

Nakamura headed east of 'Paradise'

There is a line in a recent book about Shunsuke Nakamura which amounts to an understated but perceptive tribute to what the Japanese midfielder has come to mean to Celtic. Amid the waterfall of praise and adulation which washes over him – some of it over the top – Jim Divers, vice-president of the Celtic Supporters' Association, said simply this: "When Nakamura is not playing there is something missing." Nine words which nail his value to Celtic while sparing us any guff about him being some sort of Pele of the Far East.

He's right. This is the fourth season in which Nakamura has owned the right side of Celtic's midfield. Without him the team feels incomplete. He is an automatic first pick and has been since day one, which is quite a compliment given that he was only a £1.4 million signing (the purchase of his image rights brought the deal to £2.7m, still cheaper than Massimo Donati). Since he arrived in the summer of 2005 he has been a signature player of Gordon Strachan's Celtic. More than that, he has been the boss's pride and joy.

Now the clock is running down on Nakamura and Celtic. His thoughts are straying to the day when he rejoins the club where his career began, Yokohama F Marinos in Japan. This will happen either in January or at the end of the season when he can leave for free. Celtic must insist on the latter option. They ought to be putting football before finance and keeping Nakamura around to help them win the league.

So what is Nakamura? A great? A legend? An underachiever? The most over-rated player in the SPL? Strachan will be among the minority to describe him as "a genius". No

player has been more protected, more praised, more appreciated by the Celtic manager. It will pain him to have to pick teams without Nakamura around.

He looks at Nakamura and sees someone with a level of touch, technique and vision probably beyond anyone else in the country. In that Nakamura book, the enjoyable "The Zen of Naka" by Herald journalist Martin Greig, Strachan writes in the foreword: "For pure ability Shunsuke Nakamura is the best footballer I have worked with, in both my playing and management careers." That means better than Kenny Dalglish and Eric Cantona in terms of natural talent. Strachan sees a wee man who contributes despite being roughed up in some games. He sees a professional who still stays behind to practise an already sublime talent for set-pieces. He sees someone who would run a mile rather than take a drink or hit a nightclub.

All of that, given the price Celtic paid for him, means that the first thing to acknowledge about the 2007 Scottish footballer of the year is that he has been an extremely successful signing, not least because 140,000 Celtic shirts have been sold in the Far East since he moved to Glasgow. There has been the privilege of watching one of the world's best free-kick specialists. Few will forget the strike which brought Manchester United to their knees at Parkhead.

But Nakamura was good enough to beat Manchester United, not play for them. Free-kicks aside, genius is far too generous a description of his entire output. A genius would wreak havoc in the SPL week in, week out and provide far, far more memorable moments. This Wednesday's rematch against United at Parkhead will illus-



Few will forget Nakamura's strike against Manchester United at Parkhead in 2006

Photograph: SNS Group

trate how – even if he scores another free-kick against them – he lacks the pace and physical strength to play for the European Cup holders.

Nakamura will eventually leave to a mixture of acclaim from his own club's fans and a shrug of the shoulders from others (except Kilmarnock's, who are sick of the sight of him). There will be Rangers supporters who sneer that he never hurt them. That is not strictly true. He has created a handful of goals against them and his swerving long-range strike in April hurt Rangers plenty: it set Celtic on their way to a 2-1 win which changed the course of the championship.

Old Firm games have often passed him by, though, as did the Manchester United and Villarreal matches in this season's Champions League and many previous games in that tournament. Nakamura does not frighten

opponents the way Henrik Larsson, Brian Laudrup or Paul Gascoigne did. He can seem an isolated, fragile figure who goes down easily (although he is also brave in wanting the ball even after fouls). Even his many admirers accept that in open play he usually disappears against truly accomplished opponents.

For all that, Celtic and Scottish football will be worse off without him. Think about what we want to watch in the SPL. Whether you think him a genius or a one-trick pony, how many others can place a football on the ground and do what Nakamura does?

AN observation on the SFA's statement to confirm that "players will only be eligible to play

for Scotland if they qualify through the blood route (parents and grandparents)".

This was down to a gentleman's agreement between the Home Nations despite Fifa regulations which state a player with a British passport can play for any of the Home Associations "if he or she is eligible".

Ifeoma Dieke plays for the Scotland women's team. She was born in America to Nigerian parents and grandparents, came to Scotland aged three, grew up here and holds a British passport. She has no Scottish blood. For her to carry on playing for Scotland that gentleman's agreement will have to be for the gentlemen only.

ON THE SPOT MICHAEL GRANT



Unhappy anniversary for Herr Blatter

THE INSIDER ANDREW JENNINGS



A SHIVER will likely shimmy down Sepp Blatter's spine at 10.30 tomorrow morning – three years to the minute since Swiss fraud squad detectives burst through his Zurich office door waving a search warrant. The police, investigating

allegations of misuse of Fifa funds, were seeking incriminating documents. A report is expected to go to prosecutors in the New Year.

The raid is understood to have been conducted under Article 158 of the Swiss Penal Code which carries penalties of up to five years jail.

The police's action was triggered by the collapse of a Swiss company that over nearly three decades had defeated all rivals to acquire Fifa's lucrative World Cup marketing rights. The liquidator, Thomas Bauer from Ernst & Young, dug into the company's bank records and discovered that a gigantic £70 million worth of kickbacks had gone to sports officials. When Bauer demanded that

some Fifa officials repay their bribes a bank account set up by Blatter's lawyer channelled more than £1 million back to creditors. Investigating magistrate Thomas Hildbrand, who led the raid, is probing allegations that Fifa money was used to repay the bribes. Fifa has never admitted that it is the target of a complex corruption investigation.

In June 2006, on the eve of the World Cup, I confronted Blatter at Zurich airport and asked him, 'Why did Fifa pay back the bribes?' Blatter declined to answer. The BBC filmed the exchange and it was screened world-wide. Blatter didn't sue.

If charged, Blatter would have to resign the Fifa presidency, to be

followed speedily by Julio Grondona and Jack Warner, chair and deputy of Fifa's finance committee. The tectonic plates of world football would shift and the subsequent quake throw up new leadership – and require new strategies for countries such as England bidding to stage the 2018 World Cup.

Fifa's reputation is deteriorating in Switzerland. This spring six marketing executives, some of whom organised paying the bribes to Fifa officials, went on trial accused of embezzling money due to Fifa. The court cleared most of them but ruled that Fifa had misled the police and ordered it to pay £57,000 towards the costs of the investigation.

□ Watch the fortunes of the wondrous new Westfield shopping mall that opened last Thursday at Shepherds Bush in West London. If shoppers feeling the pinch stay away, will the developer Frank Lowy – controversial billionaire chair of the Australian football federation and new favourite of Sepp Blatter – be able to raise the cash to build his other planned mall in London, the £1.5 billion Olympic Gateway in Stratford, East London? It's a key part of the 2012 Olympic site.

In early July, before the banks stopped lending, Lowy was Gordon's Brown's guest at Downing Street for a ceremonial signing of the Olympic contract to build 300 shops.