

# Champions



**Mourinho reveals his biggest mistake**

José's way, p32

**"Give the rabbit an extra carrot, he saved all our lives"**

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**"John Terry comes in hard, he'll do anything to get the ball"**

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## PURE GENIUS

**On fire and in here!  
Alves, Van Persie  
and Schweinsteiger**

**ALL INTERVIEWED**



### FREE-KICKS

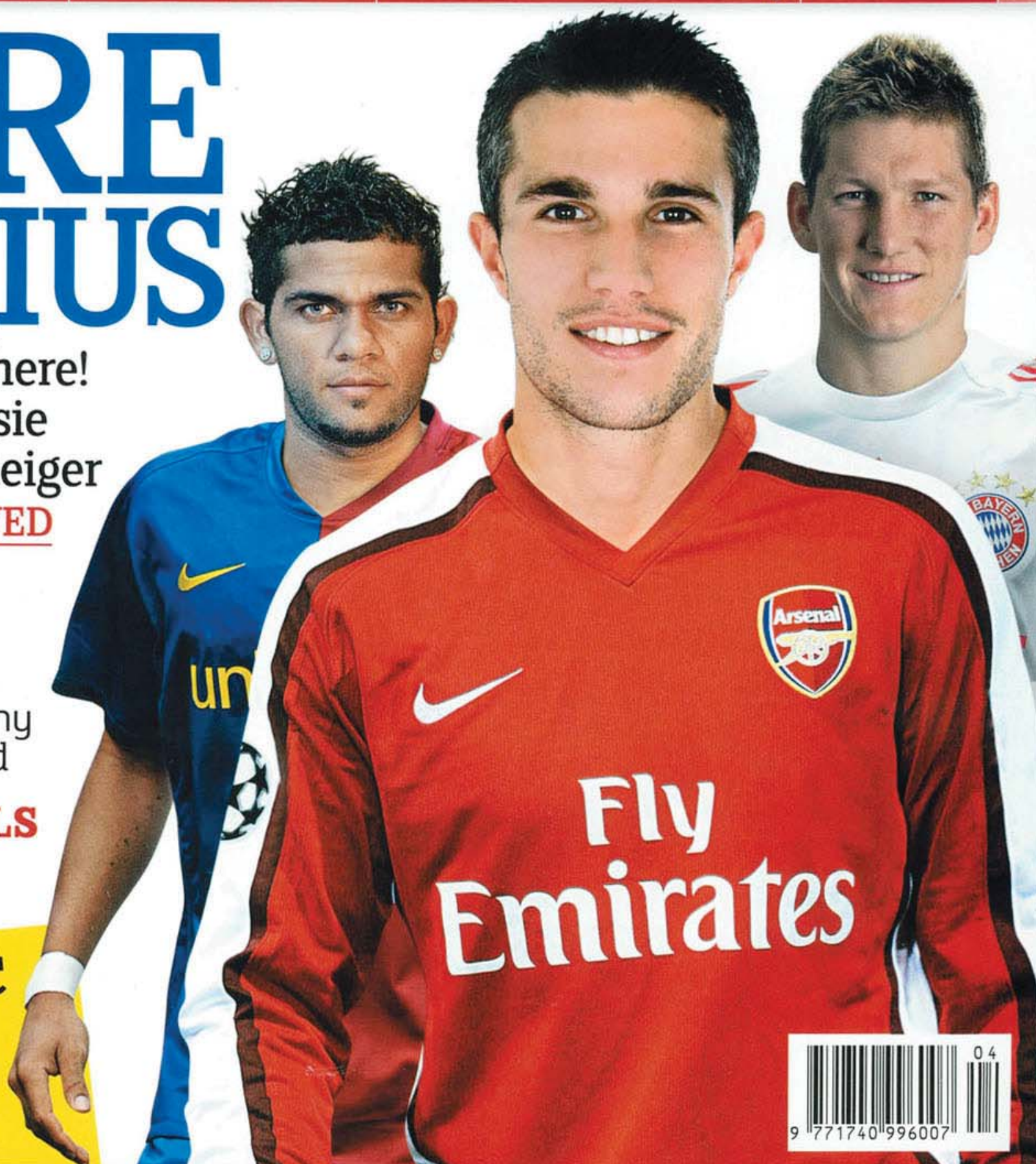
Zico on why so many end up in the crowd

### WHITE ANGELS

The heroes who defied the tanks

### THE MAGIC OF No 14...

When Xabi Alonso met Jan Mølby



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# Name Dani Alves

## Position Right-back

## Hero Tweety Pie

Tearing up the form book in his first season at Barcelona, the diminutive Brazilian puts the case for the little fellas to Graham Hunter

Photos Getty Images

**E**arly in February, Dani Alves sealed his burgeoning love affair with Camp Nou, following up a brilliant goal with a wonderful celebration dance that appeared part preying mantis, part hyperactive child. In fact, it represented his most cherished belief about football.

Barça were 2-0 up against Sporting Gijón when a cross from Xavi was headed out to the edge of the box and the Brazilian express train in boots arrived like the 9.30 from Juazeiro. Crashing through a challenge, he stole the ball with chest control, played an instinctive one-two with Leo Messi, danced around left-back Raúl Cámara and belted the ball past Iñaki Lafuente into the top-right corner.

The goal was sublime. Then came the apparently ridiculous. Alves skipped to the corner flag, hopped from one toe to the other, his arms waving way above his head as if he were taunting someone of the dimensions of

Peter Crouch or Nikola Zigic.

Fast forward a month and Alves is happy to explain. First, he rolls up his trouser leg.

What you expect to see are cuts and bruises from the take-the-man-and-the-ball tackles he suffers. What you actually see is a little yellow bird and (suffering succotash!) a cat. The feline aggressor has arms raised to pounce, claws extended for action, but his prey is ready to produce the surprise sword from behind his back. You've probably seen the actual cartoon in which the scene is played out.

"The tattoo is of Tweety Pie facing up to Sylvester," grins the Brazilian. "I did it because the idea of the little bird thwarting the big bad cat makes me laugh, but it also symbolises something important to me.

"The cat wants to catch and eat Tweety, and if you take his size and power at face value, should be able to. But

the little guy is always ready, able to outsmart him – he's always inventive enough to have something up his sleeve.

"The little guys rule in football, too. We are in an era where there are so many clever footballing 'midgets' who are smarter than the average player and can do something 'different'. Some people favour height, weight and power. When football developed perhaps size and bulk really counted. Perhaps there was a time when you couldn't have a top-level career without being a certain age, height and weight. But for years us little guys have been proving we can

play great football and dominate matches. I've always said it's better to be clever and creative than strong and big. Football is for the smart guys, especially the little fellas."

True to his theme, Alves turns up for training in his Mini Cooper. He would give membership of his less-is-more gang to Xavi, Iniesta, David Silva, Joe Cole, Sergio Agüero, Giuseppe Rossi, and Arshavin. Maradona and Romário qualify as

honoured graduates. And, of course, there is Leo Messi. Down Barça's right flank there is a footballing brains trust linking Messi with Xavi and Alves, and apparently the only thing more glorious than watching is being part of it.

"When I talk about Messi I'm not going to do it from the point of view of a friend or teammate, but as someone who loves football from deep in his soul," Alves begins. "Messi is a footballing god. He tortures opponents. The football gods, to me, are those who can turn a game at any second, in any situation. They are capable of something so different, so revolutionary, that you can bring them off the bench and they'll produce goals to turn a defeat into victory.

"It's a joy to play with Messi, and he underlines my point about football needing smart players. Another thing about him is that becoming a great is not just about turning up and turning on the magic. You have to train well, live well and look after yourself. I've seen others who have had →





## THE RIGHT STUFF

Also in the Alves mode, these players have never received due recognition.

### Josimar

The adventurous Brazilian with the never-ending legs lit up the 1986 World Cup with two fantastic goals. His shot from outside the area almost broke the Northern Ireland net; his next came after a wonderful run and rocket finish from a tight angle against Poland. He retired in 1997.

### Christian Panucci

The epitome of the all-round full-back, Roma's Panucci (below) has positional sense, a biting tackle, good reading and knows where the goal is. He won the Champions League with Milan (1994) and Real Madrid (1998) and scored the goal against Scotland that sent Italy to Euro 2008.

### Wim Suurbier

The Ajax man was comfortable on either side but starred on the right as the Dutch won three European Cups from 1971 to 1973. Tall and strong, Suurbier was a fine passer of the ball with either foot and a tremendous crosser. He retired in 1982 with 69 caps.

### Willy Sagnol

This spiky, competitive full-back won 58 caps for France, five Bundesliga titles and the 2001 Champions League with Bayern. Only Lilian Thuram's pre-eminence at right-back prevented Sagnol winning more caps. He retired in February after failing to recover from an Achilles-tendon injury sustained at Euro 2008.

### Stefan Reuter

To play right-back for Germany 69 times and wear the Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, Juventus and Fiorentina shirts you must have something about you. Reuter, Champions League winner in 1997, was extremely fast, strong in one-on-ones, whether in attack or defence, and loved to go forward. He retired in 2004.



Alves connects with the ball ready to shoot... Gijón's full-back Cámara is helpless to intervene

their head turned by the praise. They think, 'I'm great, I don't have to work hard.' But you do, you have to stay hungry, and Messi has that.

"Although there are few players more unpredictable to play against than Leo, the more intelligent you are as a teammate the more you can anticipate how he'll shake a marker, where he likes to run, when he likes to receive the ball and when you are likely to play a one-two. Football is not only about what you do when you have the ball, it's about what you do when you don't. You learn to be ready to take advantage of Leo's movement even before you receive possession. The thing I've improved most since moving to Barça is what to do when I'm off the ball."

Alves is talking about judgement. Jorge Valdano may be a proud Argentinian World Cup-winner but he's honest enough to praise a good Brazilian when he sees one. Valdano's current expression is: "Dani Alves is so attacking, so fit, so strong it seems there is two of him. One day the attacking Alves will bump into the defensive Dani tracking back on the same right-hand side of Barça's team."

Within that joke there is the only caveat about Alves. At Sevilla he was rampant coming forward but not always the shrewdest defender. If you talk to Frédéric Kanouté about him, the striker will deliver a paean of praise, calling Alves Sevilla's greatest attacker and defender rolled into one. A team leader, a dressing-room joker – the perfect teammate. But in Barça's strict 4-3-3 there is less room for even a couple of metres of positional error than there was in Juande Ramos's habitual 4-4-2.

If Alves has an Achilles heel it is how many times he is seen chasing back into shot when TV shows a goal replay. Perhaps that's why Brazil coach Dunga favours Inter's slightly more conservative Maicon, despite the great Cafu naming Alves as "my natural successor".

It looks as if the little man from Juazeiro will play his role in helping Barça end their two-season major-trophy drought, and perhaps Pep Guardiola will repay him with the final, tactical touches to his footballing make-up.

"The coach is teaching me a lot, I'm happy to say. It's a process of reading the games differently, making slightly different decisions," says Alves. "I don't in any way mean to sound big-headed, but at Sevilla I carried more

responsibility. The two big guys up front loved the ball into them as often and early as possible and they would either hold it up or get a header on goal. We have such different strikers at Barça and so much talent, I've got to moderate what I do with the ball, even though I receive it a little less than at Sevilla."

**"I've seen players turned by praise who think: 'I'm great, I don't have to work hard'"**

Statistical evidence backs him up. At Sevilla he racked up between 8.7 and 9.3 miles (14-15km) per match. UEFA statistics already show this year it is under seven miles (11km) over 90 minutes. Not a drop in physical performance, just more judicious use of his storming runs.

"When someone like Cafu talks about me that way it's a proud moment," Alves says. "I always make it clear that just to be with the Brazil squad is a huge honour. If the coach wanted me to be kit man, that'd be fine. I'll keep working, be ready to take my chance if it comes – and if, eventually, I achieve 20% or 30% of what Cafu did, I'll be delighted."

Thus far Dani hasn't done badly. As a kid he promised his father he'd pay him back for support and nurturing by becoming a successful professional. The first time Alves Sr. arrived at Sánchez Pizjuán to watch his boy play, and saw how revered he'd become, he burst into tears. Presumably one or two more flowed as Alves won two UEFA Cups, the Super Cup and one Spanish Cup. The excellence of his play almost took him to the Premier League. Now he's not only delighted that a move to Chelsea fell through, he's concerned that Robinho may have erred.

"One day there was an agreement between Sevilla and Chelsea, the next there wasn't," is his recollection of a situation that became confrontational between him and the club. "It's lucky it didn't go through, in retrospect, because Sevilla ended up getting the money they wanted and I arrived at a truly great club at a moment when they are playing world-class football. It proves you don't have to precipitate your departure from a team if you are good enough. A great club will always come along to buy you."

"I don't think Robinho's intention was to get out of Madrid to go to Manchester City. He just didn't want to stay at Madrid. He kind of ended up at City, but I think that not long from now he'll move to a great club because he's a brilliant footballer."

Just like Tweety Pie-fan Dani. ★

