

Criminal minds by Stuart Fuller

On the opening day of the Premier League as Champions Chelsea were being surprisingly beaten at home by Burnley at Stamford Bridge there was notable absentee from the Blues line-up. The Spanish centre-forward should have been trying to get his side back into the game but instead was sitting "at home" some 5,000 miles away in Lagarto, Brazil.

Amazingly, by complete coincidence, at the very moment Burnley scored their third first-half goal, a journalist from The Daily Mail randomly knocked on Costa's parents front door and asked to chat to him about why he was in Sergipe province rather than London SW6 facing The Clarets. We can speculate how the journalist came to be in such a remote location on the off-chance they could speak to the Chelsea striker but the interview that transpired was worthy of our thoughts more than the journalists locale.

The headline word used in the interview was "criminal". Costa used it to describe how he felt he'd been treated by Chelsea. Criminal in the sense that he'd had a fall out with his boss. Criminal that he'd been asked to complete his rehabilitation and reconciliation with the club by training with the Development Squad. Criminal that he was still being paid his reputed £8m per annum. Criminal that he still could call his mansion in Oxshott home. Criminal that he could come and go as he pleased.

Costa was effectively refusing to work for his employer due to the spat with manager Conti. This was the same employer who had to stand by and watch the striker's "management team" play out a public courtship with Chinese side Tianjin Quanjian about a rumoured £76m transfer just three months ago. Criminal actions I'm sure you'll agree.

Like almost all of you, if I disappeared off to Italy, Spain or Brazil without consent from my employer, they would terminate my employment pretty swiftly. But once again Football chooses to accept a different set of rules of normality. Costa is an employee and like all footballers is completely dispensable to Chelsea. He has a signed contract with the club and is duty bound to honour that and if that means playing for the Development Squad then so be it.

Alas, player power will ultimately win the day. Football fans create false idols every season at their clubs, ignoring faults in the player's make-up and moral code until they cross the line of disrespecting the fabric of the club. In many instances it's not the player but those he surrounds himself with that cause the problems. Footballers will claim that their management team are indispensable but conversely the player is simply an asset they need to create their own revenue streams, so they will on the most part be thinking of their earning potential rather than anyone else's best interests.

At our level the presence of agents is becoming all too familiar. We are fortunate in that the few we work with do have the interests of the players at heart and proactively work with us. The occasional one will fill their client with dreams of the professional game then take them to a remote club in the Scottish Football League where they will sit on the bench for a few months.

I once listened to a team talk from our previous manager, Steve Brown. Brown was one of the nicest people I've ever met in football and every game he tried to convey the privilege that every player had in crossing that white line.

"Today you have a choice. Play the game to the best of your ability and cherish the memory or let something or someone influence your performance and regret it at the end of ninth minutes. I'd give anything at my age to swap places with any one of you now for just one more game. You spend a lot more time retired than being able to play guys. Make the right choice"

We see the same names and faces hop around clubs in East Sussex each season. "It's them not me" is often their battle cry. It rarely is. Football is a fantastic game and those who play in spite of the money rather than for it will ultimately be the ones that cherish every day of their career just as Brown said. It's criminal not to take the chance that a player like Costa has but he simply can't see that