City was for many years like being a Chicago Cubs fan in terms of accepting futility or a New York Mets fan when it came to being considered second-class citizens compared to those rooting for the Yankees of English soccer, Manchester United.

"We're the best team in Manchester; we're the only team in Manchester," Cragg, who now lives on the Jersey Shore, said jokingly while watching Manchester City play last Friday night in a "friendly" against Sporting Lisbon at Red Bull Arena in Harrison, N.J.

That's what Cragg and others have made themselves believe for a long time, but now it finally might be true. An ownership group from oil-rich Abu Dhabi bought the team in August of 2008, and has subsequently spent huge sums in transfer fees to purchase more than a dozen players, including a European-record £32.5 million (nearly \$50 million) for Brazilian star Robinho shortly after the sale went through.

The team spent another £100 million in transfer fees last summer and has already doled around £90 million this summer, with more to come. (The transfer fees typically go to the player's former team, a figure that doesn't include the player's salary.) Some of that talent will be on display Saturday night in Baltimore when Manchester City plays European Cup champion Inter Milan at M&T Bank Stadium.

Having moved up from 10th in 2008-2009 to fifth in the English Premier League last season - losing on the final day of the season at home to Tottenham for the last of the coveted top four spots- Manchester City now is poised to make a run at its first first-division title and European Cup in more than 40 years. The top four teams in the English Premier League qualify for the European Cup, or Champions League, competition.

"I think it's pressure on us, but I think it's positive pressure," said Irish midfielder Stephen Ireland, 23, who made his debut with Manchester City as a 15-year-old and has played regularly for the team since 2005. "Everyone's excited for the season to start, after what we did last year. I think it's for us to see how far we can go and hope far we can challenge, especially in the European Cup as well. It would nice for us to push on and try to win some silverware. It's been a long time since we won anything."

After winning England's top division only three times in its first 90 years -- in 1937, 1956 and 1968 -- Manchester City's last run to glory came in 1970, when it won League Cup and European Cup.

"My best years [as a fan] were when City were winning, and (Manchester) United were winning, and Liverpool were winning and Everton were winning and you had four of the best clubs in the world within 30 miles of each other," said Cragg, who started rooting for the team in 1960 and has since passed that love on to his son. "Being a City fan then, it was very exciting."

Remaining a City fan over the last 40 years has been very trying for Cragg and others. There were seven managers in the Eighties. The team finally bottomed out in 1996 when Manchester City became the first former European Cup champion to be relegated to the country's third division. Since returning to the Premier League in 2002, the team finished no better than eighth until the new ownership group arrived.

The reason for the team's long-standing mediocrity was the lack of money spent in relation to other teams.

"Teams like Liverpool, [Manchester] United and Arsenal and Chelsea specifically have bought the Premier League for many years and now we're in position to do the same thing," said longtime fan Gary Fawcett, a Mancunian who flew to Newark from his adopted home in Calgary, Alberta last week and came decked out in the team's traditional power-blue jersey . "It's a fabulous thing."

The new owners are now imitating what American businessman Malcolm Glazer did after buying Manchester United in 2003, and Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich did after purchasing Chelsea the same year.

"We're playing the game," Cragg said. "This is outspending the opposition. This is like what Abramovich did with Chelsea. He said he wanted a team that could rival the best clubs in Europe. That is what City is doing now. I'd love to win the European cup."

The pressure falls squarely on Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini, who was hired in December 2009 after a successful run with Inter Milan and improved his new team immediately with a more defensive style. Having added enough talent to become one of the Premier League's preseason favorites, Mancini dismisses the notion that this year's team needs to finish in the top four for him to keep his job.

"I don't have pressure," Mancini said after Manchester City lost to the Red Bulls, two days after losing to Sporting Life. "It's not my problem. We want to have a good team."

Team captain and central defender Kolo Toure, who joined Manchester City last season, deflects the question of pressure as easily as he clears a well-placed corner curling dangerously toward the net.

"It takes time, everything takes time," said Toure, who recruited his brother Yaya away from Barcelona. "City is trying to do something really special, but it can't happen like that, you know. It takes a few years, and we'll see."

Former Manchester City assistant Hans Backe, who nows coaches the Red Bulls of Major League Soccer, called Manchester City "the most powerful club in the world today" and added that the money being spent is staggering.

"Sometimes you feel it's ridiculous," Backe, whose team recently added French superstar Thierry Henry, said after Sunday's game. "It's a little bit strange."

Backe sees a new football power emerging.

"I think they have a plan definitely to be one of the best clubs in the world, " Backe said. "I definitely would love to be in there now. It's a perfect scenario in a way to have that kind of owners behind them."