



Out of Africa: the greatest foreign player in English football

THE best foreign footballer in the history of the English game was born in Africa, or Senegal to be precise, and his name is Patrick Vieira.

That at least was the verdict of a panel of esteemed football men, canvassed for their views to accompany a book I wrote in 2003, 'England, Their England', a history of overseas players in the English game since 1888.

The 20-man panel included Sir Bobby Robson, the former manager of England and Barcelona who was then the manager of Newcastle United, and four other men who had had spells in charge of the England team: Ron Greenwood, Graham Taylor, Howard Wilkinson and Peter Taylor.

It included eminent former England stars including Sir Tom Finney and Jimmy Armfield, and seasoned managers including Lawrie McMenemy, Keith Burkinshaw and Craig Brown, and the Chelsea manager at the time, Claudio Ranieri, and veteran commentators from Barry Davies to John Motson to Martin Tyler.

I asked each of them to select an all-time foreign XI from the English game, from any era, with no limitation on formation or nations of origin – as long as the players had played league football in England at some stage since the Football League began in 1888.

And the name that arose again and again in their teams, and was most often selected as the captain of this side was Vieira.

"I am a French product with an African's hunger," was one memorable quote from Vieira, who was born in Dakar, Senegal in 1976, who moved to France aged eight, who went on to become a *Les Bleus* legend and a World Cup winner in 1998 – and who has never forgotten his roots.

Considering candidates for England's best ever foreign player nine years on from Vieira being voted just that, hundreds of others have come and gone since, but such was Vieira's influence at Arsenal from 1996 that he remains a serious contender for that best-ever title.

It's not as his influence waned after the 2003 poll: the book was published in summer 2003 and Arsenal immediately delivered their 'Invincibles' season, going unbeaten as they won the Premier League in 2003-04 with Vieira as the heartbeat, motivational force, string-puller, organiser, motivator, captain. He even scored the 66th-minute winner in the final game of that campaign to ice the cake.

Arsenal won seven major trophies in the seven-year period that began with a Premier League and FA Cup Double in the Spring of 1998 (three Premier League titles and four FA Cups), with Vieira playing a central role each time. And Arsenal have not won a trophy since he left, in summer 2005.

If African players did not become integral to title-winning teams until the Premier League era, which began in 1992, there have been significant players from the continent since the Football League's early years.

Arthur Wharton hailed from the Gold Coast (now Accra in Ghana) and was the world's first black professional and first black Football League player, as a goalkeeper with Rotherham Town and then Sheffield United and Stockport between the late 1880s and 1902. He was also a champion sprinter.

Egypt's Hassan Hegazi was an Olympian and showman on the pitch who had the briefest of spells at Fulham in 1911, and his compatriot Tewfik Abdallah was an entertainer at Derby in 1920 and then at Hartlepool.

Nigeria's barefoot wonder Teslim Balogun played at QPR from 1956, and decades later in the early 1980s his compatriot John Chiedozie hit the big time at Tottenham. In between those dates, Britain had become a place where bigotry and racism were commonplace in society and viciously so within football.

Wharton faced prejudice and Abdallah too later, not least in America later in his career where he couldn't stay in white hotels, but by and large they didn't endure the awful, overt hostility of later years.

Steve Mokone, the first black South African to play outside his country – with Coventry, Cardiff and Barnsley among others, from 1956, did, as did Albert Johanneson, a star at Leeds from 1961 who faced slurs that he didn't have nerve to hack it in English conditions.

Fred Mwila and Emmet Kapengwe of Zambia at Aston Villa in 1969 were other notable African players, albeit for a short time, in an age when it was less than comfortable to be black and playing in England.

In many ways the Premier League's formation helped numerous barriers come crashing down, albeit serendipitously. The League's founders went in search of new ways to make money and help the English game (in theory) but instead stumbled across hundreds of footballers from all corners of the world who wanted to come and be part of the party.

They bought new technical skills, and athleticism and adherence to good dietary habits. The best of them were wonderful role models as well as superb footballers: South Africa's Lucas Radebe springs immediately to mind. From all parts of the globe – including all parts of Africa – came exotic new 'firsts', and not just in the Premier League.

The first Angolans in English league football arrived in 1995 at Darlington in the shape of Pedro Paulo and Jose Quitongo. Vieira was the first Senegal-born player, at Arsenal in 1996. Liberia's first player in England was Christopher Wreh at Arsenal in 1997 and Gabon's was Guy Nzamba at Southend in 1997.

The Ivory Coast-born Frenchman Roger Boli at Walsall in 1997 was the first Ivorian of many, and Jean-Claude Pagal of Cameroon at Carlisle in 1998 was the first from his nation. Lumana Tresor Lua-Lua from DR Congo at Colchester 1998 broke his own new ground as did Togo's Kwami Hodouto at Huddersfield in 1999, when Emmanuel Adebayor was just a 15-year-old hopeful, newly arrived at Metz in France from Lome.

By the early Noughties, African players were at the heart of Premier League-winning teams. Vieira and Cameroon's Lauren and Nigeria's Kanu were all involved in Arsenal's 2002 Double season. The same trio and Kolo Toure were involved in the 'Invincibles' run in 2003-04.

By the following season, 2004-05, it was Chelsea, fuelled by Roman Abramovich's petrodollars, who won the title, with Nigeria's Celestine Babayaro, Didier Drogba of the Ivory Coast, Geremi of Cameroon and Claude Makelele (a Frenchman born in Kinshasa, then in Zaire) all part of it.

Drogba's power and aerial ability, his ball retention and his clinical finishing have marked him out as a mighty force, and at the end of the 2011-12 season, his eighth season at Chelsea, he was the joint longest-serving foreign outfielder with an unbroken run at the same Premier League club. He finished with the biggest of bangs as Chelsea won the FA Cup and then - in an extraordinary drama with Drogba at the centre of it - as the champions of Europe.

When Chelsea retained the title in 2005-06, Drogba and Makelele were integral again, as was Ghana's Michael Essien. By the 2009-10 title Drogba and Essien had been joined by Ivorian Salomon Kalou and Nigeria's John Obi Mikel.

From Benin's Stephane Sessegnon at Sunderland to Cameroon's Beniot Assou-Ekotto, Ivorian Cheik Tiote and Senegal's Demba Ba, Africa has never been as important to English football. And Viera's significance is standing the test of time.

Nick Harris is the author of 'England, Their England' (Pitch, 2003), later republished as 'The Foreign Revolution' (Aurum, 2006). He is also the editor of www.sportingintelligence.com. He has requested that his fee for this piece be donated to Kick It Out.