

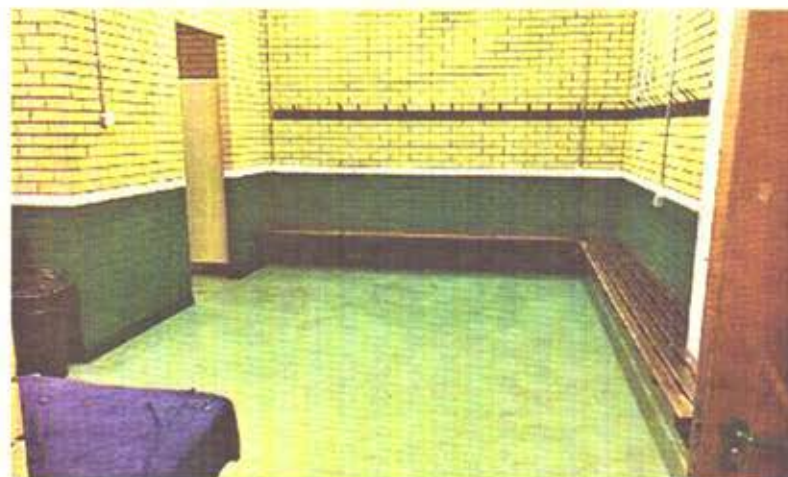
Sport FA Cup

Mourinho: I have plucked juiciest orange from tree



Paul Hirst

Welcome to Somerset: Huish Park awaits



The away dressing room at Yeovil Town, where United will prepare for tonight's fourth-round tie, is slightly smaller than the changing areas they are used to

José Mourinho boasted that he had plucked "one of the juiciest oranges from the tree" after deriding Pep Guardiola's claim that Manchester City pulled out of the running for Alexis Sánchez over spiralling costs.

The United manager confirmed yesterday that Sánchez is set to make his Manchester United debut in tonight's FA Cup fourth-round tie away to Yeovil Town.

Mourinho claimed his superiors deserved credit for pulling off a "fantastic deal" that represented great value for the club and simultaneously bloodied the nose of their cross-town rivals City. "It was the board, they did it, they got a player like Alexis Sánchez," Mourinho said. "He was with one and a half feet in another club [City]. He is one of the best attacking players in the world."

Claims from City, whether from club officials or the head coach Pep Guardiola, that they had ended their pursuit of Sánchez over fears that his wage demands would "destabilise" the club, have amused Mourinho.

The United manager accused City of sour grapes, although he used an analogy involving another fruit to explain his theory. "When you see the tree with amazing oranges at the top of the tree and cannot get there, you say, 'Oh, I got the lower ones because I don't like the ones at the top,'" Mourinho said.

"You like the ones at the top. They are so nice, so orange, so round, so full of juice, but you cannot get there, so you say, 'I don't want to go there,' or, 'I didn't like it, I prefer the other ones.' It reminds me of that story."

To make doubly sure his message got across, Mourinho then delivered another dig at Guardiola, who claimed

last week that paying Sánchez's £350,000-a-week wages would have been destabilising.

When asked if he believed City's version of events, Mourinho replied: "I don't know. I know that if other clubs did not get him it's not a problem of money, for sure."

"That's not a problem of money. You go and analyse the numbers and Manchester City spent more money than us, Chelsea spent more money than us, I think even Everton spent more money than us."

United's accounts will show that United paid no transfer fee for Sánchez, but the eye-watering £20 million signing-on fee they parted with for the 29-year-old has caused consternation in some quarters, as has his wages.

But Mourinho insists that United have not paid over the odds. "When people speak about salaries, first of all I have many doubts about the numbers that are written," he said. "Secondly, we have to put things in perspective. How much would Alexis Sánchez cost in

normal transfer, club-to-club, as a player with two or three years of contract?"

"I would say roughly between £100 million and £150 million. You put things in perspective. You go to the numbers that the club didn't pay on the transfer. You go to the numbers that the club pays in salaries, which are obviously higher than others, but you put things in perspective."

"You get a calculator and you arrive at different conclusions."

Martin Keown arrived at a conclusion that has annoyed Mourinho. The former Arsenal defender labelled Sánchez "the biggest mercenary in football" for joining United after running his contract down to the final six months.

Mourinho dismissed that claim. "Not just in football but everywhere, in every area, I think we work also for money," he said. "I know he [Sánchez] has a big passion for football. I know he wanted to leave Arsenal. Obviously, he wanted to be paid according to his quality,

according to the perspective and — one thing people sometimes forget — according to the risk.

"The player that lets his contract arrive until the end is a player playing and training every day at the limit of risk, a risk other players don't have. When a player signs his contract for three, four, five years, a player doesn't have that risk. When a player lets his contract go until the end, every day he is playing in the risk. Imagine him a couple of years ago with same injury as [James] McCarthy [the Everton midfielder who broke his leg on Saturday]."

So was the deal to sign Sánchez a bargain, then?

"Expensive or cheap? Honestly, I think it was fair," Mourinho said. "I cannot say that it was expensive because it wasn't, I cannot say it was cheap because if you add all the values of his contract, it's not also cheap."

"But I think it's a very good deal for us and the player has a fantastic contract. It's a contract according to his qualities as a player and according to the situation — no transfer fee."

Mourinho also aimed a jibe at Henrikh Mkhitaryan, who has moved to Arsenal as part of the swap deal.

"Could he perform better with us? Could I take more from his talent? Maybe," Mourinho said. "Could he give a little more also to adapt to us? Maybe, but I don't have regrets."

Mourinho claimed that the Armenia forward had taken a step down by joining Arsenal, who are sixth in the table.

"Alexis changed from a fantastic club to a giant club and Mkh changed [a giant club] for a fantastic club," he said.

Mourinho has warned his other attacking players that they will have to fight hard to win a place in the team.

"Now we have five attacking players of high quality, [Juan] Mata, [Marcus] Rashford, [Romelu] Lukaku, [Anthony] Martial, Alexis," Mourinho, who had also praised Jesse Lingard's "evolution" earlier in his press conference, said.

"It is fantastic for me and for the team. If the players one day are on the bench and don't like it, I'm happy with that."

Yeovil Town v Man Utd
FA Cup fourth round
BBC One, 7.55pm



Sánchez v Yeovil

It would take Alexis Sánchez just 20 days to earn the same amount as Yeovil have to spend on their playing budget for the season



Meet the meditating vegan who will try to stop Sánchez

Gregor Robertson

When it is put to Nathan Smith that he could be tasked with marshalling Alexis Sánchez if the Chile forward makes his Manchester United debut this evening, in the context of a somewhat unorthodox conversation, his response is not altogether surprising. "Obviously we know Sánchez is a top player," the Yeovil Town defender says. "But on the day, a man is just a man."

Yeovil's record Football League appearance holder is an advocate of meditation which, he says, eradicates any negative thoughts and helps him to focus on his game. "There's always a battle with that inner voice in your head," Smith, 31, says. "It's helped me massively with that. And I feel a lot calmer on the pitch. But it also combats everything you do in every day life."

A retreat to southern India in the summer of 2016 taught him techniques that have since become firmly ingrained in the daily routine of a man who has won two caps for Jamaica. During the ten-day stay at the

Vipassana meditation centre, recommended by a friend, Smith undertook a vow of silence, slept on a metal bed with no mattress and he was awoken each morning by a 4am gong before meditating for up to eleven hours a day. Meals were less than straightforward, too, given that he is vegan.

"I just wanted to find out more about myself," says Smith, who is approaching 300 games for the Somerset club, either side of a three-year hiatus at Chesterfield. "I always felt there was another side to life other than what we're being shown."

"The first few days [in India] you felt like getting up and leaving. You can't talk to anyone, can't make eye contact, no reading, no writing, no mobile phone. It was like, 'What do I do?' Towards the end of it you feel like you're in touch with nature, the consciousness of the earth. You learn to detach yourself from your emotions."

Emotions are unlikely to be kept in check quite so expertly among the 9,000-plus supporters — about a fifth of Yeovil's population — in attendance

at a sell-out Huish Park tonight. Smith is the only player from the League Two club's starting XI who faced United in the third round in 2015 who will play again tonight.

"The whole environment at Huish Park changed," Smith, who grew up supporting United, recalls. "The TV people coming down; a full house, which it doesn't tend to be down here; lining up against players who you see on TV all the time."

He has adhered to a meat, fish and dairy-free diet for the past four years which, he says, has made him feel lighter and aids recovery. "Growing

up around the Rastafarian community, they always talked about eating and living a certain way," he says. "Initially it was just trying something new. Then it became a health thing. And then you become conscious of the compassion side of things [towards animals]; become more aware."

Last summer he volunteered in an organic café near his home in north London. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, he has been the butt of one or two jokes from team-mates because of his alternative lifestyle. "Initially there's going to be the odd little giggle," Smith says. "But when they hear the actual foundation of it everyone has to respect it. After a period of time they've seen what I do, seen the results, and started to ask questions."

Smith cooks and prepares all his meals at home, including those in advance of away trips and



Smith insists upon cooking his own meals before matches

overnight stays in hotels. Given that Yeovil have been ensconced in a Bristol hotel since Tuesday evening, the build-up to tonight's game has proved quite a logistical challenge. This afternoon, the squad will enjoy a pre-match meal at Tamburino, an Italian restaurant. Smith, however, will prepare something different. "Amaranth and teff porridge, with Brazil nuts, walnuts, then I'll put some moringa in there, with some almond butter, coconut milk towards the end to give it that creamy effect; some dates, some goji berries, and a bit of maca powder. And that will keep me fuelled for the whole game."

Darren Way, Yeovil's 38-year old manager whose playing career ended after a car crash ten years ago, has asked his players "to dream big, bigger than they have ever dreamt before."

"If you see our manager and the way he works, everything is about belief and believing that anything can be achieved," Smith says. "When we go out on that pitch it's a level playing field. The boys believe that we can go out and do a job."