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The rebirth of Wilfried Zaha is a lesson to all clubs, large and small – some people need time

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Wilfried Zaha's return has been crucial to the relative turn around in fortune for Crystal Palace CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

As Wilfried Zaha celebrated his equaliser with a besotted Crystal Palace crowd, it was easy to remember the days when people said he did too many tricks, bought too many cars and had too many relatives in his entourage.

Back then, [Palace's saviour against West Ham at the weekend](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/28/crystal-palace-2-west-ham-2-joy-roy-hodgson-late-wilfried-zaha/)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/28/crystal-palace-2-west-ham-2-joy-roy-hodgson-late-wilfried-zaha/>) was depicted as a raw, ungovernable talent from a tough south London

background who was on [the classic too-much-too-young trajectory](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/manchester-united/11384989/Wilfried-Zaha-move-to-Manchester-United-was-too-much-too-soon.html)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/manchester-united/11384989/Wilfried-Zaha-move-to-Manchester-United-was-too-much-too-soon.html>). His transfer to Manchester United for £10

million as Sir Alex Ferguson's last purchase was often depicted as career-immolation: a premature step into the big time for a kind of mustang winger who lacked the maturity and self-discipline to handle such a step.

Four and a half years on from that move north, Zaha's return from injury has lit a fire under Palace. Even before [he came back to score against Chelsea](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/14/premier-league-clockwatch-goals-3pm-kick-offs-roboblogger-including/)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/14/premier-league-clockwatch-goals-3pm-kick-offs-roboblogger-including/>) and West Ham, and lift the whole team with his positivity, [his eyes radiated the kind of optimism you seldom see in a player representing a side who have lost their first seven games](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/11/wilfried-zahaoptimistic-can-prove-fit-enough-feature-crystal/)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/10/11/wilfried-zahaoptimistic-can-prove-fit-enough-feature-crystal/>). His late equaliser against West Ham at Selhurst Park

was the archetypal game-changing raid of a player who's not prepared to accept a bad outcome and has the talent to stop it happening.

The twisting in tight spaces and decisive finish past Joe Hart was a signature move for a player, who, whatever they say in the England set-up, should not have been allowed to drift so far away from the national team that [he ended up playing for Ivory Coast](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/01/11/wilfried-zaha-do-not-regret-picking-ivory-coast-england/)

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/01/11/wilfried-zaha-do-not-regret-picking-ivory-coast-england/>),

the country of his birth. Put it this way: would anyone picking an England squad for Russia exclude Zaha's pace and ingenuity in wide areas, his talent for making things happen?

Of course not. Zaha, remember, was called up by Roy Hodgson for a friendly against Sweden in 2012 and earned a second cap against Scotland. His England career then fizzled out, and the Ivorian Football Association escalated attempts to reclaim him. Gareth Southgate was alive to the possibility of keeping him as an England player but the pursuit turned acrimonious.

"I didn't really appreciate there was this disappearing egg timer on him going to the Ivory Coast," Southgate said. "He was the first player I went to see when I got the job permanently but he'd already made his mind up." England's manager also said: "If you don't feel that internal 100 per cent passion for playing for England, then I'm not sure it's for me to sell that to you."

Zaha and his team-mates celebrate in front of delighted Palace fans following his late equaliser CREDIT: REUTERS

This prompted an indignant response from Zaha's representatives

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2017/03/28/wilfried-zaha-hits-back-gareth-southgate-questioning-passion/>), who issued a statement saying: “Wilfried did not impose a timescale or set a date by which he had to be selected by England there was no ‘disappearing egg timer’. The ‘private’ meeting with Mr Southgate was very amicable. However the fact remains that Wilfried made his decision to play for the Ivory Coast prior to Mr Southgate being appointed interim and subsequently permanent England manager.

“It was Wilfried’s personal choice and it was his right as a senior player to accept the opportunity to represent his nation of birth and that of his family heritage. His ‘desire’ or ‘passion’ should never have been publicly questioned for making that decision.”

Zaha’s career has been punctuated by such sticky moments, with England and United, where David Moyes appeared intent on turning him into another type of player, and he ended up being loaned to Cardiff City after just two league appearances. “It was either that I slept with David Moyes's daughter or I’ve got a bad attitude,” Zaha recalled after he returned to Palace full-time. “Those are the two rumours that stuck with me until I left. As soon as anybody sees me now, people think, ‘Wilfried Zaha, bad attitude.’ I don't understand why.” He also said he had never even met Moyes’ daughter and that isolation and depression set in as his manager ordered him to “stop some of the tricks and keep the ball in certain areas.”

“For now Zaha is a lesson to all clubs, large and small. Some people just need time”

All this might have entrained a slide towards oblivion: a one-way ticket to the where-are-they-now section of newspapers. Certainly there was sufficient discouragement with England and United under Moyes for him to think he was in the wrong industry. But his form at Palace over the last two seasons tells another story, of the value of patience with any gifted youngster whose culture and personality might not fit the old-school English norm – and who might need time to mature and impose his ability on the game.

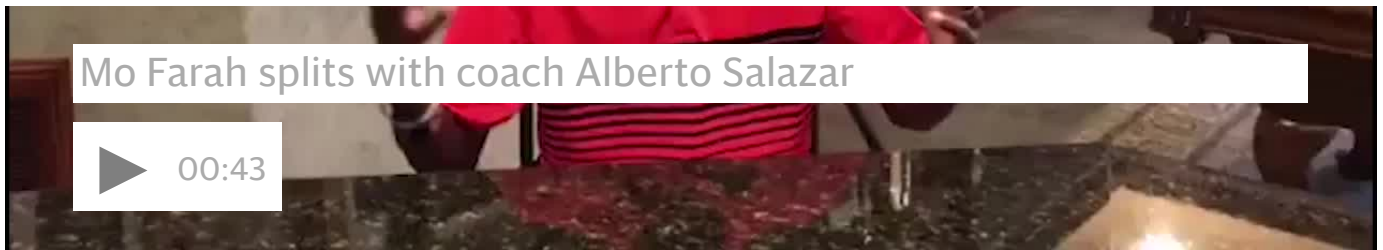
Nowadays, Zaha is an especially adoring parent who shares pictures of his toddler son, and speaks always of “the team” before himself. His return after a two-month absence for the 2-1 win over Chelsea transformed Palace. It restored inspirational talent to a demoralised side, and gave Palace supporters a match-winning local hero to believe in for the fight against relegation.

Oh, yes, Zaha is local all right (“I’m the most local footballer you’ll see”), to the extent of buying the former chairman Ron Noades’ old Surrey pad, with its Crystal Palace emblem on the swimming pool floor. If Palace do go down, Zaha may need another go at being a big fish in a big pool, but for now he is a lesson to all clubs, large and small. Some people just need time.

London calling for Farah – but SPOTY chances appear slim

So Mo Farah and his circle have finally [dropped Alberto Salazar as his coach and are moving back to London](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/athletics/2017/10/30/mo-farah-splits-coach-alberto-salazar-ahead-move-back-london/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/athletics/2017/10/30/mo-farah-splits-coach-alberto-salazar-ahead-move-back-london/>), and family reasons are an understandable starting point as he shifts from track to marathon running. The Atlantic, however, will also be a useful buffer zone from the US anti-doping investigation into allegations about Salazar's training methods at the Nike Oregon Project.





Farah's new coach, Gary Lough, knows a thing or two about marathons, through his relationship, marital and professional, with Paula Radcliffe, so Farah is on the right track there. But this move will not fully erase the doubts about the wisdom of Farah's continued association with Salazar, especially as Salazar has reportedly offered to continue advising the 10,000m and 5,000m Olympic champion from afar.

The return to Britain completes the circle of Farah's emigration to this country from Somaliland, and he will doubtless hope to reclaim his place as a full-blown Londoner: a feature he has always emphasised proudly. Britain has received his triumphs on the track joyously, and there have been few more intense occasions in any sporting field over the last five years.

Yet the betting for BBC Sports Personality of the Year speaks once more of a slight disconnect with the public. Farah's best finish here was third, in 2011, and he can be backed this time at 20-1 – the same price, in some bookmaking lists, as Jermain Defoe.

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