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# SVEN

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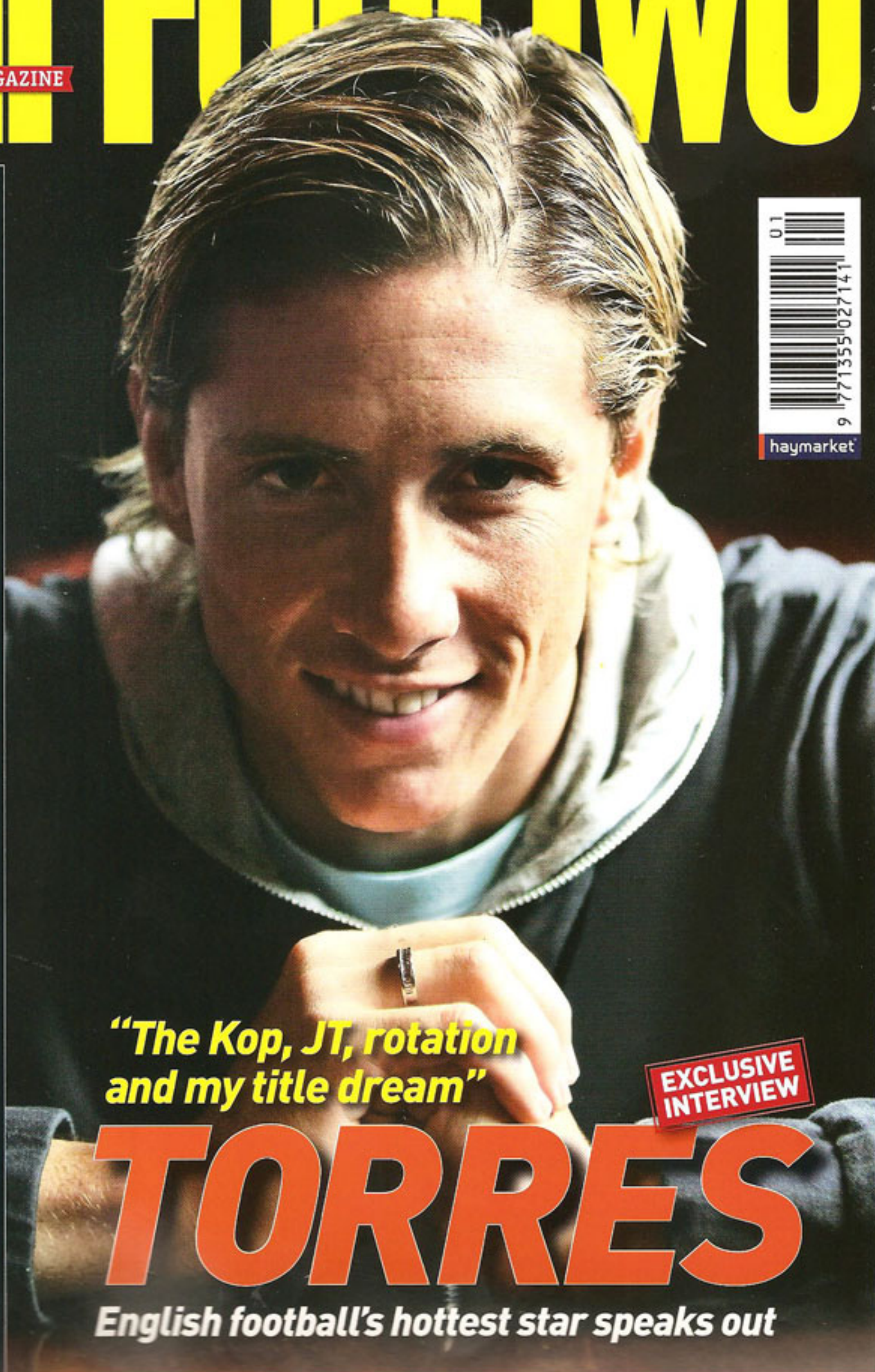
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The untold story of  
English fans in Europe



*"The Kop, JT, rotation  
and my title dream"*

**EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW**

# TORRES

*English football's hottest star speaks out*



BIG SAM'S DARTS TEAM ★ NELSON MANDELA ★ ALASTAIR CAMPBELL



# HEAD OVER HEELS

**As the most expensive signing in Liverpool's history, the pressure was immediately on £24m striker Fernando Torres to prove that he could be a Kop idol. Thankfully, it was love at first sight...**

Words Simon Talbot

**F**ernando Torres races away down the left, pauses momentarily, then accelerates past Tal Ben Haim, a burst of speed taking him into the Chelsea penalty area. Opening out his body, he guides the ball into the net beyond Petr Cech, slips to the ground, gets up, dashes to the corner and skids onto his knees, arms aloft, a huge smile stretching across his face as his teammates pile on top.

Just 15 minutes into his Anfield debut and already the Spaniard has scored a goal – against Chelsea of all teams – that defines exactly what it is he brings to Liverpool. Already the doubts about his £24m transfer fee – a club record – are washed away in a cyclone of pace, power and precision. Already the doubts about leaving Madrid are washed away in a swirl of red. The fans are going bonkers, Torres is a hero. “Oh yes!” screams the commentator, “they’ve fallen in love with him now!”

“It was a shame they then got that penalty, which wasn’t a penalty,” Torres says from his new home in Liverpool, next door to goalkeeper Pepe Reina. “But I’ll never forget that day. Virtually everything you dream of in a debut happened: to score, and against a big club like Chelsea, for it to be a nice goal, the noise, the welcome



from the fans, the way they took to me right from the start, it was... incredible....”

His voice trails off. “People had told me about all about Anfield, about the atmosphere, about *You’ll Never Walk Alone*. But they also told me that however much they explained it to me, I wouldn’t really know what

it was like until I had the chance to live it, to experience it. And, you know what? They were absolutely right. I was really surprised by the atmosphere; it was just amazing.”

From most players that might sound like the inevitable cliché or the typical discovery of the foreign footballer touching down in England. But not from Torres, not of Anfield. After all, it was at Anfield where one of the most important players in Spain’s footballing history was heard to remark “Now this is a real football club”; after all, the former Atletico Madrid striker knows all about atmosphere and he certainly knows about hero worship.

**Forget the coldness of the Nou Camp or the Bernabeu, Atletico’s Vicente Calderon stadium, the only one in Spain where season ticket sales increased when the side were relegated, boasts the most faithful fans and the finest atmosphere in Spain. As Torres explained the last time ▶**

ACTION IMAGES, PA PHOTOS





The sky's the limit:  
Fernando Torres  
has bent over  
backwards to fire  
Liverpool to the top





**"This year, there is a clear sense that the Premier League is our target"**

*FourFourTwo* met him back in April 2003: "The Bernabeu is like a theatre, very quiet, they don't feel their football; either they whistle or they applaud, nothing else. The Calderon has a different atmosphere. Atletico is different, it's a special club."

And at Atletico, Torres was a special player, an icon, the very embodiment of his club. Born and raised in working class Fuenlabrada, an Atletico fan all his life after his grandfather took him to the Calderon, Torres joined the club at 12, made his first team debut at 16 and was captain by the age of 18. Since Atletico's return to the top flight in 2002, he was top scorer every season and only once in five seasons did any other outfield player finish with a better average rating; he scored 75 times in 173 games in a mediocre team, twice finishing as La Liga's top-scoring Spaniard. Over the last four seasons only Samuel Eto'o and David Villa scored more league goals.

When the *Don Balon* published a special Atletico centenary edition, there was no question who they would put on the cover: a spiky-haired Torres, then 19, in an old-fashioned kit complete with hobnail boots, posing with a brown, laced-up ball that would crush his skull if he tried to head it. As one writer put it, Torres was "one part prodigy, one part folk hero, one part native son, one part messiah." It is impossible to exaggerate his significance to Atletico.

Torres will never have the local hero status on Merseyside that he had in Madrid but the striker, still only 23, is on course to become a Kop idol too, Liverpool's stuttering start to the season only serving to make his stock soar. At the time of writing, Torres had scored five goals in seven Premier League starts, while the club's three 0-0 draws all had one thing in common: Torres didn't start. The only thing the Liverpool fans don't like about Torres is that fact that he doesn't play every game.

For those critical of Rafa Benitez's rotation policy, Liverpool's early season momentum was destroyed when the Spaniard was left out of the 0-0 draw with Portsmouth, the folly of rotating him brought crashing home by the superb hat-trick he hit against Reading in the League Cup days later. Meanwhile, he was clearly unfit against Arsenal and missed the 0-0 with Blackburn because of that injury. On as a late substitute against Fulham in the very next match, he scored a marvellous opener out of nothing, to go with a last-minute winner against Spurs and the debut goal against Chelsea.

At the Calderon, fans sang Torres's name to the tune of *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*. But in the end he was just too good to be true. The pressure, the responsibility of carrying the side single-handedly became too great. The constant failure weighed heavy upon his young shoulders. At Liverpool, too, there is pressure. Increasingly, fans see the Spaniard as the club's saviour, the man who can finally deliver the title. The pressure is on but Torres insists that this time it's different.

**For years you resisted the chance to leave Atletico, despite interest from some of the world's biggest clubs. What finally made you change your mind?**

There were lots of things. After years trying to be successful with Atletico, I saw



#### IAN RUSH ON TORRES FINISHING

"He's only 23 and he's still learning but he's a natural finisher. The goal against Chelsea underlined the fact. He took it really well, and proved what a natural he is in front of goal. When you watch a striker you look whereabouts in the goal his shots finish. Robbie Fowler, Liverpool's last natural finisher, always put them right in the corner. That's what Torres did that afternoon."

#### MOVEMENT

"For me this is the best thing about him. He drags defenders all over the place. Watch him in the box when he's trying to exploit space. It's textbook. He'll feign to go one way before finding space off his marker and getting himself that all-important yard. It makes life that much easier for midfielders when they see their striker has earned himself a bit of room."

How to endear yourself to the Liverpool fans in one easy step: score against Chelsea



We think they're saying, 'please don't go, Nando'

that we just weren't achieving that. I came to believe that the club needed a change, that I needed a change. It was the best moment for me to go. I was determined to achieve things that I thought Atletico couldn't offer. It was a good moment for Atletico too: they could grow, get a lot of money for me and use that to build a team. I thought about it long and hard and I'm convinced I made the right decision.

**At the end of last season you lost 6-0 to Barcelona and some Atletico fans wanted you to lose to help prevent Real Madrid winning the league. Was that the moment you decided to leave?**

That was a key day, for sure, maybe the day that I was finally convinced to leave. After losing 6-0 and seeing the way it happened, after seeing all the fans, who had always been right behind their team but now weren't, after seeing the sense of tiredness and fatigue about it all... The fans didn't deserve that [humiliation] and a team that's used to winning just doesn't go through an experience like that.





**Did you leave the stadium that night thinking 'Sod this, I can't take any more'?**

Yes, I was really hurt. For me, for the fans, for the team. When I saw the Barcelona players leaving having won 6-0, I felt jealous of them, jealous of the fact that they played for a big club that always aspires to the biggest successes, that's capable of going to the Calderon and winning 6-0.

**Did that desire to lose from some quarters suggest a small-team mentality about Atletico?**

At all clubs, the fans really hate their rivals and keep an eye on their results. But one of the problems we always had at Atletico was that the fans were *too* focused on Real Madrid; that was symbolic of our bad times. When you're not achieving anything, you focus on your rivals and hope they lose. But you reach the point where you think it's time we looked at ourselves, thought about our own results and left Real Madrid alone. If your fans want you to lose, it's a sign that your team has nothing to play for. And when that dawns on you, it hurts.

**It must have been especially hard for you because you were Atletico's icon, the embodiment of the club. When things went well, they raved about you – but when things went wrong you also took all the hits. You were a kind of shield that the club hid behind...**

Any team has to be built upon collective responsibility. At Atletico, I had too much – and I had to take on the responsibility of others too. There were lots of players that, to perform, needed to feel important and maybe they didn't when I was there: maybe they avoided some of their responsibility, or weren't handed it because of me. Now that I've gone, they've stepped forward and things are going well for them. It's not just the players, either: the club, the board have accepted their responsibility. When I was there things were too focused on me, even though a lot of the time I didn't realise that because I was enjoying playing football. At Liverpool, I see a different environment. I see a club, a team. A player can't be expected to shoulder all the pressure and all the responsibility; I don't have that stress now.

#### IAN RUSH ON TORRES PACE

"I don't think he's as quick as some people have made out. I've heard a lot of talk about how similar he is to Thierry Henry. I disagree. Henry was explosive but could do it over 100 yards. Torres is different. He's very quick over 10 yards, maybe even quicker than the Frenchman. Again that was proven against Chelsea when he left Ben Haim for dead. Henry was something else but Torres is very effective in sudden bursts and with the ball at his feet."

**So playing for Liverpool is a relief?**

Yes, and a pleasure. It's a relief because in any game you feel like any number of your team-mates can step forward and win the match for you. Benayoun, Babel, Voronin... you don't feel that it has to be you or everything is going to collapse. You know that if you're having a bad day, the team can still win – something I didn't always feel at Atleti. You travel to games thinking you're going to win and that was something I needed: I needed to get into the habit of feeling I was part of a big team, with ambition, that people respected.

**Why Liverpool?**

Liverpool have always been a club with a mentality, an identity, that I like. They are a club *trabajador* [humble, hard-working, people's club]. They are a team that maybe doesn't have as many stars as other clubs but it has traditionally been as successful, or more so, because of the attitude, the values, the mentality. Liverpool are a huge club but with a humility about them that attracted me. Liverpool haven't won the ▶



Torres immediately realises he's turned up for the game on the wrong day



Atletico: a one-man team and still they couldn't get him a shirt that fits

## "When I arrived I watched DVDs to understand what Liverpool is all about"

Premier League for a long time, but they've had success and still have a real ambition. That was the perfect combination for me: a successful, big club but one that still had real hunger. That's not easy to find....

### How important was the presence of other Spaniards?

I knew Reina, Alonso and Arbeloa and I knew adapting would be easier because of that. I'd always talked to Reina about England - Cesc, too. I asked them about the way they play, the atmosphere, life here, the way the fans treat you. Life in Liverpool is great. It's very relaxed, people are very respectful. I like the football too: it's fast, there's lots of contact, and I've settled well.

### Does your style suit the Premier League, more so than La Liga even?

Because the football here is fast and powerful, because you can't switch off for a minute, it suits me. Every time you get the ball, there's a chance of scoring. In Spain it's slower, there are more touches, the game stops more. I used to watch English football and I always thought I could fit in. Now I'm here I'm enjoying it enormously. It's been even better than I expected.

### Have you had to change your game at all?

The biggest change is the fact that I play further up front, more as a No.9. In

England, I don't have to drop deep as much to help build the moves. In England the ball drops in and around the penalty area more; you have to be alert to that rather than worrying so much about playing a part in the move. The game is more direct here and I like that: I'm always a few metres further forward, which means you get more chances to score, even if you feel like you're not as involved in the game. I feel more comfortable here as a proper No.9 trying to get in behind defences, looking to be on the shoulder of the last defender, getting chances, running through.

### Liverpool haven't won the league for the a long time. Many fans see you as the player to take them that extra step and at £24 million it seems the club do too. Does that add to the pressure?

Rather than pressure, that's something that makes me feel grateful. To have arrived here and found that they've taken to me so quickly is fantastic. I felt I had a lot to prove but they give me confidence. The fans, my team-mates, the club - everyone has made things easy. Besides, Liverpool have had teams that could have won the league before - it's not that I'm the missing piece. OK, so they haven't won the league but they have won the Champions League and got to the final last year. This year, there's a clear sense that the league is our target.

### One thing that the fans don't like is that you're not playing every game. It's a new experience for you because at Atletico you played every single minute...

That's the way the coach works, he's had very good results and will continue to rotate. At Liverpool, you have to accept rotations. And don't forget that Liverpool have a lot more games than we ever had at Atletico, so even if you do sit out some games you're still going to end up playing more over the course of the season...

### IAN RUSH ON TORRES TEAM PLAY

"His team play has really impressed me. He's shown he will muck in with whoever his partner is, whether it's Peter Crouch or the more industrious Dirk Kuyt and Andriy Voronin. He certainly isn't acting like some superstar and you can see that he has the right ethic. Even when he has been 'rested' by Benitez and given his chance late in the game, he has come on and turned games without fuss and sulking."

### WORK ETHIC

"When I was at Liverpool, it was drummed into me that I was the team's first defender. Some might have wondered if a foreigner would be comfortable doing that but Torres does it brilliantly. Because of his work, Liverpool play at a much higher tempo and have the ball far more in the opposition's half because he is pressuring them. These are little details that aren't often noticed but go a long way to winning possession and games."

### But for a striker it must be hard. You get on a run of scoring and then you find yourself out of the side...

As a striker you want to take advantage of your good spells but it's not up to me. The coach decides and you have to accept it.

### You've also missed a couple of games through injury. That must be frustrating when you're finding your feet at a new club in a new country.

I think it was the first time I've ever been injured for more than a game and I really suffered. It was bad timing: I was scoring goals, things were going well and suddenly that run comes to an end. Or so it seemed. Luckily, I got fit and scored again on my first game back.

### Do you sit on the bench or in the stands watching team-mates miss chances and think 'I could have scored that'?

No! When you watch games on TV or in the stands you really suffer. But when you see a team-mate miss a chance, you suffer for him. I've discovered a team spirit here at Liverpool that I'd never seen before.

### Do you think that's an English thing? Or is it specifically about Liverpool?

In Spain, you do get team spirit but when you go to a really big club like Liverpool, with big-name players, the truth is that you don't expect to see such unity or to discover an atmosphere as good as there is here. Even the players who are really big names, heroes to the fans, are just part of the group. Stevie and Carragher are the first people to sacrifice themselves to help build a team spirit, to get everyone together - and that's contagious. That's been a surprise.

### Winning them over must have been made easier by the goal against Chelsea?

Yes, of course. Your first goal is always really important: it gives you confidence, allows ▶



**"JT wasn't going to break my focus. You have to stand up for yourself"**

you to settle, helps people believe in you... and if it's against a team like Chelsea, then so much the better.

**John Terry seemed to be give you the 'Welcome to England' treatment, but it looked like you were quite enjoying it...**

Yeah, that's part of football and it's a part I enjoy. There are lots of things that go on that no one really sees. You get veterans who try to intimidate their opponents and make sure the new boys aren't on their game. They try to make them feel scared or break their concentration. Terry is a great player with lots of experience who does what it takes to win, just as he did that day. But it was a huge game for me and I wasn't going to allow him to break my focus. You have to stand up for yourself and you have all your team-mates behind you who will stand up for you too.

**Presumably, you couldn't understand what Terry said to you anyway...**

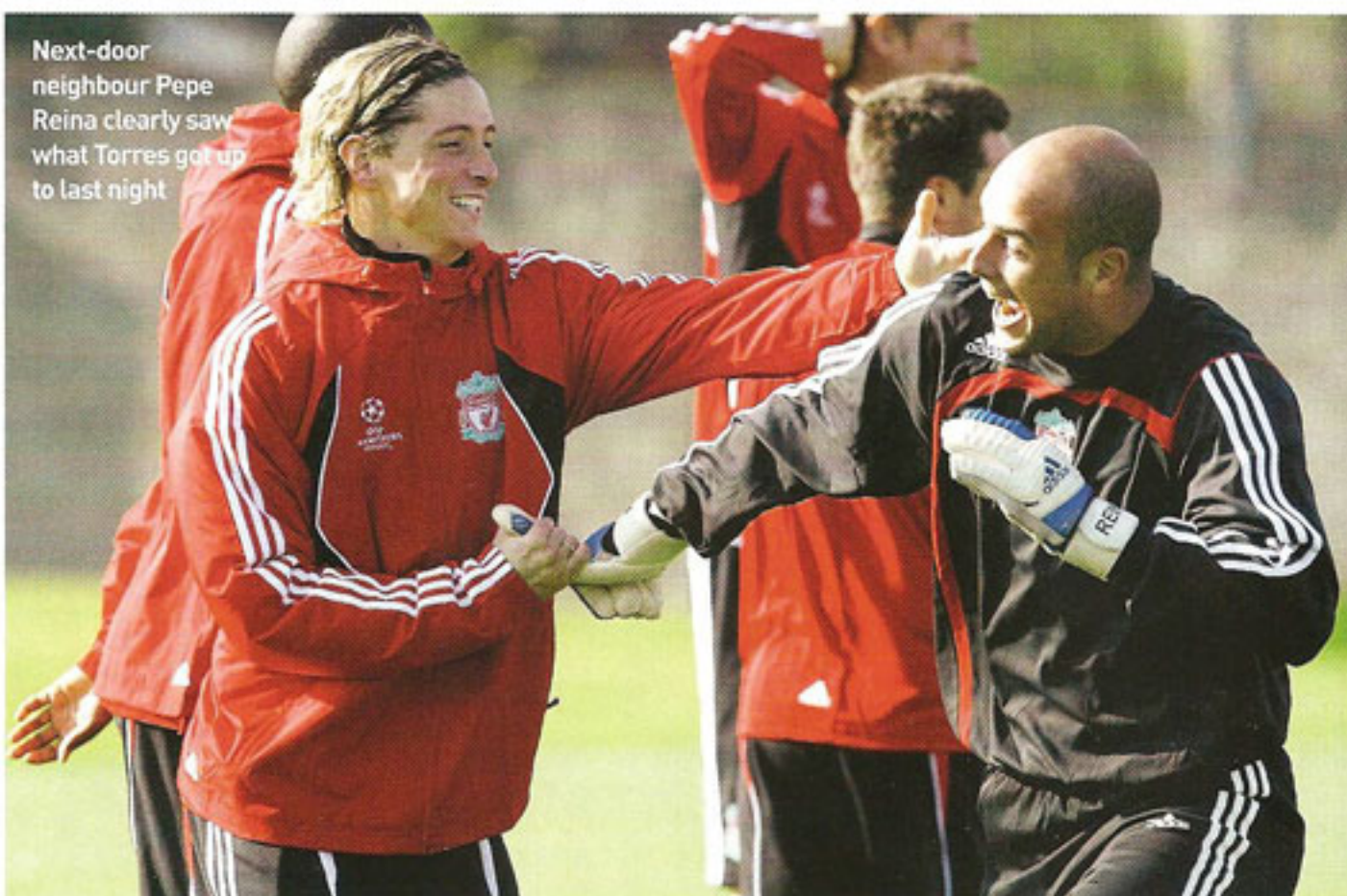
Yeah. That first month, whatever he said to me, however hard he tried, I wasn't going to have a clue what he was going on about.

**We've spoken about the pressure of your price tag and the pressure of winning the title. Then there's the pressure that goes with taking on the shirt worn by Ian Rush and Robbie**



Torres salutes one of two goals against Tunisia at the 2006 World Cup finals

Next-door neighbour Pepe Reina clearly saw what Torres got up to last night



PA PHOTOS, ACTION IMAGES, RUSH INTERVIEW LEO MOYNHAN

**Fowler – the man the fans called 'God'. Did anyone tell you about them?**

The day I arrived here, I was given videos and DVDs, books about the history of the club. People told me about the great players, what Liverpool is all about, all about the No.9 shirt. I accepted it after they offered it to me, fully aware of what it means to the fans. That's an extra incentive for me. It's not like any other number.

**You really watched videos of Liverpool?**

Of course. This is the first time I've been anywhere other than Atletico, remember. Whenever a new player came to Atletico I explained to them what the club was all about, its identity. So I think it's natural to do the same here. The first thing I did was try to understand what Liverpool is and I've discovered a club that is even bigger than I realised. I wanted to know about the players who've been here, the history, the current squad: that helps you to adapt as quickly as possible.

**Is it easier with Spanish players here?**

Of course. Reina lives next door and we spend a lot of time together. He's really helped me, as have all the Spanish speakers at the club. I'm getting better now in English but to start with it is very important to have that support. You need to know where to go, where to eat, where to buy things...

**But in the dressing room, you have to speak in English?**

Yes, it's obligatory. If he catches us speaking Spanish, Rafa has a real go at us!

**What about the team talks? Surely you don't understand...**

The team talk is in English, always. If there is something specific the manager needs to say to me, he might take me aside and say so in Spanish or I will ask the other Spanish players. But the language is English in the

## IAN RUSH ON TORRES' HEADING

"His heading ability isn't why Rafa spent over £20 million on him, but nevertheless he got up brilliantly in the last minute against Spurs to bury one in the top corner so he's not that bad. He's not small and I'm sure he has it in him. It's good for the wingers to know that they have that as an option rather than always playing narrow balls into his feet, they can also get wide and whip in good balls for him to attack. I expect to see his heading get better."

## MENTAL CONTROL

"Look at the League Cup game at Reading. He got injured after two minutes. You can't help but wonder if a foreign player will go off, not fancying it. Not Torres, he continued to get mullered for the rest of the half but carried on and got a hat-trick. He's kept his head, taken the knocks, not lost his cool and had the last laugh with a goal or two – or three! Even John Terry dished it out against him but he just shrugged it off. Very impressive."

dressing room, which is good: it helps me pick it up quickly. The first few days I spent hours doing classes, studying at home, practicing, especially football speak. I had to make sure I understood the team talks as soon as possible. If I needed something I would ask Rafa, but just me and him.

**'Football speak'? What kind of phrases?**

MAN ON! TIME! Those are the first words you learn; the things you really need to play football right from the start. During the first few training sessions I didn't have a clue so I studied and studied to make sure I could be fully part of it as soon as possible...

**How is your English?**

I speak Spanish at home, so it's slow, but I'm progressing bit by bit. My objective is to speak English to the press by December. I'm nearly ready to give it a go. It's important to be able to express myself accurately, to be sure that I'm saying what I thinking. Lots of people read interviews or see you on TV and you want to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

**Speaking of which, how hard is it to understand Jamie Carragher?**

Carragher speaks very fast but I understand him better every day because most people in Liverpool speak like he does, with a strong accent, and I'm getting used to it. At first it was hard but now Jamie's way of speaking is normal. I'm not just learning how to understand English; I'm learning how to understand people from Liverpool too.

**What's been the most difficult thing about moving to Liverpool?**

I miss my friends and family. It used to be that in five minutes I could be round their houses, now I haven't got them there. But apart from that there's been no down side to life. I don't miss Spanish football, I don't miss the climate, I don't miss anything. ○