



It's just five hours before the transfer window closes and Louis Saha is in his car, feeling highly stressed. Six o'clock and he is criss-crossing the backstreets of London, desperately searching for the right hospital to undertake his medical to complete his move from Everton to Tottenham Hotspur. Saha doesn't know where the hospital is and his phone battery has just failed so he can't contact the club doctor. He jumps out of his car and desperately asks passers-by for directions. Eventually someone helps him and he finds the hospital just in time to finalise the last details of his transfer. "You could say I was nervous, it was a very scary moment," said Saha. "Fortunately someone on the street gave me the right directions. My medical then took really long; I couldn't even watch the Spurs game that night. I don't know exactly how much time there was left when I completed everything, but by the time I got back to the hotel, it was nearly 11 o'clock."

Welcome to the world of the

special night." It has been an eventful few weeks for the striker, who has signed a six-month deal at Spurs with a year option. Not only has his life been transformed, but in France arrangements are being finalised for the publication of his book *Du Quartier aux Etoiles*. An English version, *Thinking Inside the Box*, follows in April and, almost uniquely for a football book these days, Saha has written it himself.

The book has taken a stop-start four years to write, dating back to one of the darkest moments in Saha's career, his omission from Manchester United's squad for the 2008 Champions' League final. His time at Old Trafford was blighted by injuries and the curse struck again in the week of the game, plunging him into despair.

"I was pretty sure I was going to be fit for that match. I had just restarted training after a little injury, but I felt good. Then five or six days before the final I pulled a calf muscle. It was a very small thing which only took me out for a week. So I missed the

## Revitalised

Tottenham striker is veteran of the game's ups and

modern footballer. It can be a stressful, itinerant existence but the rewards are huge and the glory is enticing. Last Saturday Saha got his share, scoring twice on his full debut in the 5-0 win over Newcastle.

"As a striker, I think I can fit well in a front line with quick wingers such as Gareth Bale and Aaron Lennon," he said. "And with people like Luka Modric behind you, it's always easier. Before the Newcastle game I felt great confidence because of the players we've got and the way we play. Sometimes before a match, you can feel a bit of pressure to prove something."

"But I didn't feel that. Everything felt under control. That was a

Champions' League final by one day. I was totally gutted. I don't think I'd ever felt that low in my life. The end of my time at United was terrible."

The challenge was to find a way of dealing with the despair which, he admits, engulfed him. "I wanted to speak about it, but I didn't want to use the press to air my feelings. That is not me. So I came up with the idea of writing about it, and that worked therapeutically for me."

"It was a way to process things, like communication. Sometimes you see people fighting because they don't know how to communicate. In a way this was the same, because I didn't know how to vent my frustrations. It was like something needed to come out. The writing really helped me."

That summer, Saha strove to make sense of his situation. "I needed time. I had so many similar frustrations towards the end; my feelings went up and down. I muddled through, but sometimes it was so hard. I'm a real freak about sport and sometimes I missed the football so badly. At those moments you'd better not talk to me, especially not about football."

So the writing became a crutch and then an inspiration – to himself and, now he believes, to others. "First of all, I did it because I was so frustrated. But I kept writing. And when I looked at it after a while, I thought: 'Wow! That is good.'" Over the next couple of years, he transformed the idea into a comprehensive book about life in football, but with a twist.

The first draft was written from his own perspective but Saha decided to broaden it out with the views of others after a chance mishap forced him to reassess the whole project. "After I'd finished about 150 pages, my wife accidentally spilt coffee on my computer, which led to me losing around 80 pages. Oh, I was scared. I was trying to recover the 80 pages in my head. But that is impossible. All

my inspiration was gone, and it resulted in a period of one and a half years in which I didn't write; I thought the book and project was over.

"I started to read it again, and I realised it was actually not that good, having been written from only my perspective. I wanted to have different angles, and so from that point I approached other people, which gave the book more potential. Looking back, it was a really good rest, because it gave me time to think about the structure. Before, I had been writing like therapy; just writing, writing, writing. When I started again I was much clearer about what I wanted to do."

His answer was to interweave his own story with the thoughts of others via a series of interviews with friends and colleagues such as Thierry Henry, Patrice Evra, William Gallas, Zinedine Zidane, Sir Alex Ferguson, Park Ji-Sung and Tim Cahill. Uniquely, Saha has also spoken to those with a different perspective, including a club physiotherapist, a press officer and even a hooligan. All to



## Saha begins a new chapter

downs and felt compelled to write about his experiences – and those of managers, fans and even hooligans. By **Arthur Renard**

give an inside view of the life of a footballer, and partly aimed at people who might want to become a professional one day themselves.

"My son, aged nine, wants to be a footballer. My brother wanted it as well. When he started to speak about it, I thought: 'Maybe he is mentally not ready for it.' So I wanted to give them an insight as to what really goes on in the mind of a footballer."

"The book contains advice; something which they can learn from. I have written my experiences, combined with the views of a coach, other players, supporters, family, friends, my wife etc. So inside the book there are different angles. Afterwards I think people will have a different idea about what it really is to be a footballer. The aim is for people who like, or even dislike, football to understand it a bit more."

The book starts with his childhood, how he became enthusiastic about football and the importance of imagination. "For that part I spoke with Thierry Henry, because we spent a lot of time together. We had the same education in a way. Both our parents are from the West Indies and we both went to the Clairefontaine Academy in Paris. The book begins with the question of how we started to play football. That was because of *Olive et Tom*, a Japanese football animation on TV. That's how it all started."

The book not only traces the story of Saha's life, but focuses on particular issues arising from his experiences. "My story is a direction, but there are a lot of different subjects, ranging from how to cope with earning a lot of money and attention from girls to issues like racism."

Hooliganism is tackled via an interview with a hardcore gang leader, which was set up via a contact at Everton. He was predictably surprised to be interviewed by a player but the exchange proved enlightening.



Louis on Louis: (From top) Saha scores on his full debut for Spurs against Newcastle; with his confidant Thierry Henry; and sharing a joke with Sir Alex Ferguson



"I asked him why he had become involved in that world. He told me he was seeking adrenaline and high-pressure situations. They are in their own 'championship'. Every time when they fight, it is their way to try to be the best."

"He couldn't be a sportsman, so this was his way to burn his energy. I'm not saying it is good, but once I'd heard his explanation, I understood it a bit better. That is my aim; I want to understand the people."

In all, Saha has gathered around 20 viewpoints. "I don't want it just to be my book, because I don't think it would be interesting, and I don't help people if I give only my own opinion. With different views and angles it will be more informative."

"My story could be good, but what is going to change? Nothing. A one-sided story doesn't change the world. But maybe 10 people, with strong views and ideas, will do something. I wanted to bring a group together, comprising not only people I know, but also some people who I perhaps

don't really like. Let's see what everyone's thinking and where it can lead to. I don't think you are going to see any other book with that many people involved on one project. I haven't seen one."

Saha talks in terms of projects. He has set up an advertising website, neezz.com, with fellow professional sportsmen, and is already thinking about his next book. "It's funny, because I became a writer before a reader. I had rarely read a book in my life. But the writing was easy – it just came to me. The people I was working with couldn't believe how quick I was with inspiration. I surprised myself as well. It's like being on the pitch, when you do something which you didn't plan, but which turns out to be brilliant."

"Reading back my work, I would think: 'Are my hands doing this?' That gave me the confidence to write more. Having started with writing, I began reading too. I was doing research on other writers, because I wanted to have things spot on. But I

### MANAGEMENT MATERIAL

#### 'I never knew how Sir Alex got close to the youngsters'

Someone else who Louis Saha came to understand better was Sir Alex Ferguson after he plucked up the courage to ask the Manchester United manager to contribute to his book.

"I was really scared to ask him that question. It was different than asking him for advice about how I should train," said Saha. "We were not talking like we were on the pitch. A player interviewing a manager is strange, really strange. But I enjoyed it."

"And if you see how much time he gave to me, it's unbelievable. He really wanted to help me. I asked him questions about his management style, like how he deals with different sets of players. For example, he is 70 but is managing players of 16 or 17 – he's old enough to be their grandfather. I'd never understood how he's able to get that close to youngsters. The way he deals with different generations and cultures is amazing. He jokes with them and gives them so much confidence, so I asked him how he was doing that."

"It was an interesting conversation, because in a way he surprised me as well. From the outside he can come across as a bit of an angry man. And when I was working with him every day, I thought he had total control over everything, not really giving things away. But maybe my view was partly coloured, because obviously I had my own interests at the time."

"After we talked, I had more of the impression of a man who trusts people and is able to delegate tasks to others. He realises that you have to involve everyone, with different views and ideas, to go forward."

Arthur Renard

wanted to have something different as well, something which hadn't been done already."

Interestingly, the book being published just as his career is reigniting, with the 33-year-old determined to make the most of the good times. "I have grown as a person, because of the way things happened to me. That has changed me forever. I know that life is sometimes good and sometimes bad. Other people don't need to say that, because they haven't faced real setbacks. They are not scared about the future; all they think about is now. It could have been the same for me."

"Of course, in a way I would love to be still at Manchester United, winning more trophies, scoring more goals and being even more acknowledged as a big player. I could have achieved more, but I would have been a different person too. I like my present situation as well. My eyes are different now, my friend."

He points to his eyes. "Yeah, I see more. Maybe I'm scared as well, but I see more and I will teach more to my kids than someone who has always done well. When you experience certain things, you gain an understanding which puts you in control when things happen again. When you don't know, it is like someone else has to hold your hand, and tell you what to do. I don't need that. I know where to hold."

"I will try to pass my experience on to my son. But he lives in the perfect world, and I think his life is going to be harder when something hits him. I have to teach him to cope with his frustrations. My dad used to do it with me, by keeping me in the house a little longer when I wanted to go out. He would hold me back for 10 minutes while I was calling that I wanted to go. He was teaching me, be patient?" The advice has served him well.

**Du Quartier aux Etoiles by Louis Saha is published on 23 February**