

Act of faith (clockwise from main): Demba Ba has been a success story at Newcastle – celebrating each of his goals with a prayer – after making his breakthrough at West Ham following a spell at Hoffenheim (inset below)



Ba's unshakeable faith proves

Exclusive interview After living off crisps and struggling to pay his hotel bills, the striker tells **Arthur Renard** how belief in his own ability and a life-changing rediscovery of Islam gave him strength to succeed

For Demba Ba, life has never been simple. At the age of 19 he was back at home in Paris. Rejected by Lyon, Auxerre, Swansea and even Gillingham his mother told him that if he did not find a club soon she would send him back to school to complete the education he had left behind to pursue his dream.

Salvation lay in England, he told her. More specifically, Barnsley. "I'd always loved the Premier League, English football in general," he says. Ba managed to get a trial at Barnsley, together with two other team-mates from Montrouge. Plans were made for them to spend three days at Watford for some extra training practice – "one of my friends from Montrouge, Gauthier Diafutua, was playing for Watford at the time" – en route to Barnsley.

The three players travelled by car from Paris with Alexandre Gontran, a former coach who is now Ba's agent. "We still had to find a place to sleep. One of my friends said that he knew someone who we could stay with. When we arrived it seemed to be a decent house. But it appeared that the guy was sharing the house and had only one room. So we

ended up sleeping with the five of us in his bedroom. The other days, we were sleeping in a hotel, but we didn't have any money. So we booked a room for two and slept there with the four of us."

After three days the boys took a coach to Barnsley. "We stayed in a fantastic hotel this time. The club paid. The trial didn't work out. We were there a week, but it was a bit chaotic. I remember the manager got sacked and another day we weren't even picked up from the hotel."

When the time came to leave they faced an unpleasant surprise. "We wanted to check out, but then... trouble again. The reception said that the club had paid for the hotel, but that we had to pay for the food. We had no money, we had nothing. We didn't know what to do. We called Gontran, who contacted an agent who was able to send us some money to pay the £500 bill."

Then they took a coach to London in the hope of more trials. "In those days, we were eating only crisps, and drinking water. We had no money, but we had a lot of fun. We were just having a good laugh, in the African style. It doesn't matter what you

have, as long as you are happy with the people you are with."

After three days, though, the fun was over and they made plans to go back to Paris. Having booked his ticket, Ba received a phone call from Gontran. "He told me that I could go to Watford, for a week's trial. Their manager [Ray Lewington] liked me, having seen me in those training days at the start of our trip." Soon, Ba saw his trial extended to a month. "And they kept doing that. After every month I got another month."

Ba was assigned to digs and paid a small amount of cash each month. He felt he was living the dream but soon he was back to reality when the club declined to offer him a professional contract. "I asked him if they would take the risk, to put me in the reserves and to give me one year. But they said no."

Another refusal, but there was now a genuine belief that he could succeed. And it eased his mother's concerns about his future. "Now she realised I had the potential to become a footballer. She said: 'Now go on, and do what you have to do.'" He returned to France and finally Rouen, a fourth division club,

rewarded his persistence with a one-year deal. After a successful year, he signed for Mouscron in Belgium. Then he moved on to Hoffenheim in Germany's second division. "I could have gone to Real Valladolid in La Liga but I chose Germany, because there was a better chance for me to succeed. I wanted to do everything step by step."

The process has proved to be the best preparation for the Premier League with Ba, now 27, on the verge of the biggest move of his life so far. But besides his career, the endless trials gave Ba something else, something deeper. When he was on trial at Gillingham, Ba was staying with Mamady Sidibé (now with Stoke City). Ba had played with Sidibé's younger brother at Montrouge. Once welcomed in the house, he was touched by the daily traditions of the Muslim family.

"At every prayer time, they all prayed together. I was born a Muslim as well, but I had never really carried out the faith. When you're young, you just want to do what the other kids are doing, until the day you find your own path."

Ba found his time in Sidibé's house a life-changing experience. "I was like: 'Dude, wake up!' So, I just got to pray with them, like five times a day. And when I got back home, I kept doing it. And I've never stopped. Since then, I have kept that feeling of

thankfulness. I see the more I give to my religion and the more I worship God, the more I get back. Every time I give, He gives me. I give, He gives me. It's like a circle, it never stops.

"Something which is easy for me to give is money. I feel detached from it. I look after myself and my family, but I won't forget people who struggle. The money I earn is not just for me, it is made for me to give to the people. My father lives in Senegal most of the time, and my mother goes there for five months a year. They are from the smaller villages, and know how to distribute money to people who need it."

Ba tries to be at the mosque every day. Sometimes he is accompanied by Newcastle team-mate Hatem Ben Arfa. Occasionally, they have prayed at the Newcastle training ground. "It has become the most important thing in my life. People sometimes have a bad image of Islam, but that is an image of what people are doing with Islam. If they knew the real Islam, they wouldn't have a bad image. Everything I read in the Koran appeals to me. When I want an answer to something in my life, it is written in the Koran."

Ba often reads the sacred book and even takes Arabic lessons at home. He will teach his children the language as well. "I have a daughter of seven months and a son of five. He is going to learn Arabic now. They

will both be raised as Muslims." Ba has made two pilgrimages to Mecca. "I loved it, the people, the atmosphere – everything is just positive. For Muslims there are three places: there is Mecca first, then Medina, and Jerusalem. I have been to the first two, now I just have to go to Jerusalem. I need to go there."

Ba will often celebrate his goals by prostrating himself on the pitch. "When I put my head to the ground, when I go to the mosque for instance, everybody is doing the same. At that moment, for God, you are the same. You are exactly like the person next to you, who doesn't have money every month. For me, it's not about being Demba Ba, or a footballer, or at Newcastle – I'm no better than anybody else."

But Ba knows he needs more than prayer to help with his football, and his fitness, and says he is indebted to sports therapist Pedro Philippou for keeping his career going. Philippou, who worked at Chelsea for six years, travels to Newcastle from London at least once a week to treat Ba. They met

in January 2011, the day after Ba had failed a medical at Stoke. They worked towards his next medical, which would eventually be at West Ham. He passed and signed a 3½-year deal at Upton Park. But West Ham said his knee was a risk.

"They inserted a clause that they could terminate my contract if I didn't play a certain amount of games that season. I believe it was around 12 games, for the second half of the campaign. I took the risk. I could get injured, be out for months and out of contract. But I said to myself: 'Take the gamble man, you've come from nowhere, if you go back to nowhere it's no problem.' But I was 100 per cent certain that I would play."

The contract contained a favourable part for Ba too. "They said: 'If you play a certain amount of games and we go down, then you are free to go.' West Ham were relegated, and Ba went to Newcastle United on a free transfer. Although he had spent only five months at Upton Park, he recalls his time there with fondness.

BA ON...

HIS TRIAL AT BARNSELY

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FINDING HIS FEET IN LONDON

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REDISCOVERING ISLAM

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TALKING RELIGION WITH TEAM-MATES

"Cabaye, Bigirimana and Obertan are all Christians, but they are passionate. That's why I love talking to them

EARNING BIG MONEY

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Agents locked in £2m stand-off with Chelsea

Ba's move held up by club's refusal to pay brokering fee

Parties still in dispute over wages on offer to striker

By Jason Burt and Luke Edwards

Demba Ba's £7million move to Chelsea has been held up over the club's refusal to pay his agents the £2million in fees they are demanding.

As an increasingly agitated Alan Pardew called on Ba to issue a declaration of loyalty to Newcastle United, the striker's representatives had reached a stand-off in negotiations with Chelsea caused both by the demand for agents' payments and a significant gap in the wages being sought by the 27-year-old and those being offered by Chelsea.

The *Telegraph* revealed on Sunday that Chelsea had emerged as the favourites to sign Ba and talks opened that evening with his advisers, which they later described as "unproductive".

Ba has a £7million release clause in his contract at Newcastle, of which he is due £2.5million. In addition the player wants wages of £70,000 a week, plus bonuses, and his agents want to share fees of £2million.

Chelsea offered Ba much less than £70,000 a week and have also, so far, refused to meet his agents' demands. Instead they have offered a standard five per cent of Ba's contract.

The Premier League club had hoped to resume negotiations yesterday but were told that no talks would take place for the next few days as Ba considered other options.

The expectation, according to sources close to the deal, is that both sides are involved in a game of brinkmanship although Chelsea have shocked Ba's advisers by their refusal to meet their demands.

Despite the stand-off, it is, nevertheless, still expected that Ba will join Chelsea during the January transfer window but, as expected, Arsenal have also now entered the bidding.

"Yohan is a Christian, but we always talk and share our ideas. I also speak with Gaël Bigirimana and Gabriel Obertan. They are all Christians, but they are passionate – that's why I love talking to them. We have the same religion as the Christians and the Jews. 'Muslim' means 'submitted to God'. So it is like a Christian or a Jew, who is submitted to God. If you translate it into Arabic, you can say to a Christian: 'You are a Muslim.' Because he is submitted to God. The origin is one, which is trusting in one God."

Then he breaks off from the interview. "I need to show you something." He goes through his smartphone, searching for a specific phrase from the Koran. It takes some time, but he is determined. After three minutes, he has found it. Ba hands over his phone and points to sura 55, verse 60: Is the reward for good anything but good?

his career and disappointments with the way some clubs have treated him.

"He can't be disappointed with the way we've treated him. We've been brilliant for him and therefore I hope he rewards us by staying with us for the next couple of years.

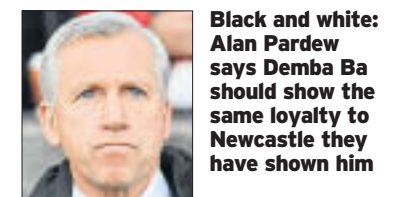
"I think he needs, in this window, to make a decision fairly early. I think for everyone's sake, most of all himself. Especially for our fans – they need to know he's going to be with us to the summer or not. We need to know as well, we need to make sure that we have a replacement ready if he leaves.

"He needs to give a message of some description. We're in an important stage of the season for us. We had a terrible result against Arsenal, we need to turn that around."

Ba's advisers believe they are justified in demanding the £2million in fees given their client is available for £7million and Chelsea are in the process of selling Daniel Sturridge to Liverpool for £12million.

There was also some interest in Ba from Tottenham Hotspur but, as things stand, it appears that Arsenal are Chelsea's closest rivals to sign him.

Privately, Newcastle have been braced for his departure and have also been in advanced negotiations with Marseille to sign French international Loïc Rémy for £11.5million.



Black and white: Alan Pardew says Demba Ba should show the same loyalty to Newcastle they have shown him

Pardew said: "At the end of the day if he feels that our offer isn't right for him [Ba], what can I do?"

"I can't remember a situation like it, quite with this level of speculation and information being put about. So I think that's a frustration for us as a club – massively.

"Hopefully, he will play against Everton, but we could get an offer tomorrow and he could go. I'd save it's evens whether he stays or goes."

The changing face of Chelsea appeared to continue yesterday with Frank Lampard being offered to Inter Milan and Lazio, according to reports in Italy. Due to the club's policy of not committing to players in their mid-30s, the long-serving midfielder, who scored both goals in the win over Everton on Sunday, has not been offered an extension to his deal that ends in the summer – much to the chagrin of supporters.

Paris St-Germain sporting director Leonardo has, however, refuted reports that Chelsea defender Ashley Cole is to cross the channel next season.

"We have never spoken with Ashley Cole, there has never been any contact. [PSG coach] Carlo [Ancelotti] was his coach at Chelsea, that's why that story is doing the rounds," said Leonardo.