

Eto'o Full of Cash and Class

By [John Leicester](#)

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I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody.”

For their sake, here’s hoping that Samuel Eto’o and Asamoah Gyan don’t soon find themselves repeating the words immortalized by Marlon Brando.

Two of Africa’s top footballers in 2010 have signed for teams so obscure that you should award yourself five points if you can name them and another five if you can say where they play.

But there are no prizes for guessing why. Money.

That, at least, is the accepted wisdom. But it’s not the whole story.

In winning almost everything there is to win in football, except for the World Cup, Eto’o has already become a very wealthy man. How wealthy? Well, Usain Bolt says that when he met Eto’o and took an instant liking to his \$48,000 diamond-studded luxury watch, the four-time

African footballer of the year simply took it off and handed it over to the stunned sprint star with the words, “You can have it.”

Maybe Eto’o has pulled that expensive party trick so often that he really does need the \$13 million a year that Russia’s Dagestani-based football club Anzhi Makhachkala says it will pay him. Given that Anzhi’s home is in Dagestan, the republic wracked by near-daily violence involving Islamist insurgents and criminal gangs, at least some of that sum should be considered danger money, even if Eto’o will live and train in Moscow.

And unlike Brando’s character in “On the Waterfront,” Eto’o already is “somebody.” During five glorious years at Barcelona and then at Inter, he proved that he has class. No mere contender, he is a proven champion. Being secure in that knowledge — as well as the money — is maybe another reason why Eto’o is prepared to slip off football’s radar for a while at Anzhi. He can afford the obscurity because he knows that when he retires, he won’t be forgotten.

Which isn’t to say that the 30-year-old’s remaining years are bound to go to waste. Anzhi’s new owner, billionaire mining magnate Suleiman Kerimov, has big ambitions for the plaything he acquired last winter. Anzhi’s goal in the three years Eto’o signed for is to qualify for the Champions League and, with an estimated net worth of \$7.8 billion, Kerimov can help it get there.

Eto’o says he could have moved elsewhere but was attracted by Anzhi’s “crazy dream” and the prospect of new experiences. That, of course, is just the sort of thing that money-grabbing footballers often say rather than admit the truth. But, again, since Eto’o was hardly poor and has already achieved so much in football, perhaps there is more to his move than just money.

“We want to aim very high and we have a president with the means, perhaps, to back up his thinking,” Eto’o says in a video on his web site. “I want to follow this project from A to Z.”

Like Eto’o, Gyan, a Ghanaian footballer who plays for Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, also spoke about the need for “a change in environment” to explain his baffling move from England’s Premier League to the U.A.E. Again, money seems to have been a major factor. The word around his former club, Sunderland, is that he roughly quadrupled his weekly wage by signing on a season-long loan to Al Ain.

But unlike Eto’o, Gyan isn’t yet a big somebody in football and never will be if he stays in the U.A.E. too long. He was a star of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. His left-footed extra-time goal against the United States that put Ghana into the quarterfinals is worth rewatching on YouTube.

Sunderland paid a club-record \$20 million for Gyan after the World Cup. Now, it is playing the role of victim in his departure. Manager Steve Bruce said agents — “parasites,” he called them — poured poison in the striker’s ear by talking of possible moves away and filling him “full of nonsense.” The club described Gyan as unhappy at training.

At 25, Gyan is the same age as Wayne Rooney — too young to be joining the ranks of older footballers who move to Gulf teams for easy money in the twilight of their careers. The U.A.E.’s Pro-League says Al Ain’s home games drew 54,452 spectators in total over the whole

of last season — 20,000 fewer than Gyan entertained when Sunderland lost 2–0 at Manchester United last December.

Money and class. In football, not everyone can have both.

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