

JONATHAN AGNEW



I can't say I've taken much interest in Spanish football before, but it will be impossible to ignore this weekend's La Liga match between Villarreal and Real Madrid, for whom Gareth Bale will probably make his debut.

We have all become fascinated and disgusted in equal measure by the obscenity of the Premier League transfer market in which million-pound

numbers now trip from news readers' tongues without any obvious trace of incredulity.

Real Madrid generates more than €500 million every year. However, with unemployment amongst the under 25s currently running at more than 50% in Spain, where everyday life is a struggle for many, it is fair to assume that the expectation on Bale, who was transferred from Tottenham Hotspur last week for €100 million, will be immense.

I certainly don't feel any sympathy for football's most expensive player in history – he will be pocketing £300,000 every week – but anyone who thinks that such an immense

pay cheque is easily earned is kidding themselves. The pressure on Bale to perform to that level of reward in every game could easily break him.

How do I know? Because I have experienced the same level of expectation when making a rare appearance in the Lancashire League 30 years ago. OK, perhaps it was not quite the same – I was paid £100 to turn out for Rishton CC – but when

the captain of the amateur team threw me the ball, it was with a look that told me I had better take some wickets, or else. (I don't think I took any, I never did bowl very well in the snow.) I'm sure many would agree that it's much easier to give a speech at a charity dinner for which you are not being paid than it is at a professional engagement.

'The pressure on Bale could break him'

With pressure and expectation created by a price tag comes the tension and angst that can smother the natural ability and flair of any performer. Fernando Torres has hardly blossomed at Chelsea after his record-breaking £50 million transfer two years ago, and cricket's

best example would be the Australian all-rounder, Glenn Maxwell, who was bought by the IPL franchise Mumbai Indians for a million dollars but barely turned out for them.

Time will tell how Bale will cope, but he could do with an eye-catching start on Saturday.