

Zenit's Spanish Midfielder Javi Garcia Settling Into Life in St. Petersburg

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Zenit St. Petersburg's Javi Garcia (back) chases AS Monaco's Fabinho during their Champions League soccer match at the Petrovsky stadium in St. Petersburg, Oct. 1, 2014.

Spanish midfielder Javi Garcia believes playing under Andre Villas-Boas has helped him make an instant impact in Russian football after swapping the "unique" English Premier League for a new challenge at Zenit St. Petersburg.

Garcia was the standout transfer in Russia when he joined Zenit for 15 million euros (\$18.87 million) in August, ending a mixed two-year spell at Manchester City that Garcia insists was a positive experience.

The 27-year-old has quickly become an integral part of Villas-Boas' Zenit team, who have raced to the top of the Russian Premier League with eight wins from nine.

In an interview, Garcia explained how easily he had adapted to life in Russia's second city — in contrast to his early days in "lonely" Manchester — and why he thinks City boss Manuel Pellegrini is capable of bringing further glory to the English champions.

"It did not take me a long time to adapt [at Zenit]," said Garcia, who scored the winner against Lokomotiv Moscow and has also helped his team gain four points from two matches in the Champions League group stage.

"I immediately began to feel like myself and had a nice understanding with the head coach and the players."

Of Villas-Boas, the Portuguese sacked by both Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur, he said:
"Figures speak for themselves."

"Just yesterday I saw a report in the Spanish press, and under Villas-Boas, Zenit have played 25 matches, of which they have won 20."

"He is ambitious and wants to win everything that is possible to win. Any footballer would want to work with such a head coach. He is close to everyone and there is never any distance between him and the players. This creates a great atmosphere within the squad."

Villas-Boas is demanding that Zenit become one of the top 10 clubs in Europe this season, which means the team need to be in contention for a place in the Champions League quarter-finals.

"Our goal at the moment is to qualify from our group, which is very even [with Benfica, Monaco and Bayer Leverkusen]," Garcia said.

"Any side has the capability to finish in first or last. We have every chance of finishing first, while the knockout stages are a lottery. A lot depends on the draw."

Garcia, who was born in the Murcia region of south-eastern Spain, said there are few similarities between English and Russian football.

"English football is absolutely unique. It is very quick and you do not have time to relax and think," he said.

"This fast pace is not only required by the coaches, but also by the fans. They want teams to attack and create goal-scoring chances. They do not want players to pass the ball backwards."

"Russian football is more similar to Spanish or Portuguese football. Teams like Zenit like to keep the ball and play good football."

'Nowhere to Go'

He said he had fond memories of his time with City. "It was a positive time in my life," the midfielder recalled.

"However, it was not easy to adapt when I first joined the club. Everything is different in Manchester — the way of life, the culture, the food. I also found the city a bit lonely. When I wanted to get out of the house, I would remember there was nowhere to go."

"After time, I managed to fit into the team and I was liked. I was getting a lot of game time."

"I played there for two years at a fantastic club with excellent team mates. We won the Premier League title and the League Cup. I got the chance to play in a very strong league and was able to really enjoy my football."

During his time at City, the Spaniard played under two head coaches, Roberto Mancini and Pellegrini.

"Mancini brought me to the club," he said. "Mancini really liked to keep possession of the football, and this was part of our game plan. In this respect, you could compare him to Fabio Capello. Both these coaches like players with character, who are willing to give everything on the football pitch.

"Pellegrini is a lot calmer. He is able to keep his emotions in check and always come up with a calm and calculated decision. He is always relaxed when speaking to the players. He has the ability to bring the [City fans] many more titles."

Garcia has fallen in love with the city of St. Petersburg, and is planning to bring his wife and daughter to live with him.

"Without question, St. Petersburg is a lot better than Manchester," he said. "This is in terms of everything. The people, the culture, the restaurants. Here I will drive along the streets in my car and look out of the window, and I am just happy!"

"The only thing that has shocked me a little is the driving culture. The drivers here a little bit crazy. They drive so quickly and not everyone obeys the traffic rules. You constantly need to look everywhere to make sure that you don't get in an accident."

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