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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Frank Lampard

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A victim of terrace taunts in his early playing days, Frank Lampard has turned his frustration into positive energy to become the second best player in the world.

Ronaldinho, Rooney, and Ronaldo - three prodigies that are certain to dominate the headlines in the World Cup in Germany. All have raw, god-given talents that have been honed and perfected from the moment they learnt to kick a ball.

But one player that has the potential to steal the limelight this summer has risen to the top of the football elite through a mixture of cold-steeled determination and hard training - lots and lots of it.

The phrase 'practice makes perfect' may be an overused cliché to stir tired kids into taking their umpteenth penalty kick, but Chelsea midfielder Frank Lampard has proved over the last three years that if you have the will power and diligence to keep at what you love doing the most, then even the highest level of success is attainable.

Frustration at West Ham

Chelsea bought Lampard from neighbours West Ham in 2001 for 11 million pounds - a princely sum that raised eyebrows in some quarters of the footballing fraternity. The 27-year-old had spent his early, formative years at Upton Park where his uncle Harry Redknapp was manager and his father - Blues legend Frank Lampard Snr - was coach.

Lampard's family connections would occasionally raise cries of nepotism from a minority of fans. 'He walked on the pitch at West Ham and got admittedly stick and lots of kids would have been finished by that,' says Redknapp in a BBC Sport interview. 'But it didn't bother him, he believed in himself and look at him now - who's had the last laugh?'

Redknapp believes the abuse strengthened Lampard's resolve to be the best. 'Everybody else would have gone home, but Frank would come back to the training ground on his own in the afternoon and train,' says the ex-manager. Redknapp's nephew says about his time at the club: 'It made me a stronger person and a stronger player - it's taken me ten years to answer the criticism through very hard work in training and playing.'

Chelsea's New Hero

Although procured for a record fee, it wasn't until the arrival of Chelsea's current boss Jose Mourinho in 2004 that Lampard came into his own in a team that have dominated the Premiership over the last couple of seasons.

In his first press conference as Blues manager, Mourinho said he was not prepared to discuss individual players, making one exception - he 'loved' Lampard. The 2004-05 season was perhaps the club's most successful ever - winning the Premiership and the League Cup, and reaching the semi-final of the Champions League - with the midfielder in the driving seat. The Essex native played in all 38 of the team's Premiership matches, scoring 13 goals.

Simply the Best

Doctors have recently discovered that Lampard has an unusually large heart - a similar condition to that of Tour de France king and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong - which might go some way to explaining his phenomenal playing statistics and work rate.

In October last year, Mourinho hailed his protege as the 'best player in the world', a sentiment echoed days earlier by German legend Matthias Sammer. Lampard crowned 2005 by coming second to Ronaldinho in

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The Heart of England

But what of England? Despite his high-profile transfer in 2001, Lampard was excluded from the team for the 2002 World Cup in Korea / Japan. It wasn't until Euro 2004 and netting three goals for his country that he cemented his place in the hugely fought over midfield role. His performance was so commanding, that it may possibly have been one of the contributing factors to Paul Scholes' retirement from international football.

Luck permitting, success in Germany - thanks to hard graft and determination - could see Lampard's ascendancy to a place among the pantheon of the greats.

*May 2006
-Ben Lupton*

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