

**INTRODUCING
THE WORLD'S
GREATEST TEAM**



BELLINGHAM



VINICIUS JUNIOR



ENDRICK



RODRYGO

FOUR FOR TWO

THE
NEW

GALACTICOS

**INSIDE
RATCLIFFE'S
MAN UNITED**
The quest to
revive a giant

With Mbappe added to an all-star attack, can Real Madrid rule Europe once more?

**THE RISE OF
ASTON VILLA**
How Emery led them back into the elite

FUTURE

ISSUE 369

PRINTED IN THE UK

£5.99

06

9 771355 027226

CAFU • KROOS • MOLBY • SOUTHAMPTON • TYLDESLEY • ROBERT PLANT



City football
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

KICK OFF YOUR CAREER IN SPORT

Experience the summer of a lifetime at **Next Gen**, a summer residential programme for 14 to 17 year olds like no other. Go inside the world of Manchester City and New York City FC, as you take your first steps into the sporting industry.

Ready for the summer of a lifetime?
Scan the QR code to find out more.



CITYFOOTBALL-LEADERSHIP.COM/TEEN

KEY DATES

Next Gen Manchester

21 JULY–2 AUGUST 2024

One and two-week offerings available

Next Gen New York

4 AUGUST–16 AUGUST 2024

Future PLC Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA
 Phone 01225 442244 Email fourfourtwo@futurenet.com
 To contact an individual, email firstname.surname@futurenet.com

Editorial

Editor **James Andrew**
 Art Director **Anthony Moore**
 Chief Sub Editor **Gregg Davies**
 Online Content Editor **Mark White**
 Head of Video **Adam Clery**
 Editor at Large **Andy Mitten**

Deputy Editor **Matthew Ketchell**
 Senior Staff Writer **Chris Flanagan**
 Staff Writer **Ed McCambridge**
 Staff Writer **Ryan Dabbs**
 Presenter/Producer **Adam Monk**

Thanks to

Huw Davies, Andrew Murray, Jon Crampin, Louis Walters, Ed Price, Fi Todd, Harry Membrey, Susan Tyldesley, Tom Jewitt, Lloyd Webb

Photography

Getty, Alamy, PA, Offside, iStock, Reuters.

All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising

Media packs are available on request

Account Director **Richard Hemmings**
richard.hemmings@futurenet.com
 Head of Sport **Matthew Johnston**
matthew.johnston@futurenet.com

Account Manager, Sport **Liv Wilford**

liv.wilford@futurenet.com

International Licensing

FourFourTwo is available for licensing and syndication.

To find out more, contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at www.futurecontenthub.com

Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**

International Account Manager **Brendon Bester**

Subscriptions

Email enquiries help@magazinesdirect.com

Order line 0330 333 1113

Online orders and enquiries www.magazinesdirect.com

Consumer Revenues Director **Sharon Todd**

Manage your subscription online with MyMagazine – for FAQs, visit www.mymagazine.co.uk/FAQ or log in at mymagazine.co.uk

Full price subscription rate £77.87 for UK, €164 for Europe,

\$186 for USA, £143 for Rest of World

Subscription delays Disruption remains within UK and International delivery networks. Please allow up to seven days before contacting us

Past Issues

If you're an active subscriber, you have instant access to past issues via your iOS or Android device(s). To buy single past issues (print format only), visit magazinesdirect.com (click on 'Single Issues') or email help@magazinesdirect.com. The Magazines Direct website is owned and operated by Future Publishing Limited.

Circulation

Head of Trade Marketing **Ben Oakden**

Production

Head of Production **Mark Constance**

Senior Production Manager **Matt Eglinton**

Ad Production Manager **Nick Williams**

Digital Editions Controller **Jason Hudson**

Production Manager **Vivienne Calvert**

Group Management

SVP Consumer **Kevin Addley**

MD: Sports, Knowledge and Wellness **Dave Clutterbuck**

Group Sports Editor **Michael Harris**

Head of Art (Sports) **Kevin Eason**

Commercial Finance Director **Dan Jotcham**

Printed by

William Gibbons

Distributed by

Marketforce UK, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6JR

www.marketforce.co.uk/mfcommunications@futurenet.com

ISSN 1355027X

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2024 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information.

You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material, and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend and adapt.



Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com Tel: +44 (0)1225 442 244

Chief Executive Officer **Jon Steinberg**
 Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
 Chief Financial and Strategy Officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

WELCOME

Back in the summer of 2000, Florentino Perez became president of Real Madrid and set about making them the Harlem Globetrotters of the sport by signing the biggest and best names from Planet Football.

He built a team that had the best player from France, and arguably best in the world, Zinedine Zidane. Among others, there were some Brazilians, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, plus England superstar midfielder David Beckham. While they were pretty on the eye, they won just two La Liga titles and one Champions League crown in Perez's first tenure.

The Spaniard was re-elected to the Santiago Bernabeu hotseat in 2009 and Real Madrid have enjoyed plenty of success during his second stint. Now, he's building 'the new Galacticos' in a similar way to how he created the first – with the best player from France, arguably the world, Kylian Mbappe, Brazilians Vinicius Junior, Rodrygo and Endrick, plus England superstar midfielder Jude Bellingham.

Los Blancos are already reigning La Liga and European champions – after adding Mbappe and Endrick to their ranks this summer, it's a daunting prospect for their opponents.

In this issue, we look at their new team of heavyweights and ponder how they will compare to the team of the early 2000s. Enjoy the mag.

James Andrew

@JamesAndrew_

@FourFourTwo



5 THINGS YOU'LL LEARN INSIDE

1

Which former footballer was later jailed for stealing famous artworks

2

Which club's top brass fired the whole team after a 10-0 defeat

3

Which singer received a visit from Harry Maguire during pre-season

4

Which fans threw fish cakes onto the pitch to protest against VAR

5

Which club were managed by Alan Carr's dad, then were liquidated

WANT MORE?
 FIND US HERE...



FOURFOURTWO.COM



@FOURFOURTWO



@FOURFOURTWOUK



FACEBOOK.COM/FOURFOURTWO



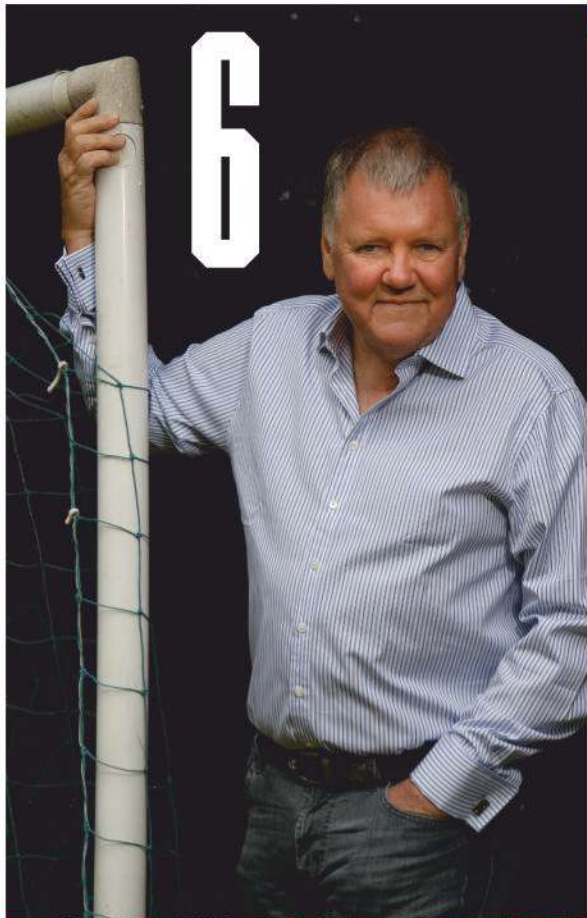
FOURFOURTWO



SCAN TO SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

SUBSCRIBE FOR £4.20 PER ISSUE

Get FFT sent direct to your door every month for £54.49 per year – with 13 issues published in total, you'll make some great savings. Head to magazinesdirect.com and find FourFourTwo, or phone 0330 333 1113



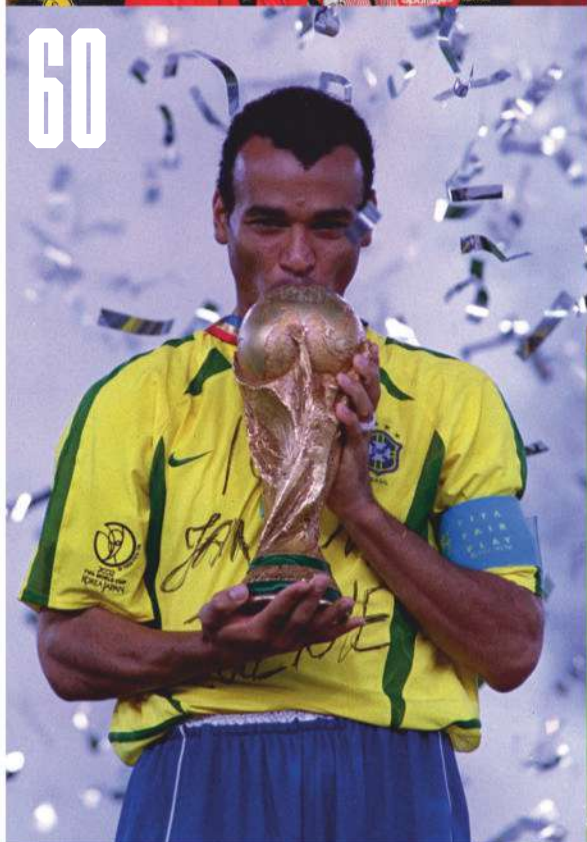
18



22



CONT



YOU ASK...

6 Clive Tyldesley on Ally, Cloughie and that night in Barcelona

UPFRONT

- 12** The month's action in pictures
- 18** Toni Kroos: my greatest games
- 19** Post-match interview secrets
- 20** Test yourself with the FFT quiz
- 22** Robert Plant's love of Wolves
- 24** Greenland's seven-day season
- 25** Pep's Barça or Zizou's Madrid? Our staff debate who was better

FEATURES

- 28** Real Madrid's new Galacticos
Kylian Mbappe and Endrick have joined Jude Bellingham, Rodrygo and Vinicius – will they win it all?
- 36** Aston Villa's return to the elite
After 1982 glory, they're back in Europe's top competition at last
- 42** The new Champions League
All the madness explained, via Swiss chess and French pirates
- 46** Ratcliffe's Manchester United
FFT heads to the US to find out how a giant intends to rebuild

81



72





EVENTS

FEATURES

- 54 Worst starts to a season... ever!**
Torched cars and Alan Carr's dad
- 60 An exclusive chat with Cafu**
A hero relives a glorious career
- 66 The Saints have marched back**
Southampton's stars talk to FFT
- 72 Lamine Yamal's game analysed**
Plus: Liverpool 2004-05 revisited
- 98 Phillip Cocu picks his Perfect XI**

THE MIXER

- 90 Rihanna's sneaks, Messi's Beats**

AROUND THE GROUNDS

- 78 Michael Skubala: Lincoln boss**
- 79 Edinburgh City's year of misery**
- 80 Best & Worst: Bristol City**
- 81 Peter Odemwingie takes up golf**
- 82 Yeovil: finally on the rise again**
A mad decade for the Glovers

THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

- 84 Jan Molby: the Danish Scouser**
"My Liverpoolian accent helped"
- 86 Izzy Christiansen's Lioness life**
- 88 Lee Clark gets invited to Harrods**



“I broke commentary’s cardinal sin by saying, ‘And Solskjaer has won it’ – if they hadn’t won, they would’ve hanged effigies of me!”

CLIVE TYLDESLEY

Clive Tyldesley has invited *FourFourTwo* into his home in leafy Berkshire and, fittingly, a five-a-side

football goal stands in the garden.

“He does keepy-ups and I go in goal!” jokes the 69-year-old’s wife, Susan. “It’s purely for decorative purposes these days,” Clive explains – the couple’s four children are now adults and have moved out to pursue careers of their own.

In the kitchen, there’s a pile of Tyldesley’s commentary charts, which he writes by hand for every game he works on. These days, he sends copies to the many people who order them online as souvenirs.

Born in Radcliffe in northern Greater Manchester, Tyldesley knew as a child that he wanted to be a commentator. He has since been in the business for 49 years, starting out by covering Nottingham Forest and Liverpool, two clubs that would end up sharing five consecutive European Cups.

Much of his career was spent at ITV, a relationship that came to an end at Euro 2024 when Tyldesley signed off with a lightning-delayed commentary on Germany vs Denmark – a departure that wasn’t of his choosing.

This afternoon, he’s just come back from central London, where he’s been recording the latest episode of his new podcast, *The Football Authorities*, with Martin O’Neill. His passion for football

and commentary is as strong as ever, which becomes clear as we sit in the garden and he tackles your questions...

How old were you when you realised you wanted to be a commentator?

Lucy Johnston, Lincoln

Some silly age. I wasn’t the only child who chased a football around the garden, commentating to himself or herself, but I was serious – I meant it! It was just what I wanted to do. I was in a boarding house at a grammar school, where it was against the rules to listen to the radio beyond a certain time. I would take the risk with an earpiece, listening to the great radio commentators, Peter Jones and Bryon Butler – and Brian Moore was also at the BBC at the time. [FFT: What was the punishment if you got caught?]

I was punished a couple of times. You really wouldn’t want to know. They were corporal punishment days, so it wasn’t a smart thing to do...

Would you have swapped commentating for playing professionally?

Rev Darren Jalland, via X

I was never any good. We played football at every break but my school’s sport was rugby union; I played to a level far above my talent and, more importantly, my courage levels. I’ve got the pain threshold of an artist rather than a performer – I’ve got this far in my life with a motto of ‘No pain, no pain’ [Laughs]. I didn’t have any dreams about scoring a hat-trick at Wembley. My dreams were always about commentating on that.

How did you get your first opportunity in commentary?

Seb Parkinson, via X

I came out of university in the late 17th century – 1975 – and talked my way into a runner’s job at a radio station that was opening in Nottingham [Radio Trent], just to make the tea and feel part of the industry. I had a late-night rock show for a while, but I wanted to work in football. As fate would have it, Nottingham Forest were a mid-table Second Division team who’d recently taken on Brian Clough [below], little knowing that within five years they would be successfully defending the European Cup. It was an era when a local reporter was much closer to the club: I socialised with the players and used to travel on the Forest team bus to away games. The same was true when I got my second job [at Radio City] in Liverpool – probably the best team in the world, but I’d still be out having lagers after the match with these guys, and travelling on the team coach with the mighty Liverpool.

What was it like, dealing with Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest?

Josh Byrne, Ilkeston

It was a good grounding – he was very difficult and demanding. He was drinking, and that did affect his mood swings. I got a few kisses and a few rollickings; sometimes there was rarely anything in between. I remember doing an interview with Martin O’Neill at maybe 2pm on a Thursday at the City Ground: we were trying to find somewhere quiet to do the interview and went into the first-team dressing room. Brian walked past. He marched me out of there and said, “Are you in my team?” I said, “No, Mr Clough”. He said, “Well, you do not come into this dressing room. This is for the manager and the players of Nottingham Forest, not for anybody else.”

Which team do you support, and do you find it hard to be impartial when commentating on them?

@Joopla2, via X

I grew up a Manchester United fan. I shouldn’t have done – I lived in a semi-detached house and on the other side of the wall lived the Bury manager. But my dad was a United fan. I think the first game I went to was in 1960. When I was 14 or 15, I started to go on the Stretford End, ▶





then I started to go home and away when Manchester United had a very average team, slipping into the Second Division. I think I missed only six, eight games that season. If you'd told me then that I would ever have an affection for any other club, we would have got into a very heated argument.

But who do I support now? I support my friends; the people who have helped me in this business. I want them to succeed. I have no problem commentating on Manchester United – that affiliation has left me – but a game that's important to a really close friend is difficult. When Iceland beat England in 2016, I essentially had to say at the final whistle that Roy Hodgson's position as manager was untenable. Susan and I had gone for meals with Roy and Sheila, I regarded him as a good friend, and I was calling for him to go in front of 25 million people. But he'd pretty much resigned before I finished the sentence.

Out of all of the very many brilliant commentators through the ages, which one inspired you in particular?

John Gray, via X

I had a spell when I fastened onto NFL on Channel 4. Part of the hook was the commentaries of John Madden – the coach, the co-commentator – and his straight man, Pat Summerall. If you Google his most famous line, you won't find any answers. Summerall never commented to be showy, flowery or poetic; to grab attention or be melodramatic. He just called the game as he saw it. He had a wonderful feel for rhythm and tone, and a voice that could wake people from a coma. He had a lovely, relaxed affection for the sport he commentated on, clearing the way for Madden to come in with his mad lines and sayings. Before the 2014 World Cup, England played a warm-up game at Miami Dolphins' stadium and the commentary booth was palatial. A couple of local camera guys said, "This is where Summerall and Madden used to sit" and it was a chill-down-the-spine moment for me, sitting in the same seat as Summerall.

What's the saddest that a match has ever left you on air?

Nik, via X

I was at Heysel. You go to a football match to commutate and end up counting the first dead bodies you've seen in your life. It was an out-of-body experience. You become almost like a wartime journalist for a few hours, and have to take on the responsibilities and judgements that go with that.

I wasn't at Hillsborough – I was at that day's other FA Cup semi-final, at

Clockwise from right

Heysel made Tyllesley "almost like a wartime journalist for a few hours"; Madden needed Summerall, says Clive; Solskjaer had indeed won it; "Oh, hi there, I didn't see you come in"; telling 25 million people that your pal is on his way out? Not fun



Villa Park. My boss instructed me to go in the next morning to chair a phone-in and I resisted hugely, probably because I'd leapt to the same cynical conclusions that a lot did, with the misreporting of what had happened in the hours after the tragedy. All of my misconceptions were disproved in 15 or 20 minutes. Everyone had the same story: they opened the gates and waved them through to their deaths.

On the Tuesday or Wednesday, I was at Anfield, waiting in the car park for the latest announcement, when I was summoned in to speak to Kenny Dalglish, who's a friend. He just said, "Ian Whelan? A kid you showed around Radio City a couple of times,

who wanted to be a commentator?" I said "Ah yeah, Ian... oh no, really?" He said, "Yeah. His parents and his sister are in the players lounge; we've got people trying to counsel the bereaved and they'd really like to meet you." Welcome to a tiny portion of the incredible responsibilities that football club had to shoulder in the days, weeks and decades that followed the tragedy. Kenny and his wife, Marina, were just remarkable.

How difficult was it, being sent home from the 1986 World Cup in Mexico?

George Leedham, via Facebook

I wasn't actually sent home. I'd been doing full-time reports from Merseyside

games for *World of Sport* on ITV, who had commentators in Mexico for the World Cup. Communications with Central America weren't as reliable then, so they asked if I'd go to London, research every game they were covering, sit in a studio and be prepared to take over commentary if needed, until they could re-establish connection with Mexico. Their lead commentator, Brian Moore, was presenting from London for the first two weeks and then flying out.

The first night was Spain vs Brazil and they couldn't make contact with the stadium, so I was marched to a booth to prepare to commentate. Then, about 45 minutes before kick-off,

Trevor East – a good friend who later gave me some wonderful opportunities – said, “Look, I’ve got Brian Moore in the studio; if we don’t get the lines up, am I going to take a rookie reporter on the first night in front of 20 million, when I’ve got my lead commentator here?” I had no argument with that. He told me to do the game as if doing it live, so he had something he could listen to and see if he could help me.

They managed to get the commentator in Mexico, and at half-time a sound engineer said, “I’m watching the main studio and it’s saying the score is 0-0 – you’re saying 1-1?” I said, “It’s definitely 1-1; I’ve commentated on both of the goals.” I was watching a clean feed, with no captions – just pictures. One was offside but didn’t seem to have been given as offside, and by the time they came back from a replay they were playing, so I assumed they’d kicked off. The other was a handball goal, celebrated in such a way that I thought it had been given; they must have started again in a way where I was convinced it had been allowed. I was in bits. The morning after, Trevor said, ‘This isn’t going to work, is it?’, so I went home, thinking maybe my chance on network television was over. At least no one saw my mistake, except Trevor and the sound engineer.

How did it feel to join the BBC when Match of the Day returned in 1992?

Isabel Ward, Cheltenham

It was a huge moment for me, because all of my ambitions first came from sport on the BBC. John Motson and Barry Davies became friends. John may have appeared straight-laced but he liked a good boozy lunch! He was a wonderful raconteur. I was number three or four, way behind Motson and Davies, and in that sense they were four frustrating years at the BBC – like a middle-distance runner lining up against Seb Coe and Steve Ovett, only running for bronze. But they were four wonderful years because apart from Match of the Day, I did things for Sportsnight and features for Football Focus, and Television Centre is an iconic building. I remember previously going to watch Manchester United at Loftus Road nearby, getting there early and just watching people going in and out of Television Centre, thinking: ‘That is where I want to be’.

How important was Brian Moore for your career? How did it feel replacing him as ITV’s main commentator?

@Trevorsports90, via X

My timing was good. I was asked to go back to ITV and understudy Brian

“SOMEONE TOLD ME, ‘REMEMBER THE NAME: WAYNE ROONEY’ AND IT WAS THERE ON HIS SHIRT... I NICKED IT”

in 1996, ITV won the rights to the Champions League, then Brian retired. I inherited his seat in the summer of 1998, as Manchester United were preparing for their Treble season. Brian was very good to me, and my mentor was Reg Gutteridge, ITV’s boxing commentator, who saw something in me that he thought he could improve. He taught me 90 per cent of what I know about the job.

If you could go back and commentate again on either the Champions League final in 1999 or the one in 2005, which would it be?

Jacob Cullip, via Instagram

The 1999 final was the most important night of my career. The audience was maybe 25 million, and if I’d f**ked up, ITV would have asked if this rookie was good enough to handle the Champions League contract and gone and got Motty or somebody. Those two or three minutes that I managed to somehow negotiate and come up with some words to describe, which have become a tiny part of people’s recollections of it – that was my breakthrough. Six years down the line, I was fairly well-established, even though the 2005 final was more incredible because if you’d gone to the loo a minute before Liverpool made it 3-1 and come back a minute after they’d equalised, you wouldn’t have detected any change in the flow of the game! Liverpool scored three goals in six and a half minutes but Milan continued to be the dominant force – it just wasn’t 3-0 any more. It was 3-3. That game was the most incredible football drama I’ve ever witnessed.

Did it feel inevitable that Manchester United would win the 1999 Champions League Final even when 1-0 down to Bayern Munich in the dying minutes? That’s how I felt.

James Stuppel, via X

Absolutely not, no – Bayern Munich hit the woodwork twice in the last 10 minutes. With 89 minutes played, there’d been one goal and I’d got it wrong – “Basler, deflected and in”. It wasn’t deflected. Every time I see Peter Schmeichel, I say, “I thought you

were the greatest goalkeeper in the world – you never moved, so I assumed it had been deflected!” [FFT: How pleased are you that your commentary on the comeback is remembered so fondly?] I’m pleased it has stood the test of time. “And Solskjær has won it” does break the cardinal rule of commentary, though, waving the winner across the line before they’d reached it. If Bayern had equalised, then won, there’d have been an effigy of me hanging from a lamp post in the Arndale Centre that night. It would’ve been my fault! [Laughs]

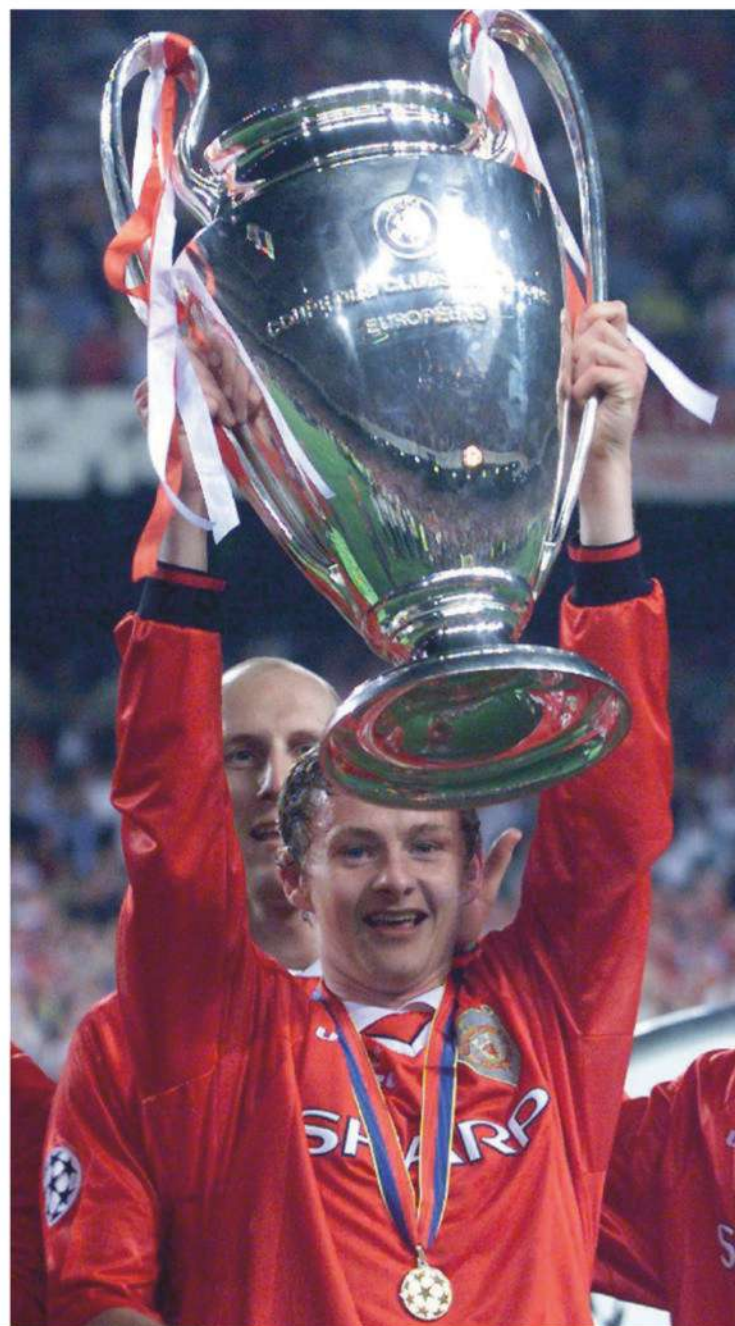
Who was your best co-commentator?

@Bonessunitedcfc, via X

I’ve been very lucky: a lot of the partnerships on air have also been partnerships off air, from Ron Atkinson

through to Rob Green today on CBS, via Andy Townsend, Ally McCoist and so on. There’s always been a friendship and that shows on air. McCoist is the best example where people just know instinctively that we get on famously.

For a couple of years around 1989 and 1990, I commentated on rugby league for Granada. I had been around rugby league – I had a grandfather who liked it – but I didn’t know the sport. I needed someone alongside me who knew the sport and knew my shortcomings. That was Brian Smith, the Australian coach of Hull FC, who appreciated my desire to get to the core to the sport and led me along a path to understand it better. Because I needed him more than I ever needed a football co-commentator, my answer would be Brian Smith. ▶



What has been the most iconic line you've delivered as a commentator?

Jamie Steinbauer, via Instagram
That's up to other people; I don't know. [FFT: One that stood the test of time was, "Remember the name: Wayne Rooney", after his spectacular first goal for Everton...] Yeah, it did. A guy at a testimonial dinner said that phrase to me previously about Wayne and I sort of nicked it, because the name on the back of his shirt was staring me in the face as he ran away to celebrate.

Your commentary notes have become famous. How long do they take to compile?

John Booth, Barnsley
They take as long as they take. It's a comfort blanket. When I've done that preparation and it's sitting there in front of me, it gives me confidence. You've done your work – you might f**k up, but you've got no excuses. If you use more than 10 per cent of it, you're probably boring the audience. It's just knowing more about the whole backdrop to the game than anyone watching, and hopefully amplifying their enjoyment by using what you know at the right time.

You seemed genuinely upset in a social media video after you were replaced by Sam Matterface as ITV's lead commentator in 2020. What happened?

Madeleine Sutton, Ipswich
In 2018, I signed my latest two-year contract with ITV. That year was the end of ITV's Champions League highlights contract and they only had England coverage, so the contract was inevitably reduced. I asked if I could seek work from other broadcasters as well and the head of sport said, "Yes, that's fine, but this will be the last contract we'll offer you". I didn't think too much of that; I spent the next two years thinking that if I did good work, I could dismiss that. Maybe they thought, 'He is heading into his late sixties so we need to see if he can still see, talk and think in two years' time'. But I thought I was doing good work and didn't get negative feedback from anyone in the organisation. I wasn't expecting what came in a Zoom call in the summer of 2020.

I had been given my fixtures for Euro 2020 – ITV's first-choice games – before the tournament was postponed. I thought at the very worst they'd give me another year to cover Euro 2021, then they'd see. But they started the conversation as if I should have been expecting that Sam was going to take over from me. I thought, 'What?' The call lasted 45 seconds. I was upset.



Clockwise from above
"Remember the name: Clive Tyldesley"; ITV's 2000s dream team; The Football Authorities was 50 years in the making; Rangers provided a new audience; the Bernabeu: solid; "My notes say it was 1-1... I think?"; "Not for me it wasn't, Clive"

Not long after that, I was contracted to cover Soccer Aid, on ITV but made by Endemol, a separate company, and thought I should tell the person there in case ITV may want to use Sam. He said, "We want you". But half an hour later, he phoned back to ask, "Are you OK health-wise?" I said yes. He said, "Sorry, I've got to ask: have you done something? I don't want to read about anything on the eve of a charity match." I said it was nothing like that. I sat down with Susan and said, "Is that the stigma? People are assuming there's a reason for this?" So I recorded a video for social media: even though I said I was surprised and upset, it was to reassure people that I was still here.

Have you appreciated the outpouring of affection that you've received on social media since ITV dropped you as their main man? It seems millions of viewers still appreciate you.

Matthew Chambers, Bishop Auckland
Maybe thousands... but yes, I'm as vain as the next person: I enjoy praise



HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1975

Joins Radio Trent, shortly after Brian Clough arrives at Forest

LOW: 1986

Dropped from ITV plans at the World Cup after goal mistakes

HIGH: 1992

Makes the move to the BBC to cover *Match of the Day*

HIGH: 1999

Camp Nou words become famous, as ITV's main man

LOW: 2020

Surprisingly replaced as ITV's lead commentator

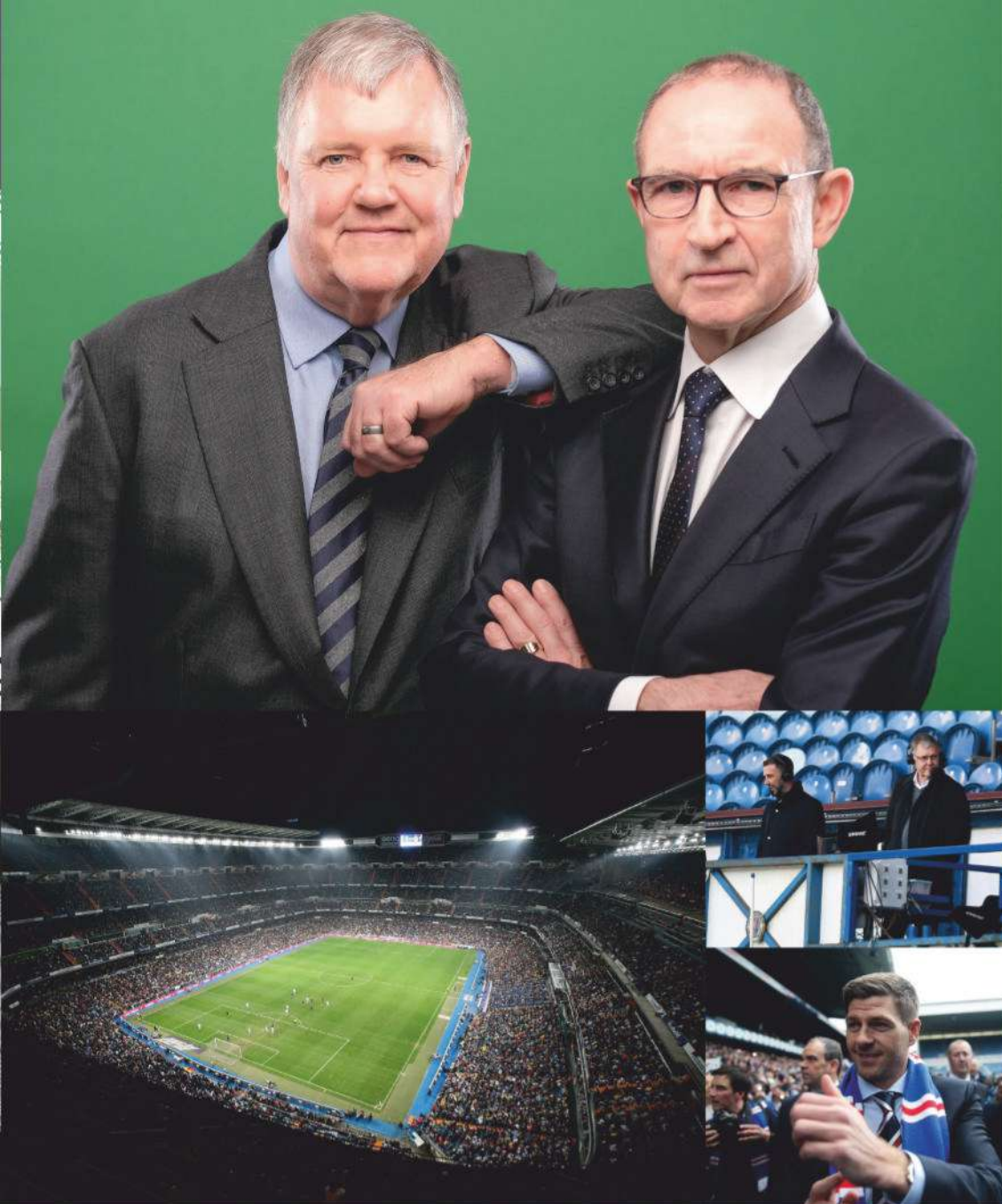
because we need people to like what we do, to keep our jobs. Some of the many messages I've received have been very touching. I have really appreciated them and tried to reply to them all. But in a sense it's no consolation if you're not doing the work you want; if you haven't been selected. ITV have shown an incredible amount of faith in me during my career, though, and I still talk about ITV as 'we' even though it's not any more.

Why did you choose to leave ITV in the middle of Euro 2024?

Lucas Oliver, via X
It wasn't my choice. ITV gave me a contract for Euro 2021, the World Cup and Euro 2024. I privately thought, 'If I do good work, I might be able to change their minds'. But in Qatar I was

told after a really good last-16 game, Portugal [6-1] Switzerland, that I didn't have a quarter-final. They asked me to stay on for another four days to do 10 minutes of highlights and I said, "Well, if you're really forcing me to, yes, but I'd rather go home if you think I'm now number three". For Euro 2024, I got a call from the head of football before the tournament, saying, "Look, so we don't have to go through that again, you're heading home after the last 16."

If there's a perception that I have had my turn and should be grateful for the opportunities I've had – that I'm in my 70th year and it's time to give someone else a chance – then I can't argue with that. But I don't think that's the way it works. You pick your best team. I continually review my own work; I've always watched games back and I've been working through the ones I did at the Euros, and I think my standards are still high enough to earn selection. While I believe I can still do it, I don't think there's any alternative other than to feel disappointed.



How did you find being the commentator for Rangers TV during lockdown?

Greig Morrison, via Facebook

Well, it was work! Rangers really wanted me – they'd done a deal to provide free coverage of all of their home games for their season ticket holders until they could go back into the stadium. I was fortunate that Rangers won every game I commented on, I think! They went through the season unbeaten and my voice became associated with a very famous Rangers season.

I would see Steven Gerrard at 1.30pm, both in our masks, me keeping 10 yards away, asking for information, and him whispering in his Scouse accent. I couldn't hear him properly through the mask. I would go back and say, "I think he said James Tavernier's playing at centre-back – I'm not sure?!" [Laughs] It became a wonderful 18-month adventure... although I learned that I didn't know Glasgow football quite as well as I

"I TRIED TO TALK ITV OUT OF THE SHOWREEL BEFORE MY LAST GAME AT EURO 2024. I HAVE NO PLANS TO RETIRE"

thought! In a commentary I try to find a different way of saying the same thing, and I was talking about a Celtic match that was happening at the same time as Rangers were playing. I had given the score as Celtic this, Celtic that, and I happened to say, "The Hoops have now gone three up". I got so much mail from Rangers fans, all quite sympathetic, but there was an element of warning... One guy said, "They are either Celtic, or they are 'them'." So from that point on, Celtic were Celtic – don't call them something that sounds affectionate!

What station will you be with this year? I hope you'll be somewhere...

Peter Brown, via X

The only contract I have is with CBS to cover the Champions League, which has three years to run. It's a really good operation, and it's nice to be in the Bernabeu or Barcelona on the halfway line. I'd anticipate that Amazon will ask me to commentate on some Premier League games in December, but apart from that, I have no commentary work in the offing.

I've no plans to retire. That was one issue I had with ITV's showreel before the last game I did in Germany. I tried to talk them out of it because it was almost a contradiction to pay tribute to a career that I'm trying to extend and they weren't. But it went out, it was very nicely done, and I was very appreciative of the guys who insisted on doing it. The world will continue to turn if nobody does pick me up – in fairness, it's not as if Sky, TNT or Premier League Productions are beating my door down to offer work.

I keep hearing how popular Ally and Clive is as a combination, but between the World Cup and Euro 2024, I think we worked together only five times – one Amazon Prime game and probably four FA Cup games for ITV. I can only assume organisations hear something else other than what we see on social media. Are their focus groups saying, "No, we don't want him" or "We don't want those two together"? I don't understand it otherwise. But I am available and I think I can still crack it.

How did your podcast with Martin O'Neill get started?

Daniel Butler, Leicester

I was approached by Global Media, who wanted something different. I came up with ideas and the one they liked the most was a dialogue between myself and my first friend in football, Martin O'Neill – we hit it off as soon as we met at Nottingham Forest. We've produced a podcast that's reflective and will, from time to time, feast upon yarns from many decades ago, but will always try to apply the lessons from that to the modern game that we both still love.

What advice would you give anyone looking to get into commentary?

Adam Cattell, via Facebook

If you have a real yearning to do it, you have got to be earnest and committed – it can't just be a whim. When you consume sports media, listen carefully, determine what you like about the people you like and what you don't like about the people you don't, with a critical ear, asking yourself what you can bring to the job. When you sit down in front of a panel at a job interview, that's what they'll ask. If I ever get asked for a single piece of advice, it's to bring yourself to the party. By all means, examine the work of the people you admire, but don't try to copy them – pick out what you think are the best parts, then bring your own personal stamp.

I so wanted to be a commentator in my teens. It probably sounds a bit grandiose but sometimes I think about how I would have felt if some God-like figure had appeared in an apparition and said, "Bad news: you're going to be an accountant, but you will appear on a reality show where you get to commentate live to an audience of 20 million for one minute of football". I try to make every minute that minute. 🍀

The Football Authorities is available to listen to now on Global Player or wherever you get your podcasts, with new episodes available weekly

UPFRONT

Playing off the last defender, it's the big-man-little-man partnership of football and funnies





THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

↑ "HELP, I'M TRAPPED!"

Kadidiatou Diani may be one of France's leading strikers, scoring regularly for Paris Saint-Germain before joining Lyon last summer, but that didn't stop her being attacked by her own hair during the Olympics. The braids picked their moment, then pounced, temporarily blinding Diani in Les Bleues' victory against Colombia. *Photo Olivier Chassignole/AFP/Getty*

← DRONING ON

Canada's women's team were lambasted for using drones to film opposition training sessions at the Olympics, deducted six points as a result. Thankfully this drone was launched for rather less underhand reasons, simply to take some pictures of random five-a-side matches. Very pretty. *Photo Richard Newstead/Getty*



↑ **ON THE VOLLEY**

Wolves got into the Olympic spirit themselves while away on a pre-season training camp in Marbella – many Brits head to the Spanish resort to drink, but Craig Dawson and pals instead opted for some water volleyball. VAR officials probably turned up and gave a penalty for handball, just to annoy boss Gary O’Neil...
Photo Jack Thomas/WWFC/Getty

↑ **FOAL’S ERRAND**

Having finished 14th last term, Borussia Monchengladbach made the trip to Rottach-Egern in Bavaria for their pre-season – mascot Junter went with them. The foal, named after club hero Gunter Netzer, then rode around a pitch to entertain travelling supporters, because why not?
Photo Christian Verheyen/Borussia M’chengladbach/Getty

↑ **JUST A BLUR**

A red card meant that Brazil legend Marta was banned for her nation’s quarter-final clash against France at the Olympics, and just as well – at 38, she’d have struggled to keep up with chum Gabi Portilho and French defender Wendie Renard, both moving so fast that they started to enter the fifth dimension.
Photo Robert Cianflone/Getty

→ **“WATCH AND LEARN, TOM DALEY...”**

France’s men’s left-back Adrien Truffert wasn’t moving quite fast enough – scythed by Mohamed Shehata during a semi-final with Egypt. Thierry Henry’s charges looked set to earn gold at home, but Spain won the final to follow up on Euro 2024. Let someone else celebrate *something*, lads?
Photo Claudio Villa/Getty



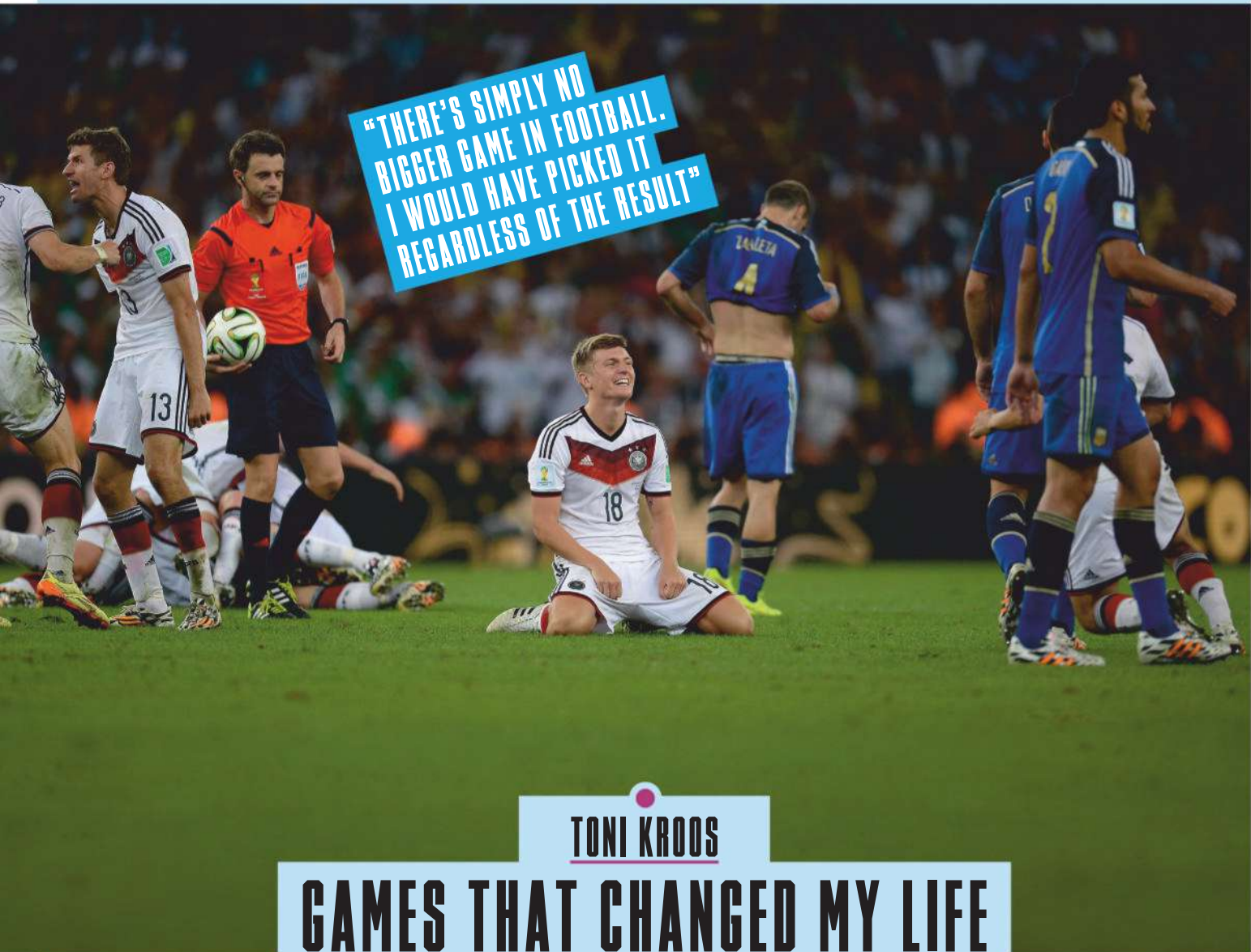




←
STAR ATTRACTIONS

As if Jude Bellingham wasn't enough already, Kylian Mbappé linked up with Real Madrid at their Valdebebas training base ahead of the new season – no wonder Carlo Ancelotti looked so cheerful. Good luck, La Liga, you're likely going to need it.

Photo Victor Carretero/
Real Madrid/Getty



“THERE’S SIMPLY NO BIGGER GAME IN FOOTBALL. I WOULD HAVE PICKED IT REGARDLESS OF THE RESULT”

TONI KROOS

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Leverkusen 3-2 Gladbach

December 19, 2009
Bundesliga

“I’ll start with a game for Bayer Leverkusen, where I made my breakthrough as a professional. The club gave me the opportunity to show I belonged at the top level. I’ll always be grateful to Leverkusen for taking a gamble in loaning me as a teenager from Bayern Munich and giving me a platform. Before that move, people had spoken about me as a promising youngster, but proving that in the Bundesliga was what really mattered to me. I spent 18 months with Leverkusen as they helped me on my journey. I was thrilled to see them lift the Bundesliga last season. They were the best team throughout the campaign and deserved their success. The fans were amazing with me, so seeing them celebrate was special.”

Germany 1-0 Argentina

July 13, 2014
World Cup Final

“I have to choose this [above] – there’s simply no bigger game in football. I’d have picked it regardless of the result. Those lucky enough to have won the World Cup will tell you how important it is – what it does to you as a person – and it has a special place in my heart because of what that win meant for all of Germany. I can still recall the entire occasion. It was a late afternoon game and the nerves grew and grew as it got closer. The match itself wasn’t great from a spectator’s perspective, but that can happen in major finals: often, the team that scores first wins it, and that was the case for us. I remember Mario Gotze’s volley hitting the back of the net, the celebrations that followed, and feeling relief and happiness at the final whistle. Goosebumps, even now.”

Real Madrid 2-0 Sevilla

August 12, 2014
UEFA Super Cup

“My first game for Real Madrid after joining from Bayern Munich was a baptism of fire: a big European final against an excellent Sevilla side that had won the previous season’s Europa League title. I felt a lot of eyes on me that night. Every player who signs for Real Madrid feels that when they first arrive and I’d just won the World Cup, so expectations were high. But it also gave me the confidence to perform right away. We won 2-0 thanks to a Cristiano Ronaldo brace and I had my first game, as well as my first trophy, out of the way. That put the wind in my sails and paved the way for later successes. Making a good first impression is massive at Real – for you, the fans, the press, your team-mates and the president who signed you.”

Dortmund 0-2 Real Madrid

June 1, 2024
Champions League Final

“To sign off with another Champions League title – my fifth with Real Madrid – in my last game in club football was a fairytale ending. I couldn’t put it any other way. Many players will look back and cherish their final game for a club but, for me, there’s no comparison with lifting a European Cup and celebrating the achievement with your fans. Again, it wasn’t a brilliant performance, but we dug deep as a group and got the result. We had an incredible group of players last season. The dressing room was a tight unit and you just knew, going into big games, that everybody would fight for one another to the last second. That unity, that passion – and, of course, our individual qualities – made us successful. We always felt that we’d find a way to win somehow.”

JULES BREACH

OPINION

The TNT Sports presenter explains what it's like to do post-match interviews



There's nothing quite like the new season buzz. That fresh feeling of optimism, excitement, belief and often blind faith that this will be your team's year always bubbles up as another campaign gets underway.

With the Premier League up and running again, it also means a return to my regular duties as match reporter and presenter for TNT Sports. *FourFourTwo* were fascinated to find out what it's like for me being tasked with a post-match interview, win or lose, and dealing with that pressure when you are broadcasting live to the nation.

It's a combination of a huge adrenaline rush, nerves and excitement, but there's no doubt that being the first person to speak live to the stars after a big win or special moment in their career is one of the most fun parts of the role. As you can imagine, it's not as straightforward as it sometimes looks on screen, and there are so many layers, rules and processes to follow when it comes to how the media work with a football club on a Premier League matchday.

Using Saturday's 12.30pm kick-off as an example, on arrival, as the host broadcaster, TNT Sports are given first access to both managers, as well as one player from either side for interviews before the match. We have a team ensuring everything is timed meticulously, as I often have to run from one live slot into another with only a few minutes in between to digest the team news.

Post-match, we are granted a minimum of one player on the pitch, shortly after the final whistle. We are also given priority to interview both managers, and at least one more player from both teams, usually conducted in the interview room.

Each football club has a media team, with press officers who are in contact with us regularly during the match, who decide who is available for interviews. Our job at TNT Sports is to follow the story and request who we think might provide us with the best interview post-match, and hope that the player and club are happy to oblige.

As you would expect, that doesn't always go to plan and there are lots of last-minute changes. Think injury-time goals, red cards, late equalisers, penalties, VAR decisions gone wrong – all of those things have a huge impact on who we interview. Sometimes, you might have a matter of seconds to plan your questions, or no time at all. I've been stood on the pitch after the final whistle, microphone in hand, having been told I'm interviewing one player, but seeing someone completely different walking towards us. It certainly keeps you on your toes, and the best part is that every match is different.

My favourite moment from last season was an on-pitch interview at Molineux with Kobbie Mainoo and Bruno Fernandes after Manchester United's dramatic 4-3 win over Wolves. Pedro Neto equalised for Wolves in the 95th minute, before Mainoo scored the winner in the 97th minute, which was also the youngster's first ever Premier League goal. We went from requesting an interview with Marcus Rashford, who was also on the scoresheet, changing it to Neto after his equaliser, to two minutes later, requesting Mainoo after his late heroics. It was chaos, as you can probably appreciate.

Talking to a bashful but buzzing Mainoo minutes after that special goal, while his captain stood next to him full of pride, was one of those interviews where I couldn't stop smiling throughout. You could feel their emotion and see their authentic reactions – those moments after significant wins, and goals you know mean so much to the players, are such a pleasure to be a part of.

However, they're not always that fun. For every big win, there's a losing manager and players who have completely contrasting emotions, and you sometimes only have a short space of time between interviews to adjust. Players and managers can often understandably be disgruntled – after all, I wouldn't want to be in front of a camera after a rough defeat.

One of the toughest moments last season was interviewing Roy Hodgson after Crystal

Palace's defeat at Arsenal. The travelling fans had held up banners calling for changes at the club, so it wasn't easy addressing that with Hodgson, and whether he felt any of the fan frustration was aimed at him.

The interview rooms are small and eerily quiet – as long as you're direct but still fair, and ask questions you know the fans want the answers to, overcoming the challenges of those interviews can also often be very professionally rewarding.

With an endless stream of football content readily available on tablets, phones, radios and TVs, supporters are always desperate to hear exactly what their favourite players and managers think.

So here's to another season of memorable moments, throwing the script in the bin, and having a whole load of fun along the way.



TALKING TO A BUZZING KOBBIIE MAINOO AFTER HE HAD SCORED, I JUST COULDN'T STOP SMILING

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Test yourself with our teasers, on subjects ranging from footballer fears to kings, Grecians and Pilgrims

01 Dennis Bergkamp (right) had a famed fear of what: spiders, snakes or flying?

02 Which Championship side have a bee and a beehive on their badge, taken from the coat of arms of their city/town?

03 How many players have scored more than 200 Premier League goals?

04 Which superstar became Real Madrid's biggest sale when he made a surprising move to Juventus?

05 Which of these Glaswegian stadiums is the largest by seated capacity: Ibrox, Celtic Park or Hampden Park?

06 Who was the last Italian player to bag the Ballon d'Or?

07 In what country were Germany's 2000s strike partnership Miroslav Klose and Lukas Podolski (right) both born?

08 Which legendary player was nicknamed 'King of kings', became the UEFA Cup's all-time top scorer and also had a loan spell under Sir Alex Ferguson?

09 True or false: no player has ever scored a World Cup goal directly from a corner.



11 How old was Julian Nagelsmann when he became the youngest Bundesliga coach ever in February 2016?

12 In which English county would you find a football rivalry between the Grecians and the Pilgrims?

13 Which three clubs did Croatian midfielder Niko Kranjcar play for under manager Harry Redknapp?

14 Who was West Ham's gaffer when the Irons recruited Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano in controversial fashion?

15 Which iconic playmaker, who starred for Milan, Inter and Juventus throughout his career, penned the autobiography titled *I Think Therefore I Play*?

16 What nationality is Manchester City women's striker Khadija 'Bunny' Shaw?

17 Since its rebrand in 2004-05, who are the only team to have a 100 per cent record for winning the Championship when playing in the division?

18 Who were the last club to win the men's Champions League final in a stadium in their home country?



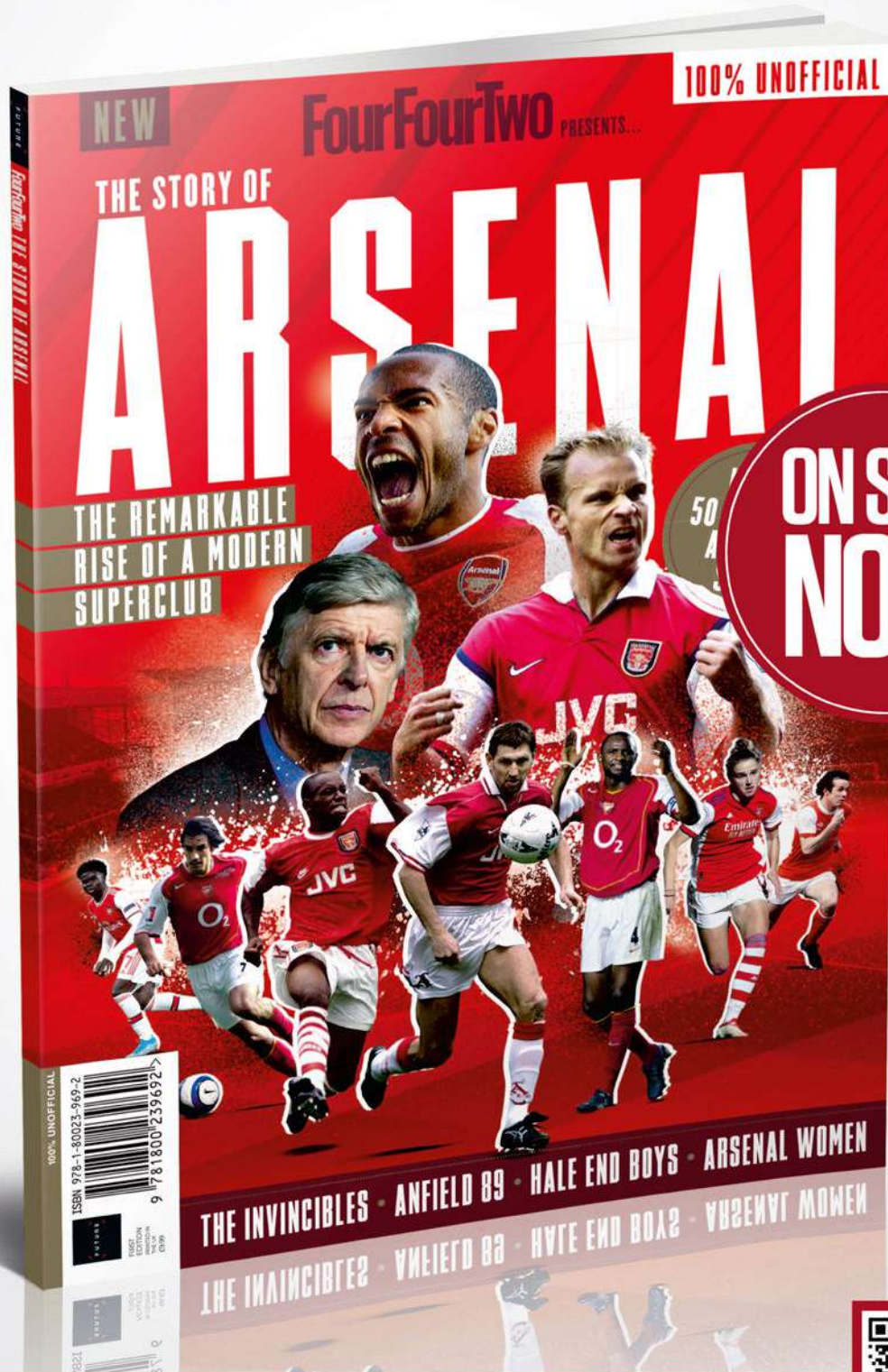
10

These are the only four players to have featured in Europe's top five leagues – can you name them all?

1. Flying 2. Luton 3. Three 4. Alan Shearer (260), Harry Kane (213), Wayne Rooney (208) 5. Cristiano Ronaldo (208) 6. Celtic Park 7. Poland 8. Henrik Larsson 9. True 10. Florin Raducioiu, Christian Poulsen, Steven Jovetic, Justin Klivert 11. 28 12. Devon (Exeter and Plymouth) 13. Tottenham, Portsmouth, QPR 14. Alan Pardew 15. Andrea Pirlo 16. Jamican 17. Newcastle 18. Borussia Dortmund (1997)

DISCOVER THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF ARSENAL

Celebrate the key players, visionary managers and defining moments from Arsenal's rich history as one of the most famous clubs in world football.



FUTURE

Shop easily online at:
magazinesdirect.com



bit.ly/3JVSrbc

MY FOOTBALL

The legendary Led Zeppelin frontman tells *FFT* all about his 70-year love affair with Old Gold, from Billy Wright through to Ruben Neves...

What's your earliest memory of watching Wolves?

It would have been in the late 1950s – around 1957, when they had Jimmy Murray and Norman Deeley. Those heady days at the end of the 1950s were a magical time. I recently found *Billy Wright's Book Of Soccer*, signed to me by Billy [the former Wolves and 100-cap England captain who spent all of his 20-year career at Molineux], which I bought from a local bookshop in 1958 – but my first game was definitely before that.

Did you manage to get to many games while at the height of Led Zeppelin's success?

I was always with it – the whole idea of coming to Molineux on a cloudy, misty Tuesday night, when the South Bank was just an absolute miasma of cigarette smoke with a fantastic atmosphere and chant. It was such a far cry from what I'd been involved with on tour. I could get lost in the euphoria, the pain, or the bliss. On a Tuesday afternoon, I would be recording with Led Zeppelin and suddenly get a sore throat to be away for a night game.

You've played in testimonials – were you also involved in pre-match entertainment?

I was drawn into all manner of madness when the club called upon local luminaries, musicians and comedians. I would play there myself on the old pitch and the



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

ROBERT PLANT
WOLVES

intentionally long grass so that the game would slow down, which was fantastic – we weren't footballers but we all wanted to be in the game. There would be testimonials for players like Dave Wagstaffe or Johnny Richards, and they were big moments.

Is it true the club helped you during a period of physical rehabilitation?

In 1975, during those Led Zeppelin days, I had a really bad car wreck and I was in a wheelchair for several months. I had to learn to walk and use my right foot again. It stopped a lot of Led Zeppelin activity,



though we did write and cut a new record [*Presence*]. I said to Sammy Chung, who was the club's assistant manager at the time, "Look, I've put my credibility and reputation on the line a bit, performing like a pantomime pony under the floodlights – can you help me to walk?" So, I started a physiotherapy regime and went to the gym with players of that time, such as Willie Carr and John McAlle. Sammy helped me to get as much movement out of my leg again as I could.

Do you remember when the club was in serious trouble in the 1980s?

There should be a psychotherapy unit for Wolves fans who've been through it all with the mysterious times and mysterious owners. The club's ownership fluctuated so badly for a while with the scallywag element. I was really concerned when the Bhatti brothers nearly ran the club into the ground. I remember coming home from a night match against Stockport in Division Four: there was only one stand open, we were on the right side, and whoever wanted to beat the s**t out of us was on the left. On the way out, a cop said to my boy, Logan, who's 44 now, "If you're a naughty boy, your dad will bring you back next week" [*Laughs*]. We didn't know if there was going to be salvation;

there was a bit of manoeuvring with the Gallagher brothers and the council. If Jack Hayward hadn't come back into the picture, we could have gone under like many others.

What's been the biggest high?

The First Division Play-off Final against Sheffield United [May 2003, left] in Cardiff was incredible because we'd been away from the big time for 29 years. Sadly it coincided with the premiere of the Led Zeppelin DVD film in New York, so I got there 72 hours later. I remember seeing a businesswoman in a black suit getting on the same flight as me – I could see a Wolves shirt under her suit, so there was more than one of us trying to get back.



“ON TUESDAYS I’D RECORD WITH THE BAND AND GET A SUDDEN SORE THROAT SO I COULD GET TO THE GAME”

Moutinho were really something, with their ability and skill factors. When I was living in Austin, Texas, I missed it so much, I had to come back to the Black Country. I’ve been part of this community for 75 years.

There’s video footage of you presenting a special edition of *Physical Graffiti* to previous manager Julen Lopetegui...

I didn’t know him, but I know he was surprised to find that someone he had listened to all his life was sweating in the director’s box.

There’s also a picture of you with the 1979-80 League Cup winning side – what do you remember about the game?

We won it against Manchester City a few years before [1974] and again against Nottingham Forest. I took my wife and daughter, and my daughter grudgingly got into it, but at the time there seemed to be a bit of nonsense [fighting] wherever we went and she used to ask to go and sit in the car at half-time because she was cold. We went to the mayor’s presentation after the game and I’ve got to know these guys now. With the first League Cup win, it took me two days to get back from Wembley.

Who would play in your ultimate Wolves five-a-side team?

I’d have Jody Craddock and Romain Saiss at the back, Kenny Hibbitt and Ruben Neves in the middle and Bully [Steve Bull] up front.

How does it feel to hear *Kashmir* before the teams come out at Molineux?

I’m very proud of that, except they’ve edited the thing wrong – I need to get in there and cut it up. But it’s a fanfare just before Jeff Beck’s *Hi Ho Wolverhampton* [*Hi Ho Silver Lining*]. I used to call him up when they played that and he used to hate it profusely... he hated that song.

What are your hopes for Wolves’ future?

Stability from the top down. This is a tough game; decisions and agreements are made and then circumstances change. Our manager [Gary O’Neil] came in with four days’ preparation and was dissed and given no slack at all by anyone, which is ridiculous. He has shown so much character and resolve on the touchline and in the media. Still, ‘Out of Darkness Cometh Light’ [Wolverhampton’s motto]. We had such a depleted squad but he has the side playing with different, new expectations and with an identity – these guys are playing for each other with a certain amount of verve.

Richard Purden



Was Bonzo [late Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham] a football fan?

Not really. We were both connected to village football teams and he sponsored a few games. Later, I would play Sunday games in the Kidderminster district league... very badly. I just wanted to kick a ball – and much to the enjoyment of the crowd, who would shout, ‘Planty!’ for me to shoot, like they would for Ruben Neves, except I would slice it out for a throw-in.



Did Nuno Espirito Santo bring something special to Wolves when he arrived in 2017?

Nuno had such beautiful charisma. I guess it was a gentle arrangement between Fosun and the Portuguese superstar football agents that meant we were suddenly seeing quality of this unknown magnificence; the tight play and one-touch football. Nuno spirited it all from the sidelines and it was extraordinary to see. When Raul [Jimenez] came, he got so into it – he really dug it. Also, guys like Joao

Top Spot the Plant **Above** “You didn’t have *How The West Was Won*? OK, fine” **Left** Nuno and Bully – Wolves heroes for very different eras



WEIRD
WORLD OF
FOOTBALL

MEANWHILE IN...

...Greenland, the world's shortest season finished in just seven days – icebergs ahoy!

If you ever start to feel like you're trapped in a Mitchell and Webb sketch of 'Constant, dizzying, 24-hour, year-long, endless football: the football is officially going on forever!', get yourself over to Greenland.

The European club campaign feels more crammed than ever, with an extended Champions League format and a league season of 10-and-a-half months in some countries – Romania's top flight kicked off on July 12, 10 days after their national side were knocked out of the Euros,

and usually finishes in the last week of May or the start of June.

In Greenland, they had the whole season done in a week in early August – bish bash bosh, here's your trophy lads, see you again in 358 days. Travel is near enough impossible, so there are no regular fixtures. In previous years they've staged regional qualifiers, but there was none of that this time.

Instead, they got seven teams together in Qeqertarsuaq on the brilliantly-named Disko Island (FFT is getting a mental image

of them booting about a mirror ball while YMCA plays over the tannoy, but it's probably nothing like that), and let them slug it out for a week against the backdrop of icebergs in the bay.

Three other sides withdrew because of travel difficulties – a year ago, SAK pulled out as some of their players had to go reindeer hunting. This time, B-67 Nuuk prevailed over the mighty Nagdlunguaq-48 in the final – the numbers are presumably how many days it takes them to get home...



FISH CAKE PROTEST

VAR is already pretty unpopular in the UK – and they don't much like it in Norway, either.

When Rosenborg entertained Lillestrom, play was halted no fewer than four times during the first half hour, as fans chucked items on the pitch to protest the pesky video system. Tennis balls and smoke bombs were the first to be hurled, before someone threw a fish cake onto the pitch, too. That'll show them.

- Kuwaiti club Kazma took great heart from a 7-1 pre-season win over Telephonat Beni Suf – until the Egyptian outfit denied all knowledge of the fixture.

Kazma had been hoodwinked by an agent who'd pretended to represent the Egyptian outfit to arrange the game, but then gathered some amateur players to fulfil the fixture. No wonder they won so easily...

- Two Augsburg players were refused access to South Africa for a tour, after Johannesburg Airport had them registered as Nigerian rather than Croatian.

Kristijan Jakic and Nedičko Labrovic turned up with Croatian passports (well, because they're Croatian), but were sent home.

- In Brazil, Flamengo were given a penalty after two balls ended up on the field at the same time, and an opponent tried to stop an attack by whacking the rogue ball at the actual ball.

PAL ENGER: UEFA CUP TO ART THIEF

Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is one of the world's most famous artworks, taking pride of place in Oslo's National Gallery – until a footballer nicked it.

Pal Enger, who died recently aged 57, played for Valerenga in the Norwegian top flight and the UEFA Cup, but became more famous for two attempts to steal *The Scream*. The first was unsuccessful, but earned him four years in prison. "We took the wrong f**king picture," he said. In 1994, he succeeded – the artwork was later found (pictured), Enger was convicted again, then stole 17 more paintings. Should have stuck to football, Pal...



THE DEBATE

Who are the greatest Champions League team ever?



BARCELONA 2010-11

CHRIS FLANAGAN
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

@CFlanaganFFT

What do you get when you combine the greatest player of all time with possibly the greatest manager of all time? That's right: the greatest club team of all time.

Never was that proven better than the Champions League final of 2011. If Brazil's 1970 World Cup Final win over Italy was the finest performance ever delivered by an international team, the finest club display surely came at Wembley 13 years ago.

Barcelona were already decent when they won the Champions League in 2008-09, Pep Guardiola's first season in charge. That season, Sergio Busquets, Xavi and Andres Iniesta combined to tiki-taka Europe into submission, in an era when they were also busy helping Spain to win three successive tournaments.

The Blaugrana also had some chap called Lionel Messi, just to make them even better, although they needed luck to reach the Champions League final – the infamous semi when Chelsea had several penalty appeals turned down at Stamford Bridge, then Iniesta scored late on. "It's a f**king disgrace!" and all that, as Didier Drogba put it. In Rome, Barça beat Manchester United, but the Red Devils actually had more shots.

In 2011, they won it a whole lot more convincingly. That season, they'd thrashed the Real Madrid of Jose Mourinho and Cristiano Ronaldo 5-0 in La Liga. In the Champions League semi, Barcelona won 2-0 at the Bernabeu, pretty much sealing it in the first leg.

In the final, they produced a mesmerising display for the ages. Their line-up had arguably upgraded in several areas from 2009 – David Villa for Samuel Eto'o, Eric Abidal for Sylvinho, Dani Alves for Carles Puyol at right-back, plus Javier Mascherano alongside Gerard Pique in place of Yaya Toure, who'd been centre-back in Rome.

Manchester United were a fine team themselves, but couldn't get the ball off Barça – Guardiola's side had 63 per cent possession and 19 shots to United's four. It wasn't just winning football, it was historic, beautiful football.

True, Barcelona weren't kings of Europe in 2010, denied by Inter parking the bus in Catalonia, but their 2011 peak produced the best team club football has ever seen, not just the Champions League.



REAL MADRID 2015-18

MARK WHITE
ONLINE CONTENT EDITOR

@markwhite

If football is art, Pep Guardiola is Vincent van Gogh, crafting beautiful swirls and creative flourishes with a Catalan canvas that conquered the continent.

Carlo Ancelotti's Milan-era pragmatism is parallel to Piet Mondrian's simplistic blockwork, Jose Mourinho more like the inevitable dread of *The Scream* – leaving Sir Alex Ferguson as Banksy, revelling in a heist as much as a masterpiece.

Zinedine Zidane's Real Madrid 'Threepeat' team are nothing quite as evocative. They were not pretty, but the cold headline speaks alone: no other club has won the Champions League back to back in the modern era. Zizou did it three times in succession, beating Atletico Madrid, Juventus and Liverpool in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

The team itself wasn't too shabby either, led by melodramatic showpony Cristiano Ronaldo, held together by sturdy workhorse Karim Benzema. From Sergio Ramos throttling games by the throat, to Marcelo holding an entire flank down on his own, there were Galacticos, too. No, it wasn't as elegant an image as the Barcelona boys all growing up together – though Toni Kroos, Luka Modric and Casemiro rivalled La Masia's engine room – but Real Madrid did something that Barça didn't in Europe.

It was Zidane's team that built the reputation that the Champions League *belonged* at the Bernabeu. Real Madrid rewrote their narrative, because of what the Threepeaters did: they were so good, they erased memories of Robert Lewandowski and Lyon rampaging their predecessors out in the early 2010s. This was aura, before the word was tossed about.

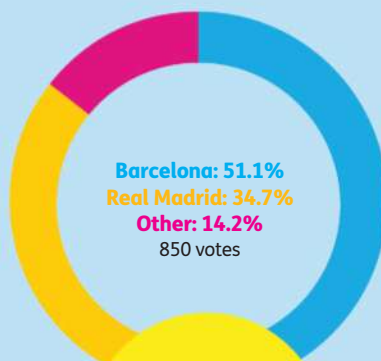
Is that version of Los Blancos the greatest side of all time, the very picture we present as the apex of our sport? I doubt anyone would argue so, offering Brazil 1970 or Barça as more nostalgic examples. To be honest, I don't even particularly like that Real Madrid team: some nice Gareth Bale moments aside, I don't have warm memories of their football.

But the Champions League is not a romantic competition. When that anthem blasts out, it's an arena in which only the best survive. Only one team has won it on vibes alone. Three times.



THE RESULTS ARE IN

Social view via @FourFourTwo followers on X



Tell us what you think via #FFTDebate on X, or email us at fourfourtwo@futurenet.com



FourFourTwo

CELEBRATE THE NEW SEASON!

SUBSCRIBE

AND SAVE

50%*



NEW
SEASON
SPECIAL
OFFER!

BENEFITS OF SUBSCRIBING

- **Free Delivery** direct to your door
- **Exclusive** subscriber covers
- **New** digital access to 130+ issues when you subscribe to print! **

CHOOSE YOUR PACKAGE

1

PRINT

ONLY £19.46 every 6 months
by Direct Debit



PLUS!

Instant access
anytime,
anywhere

2

DIGITAL

ONLY £15.57 every 6 months
by Direct Debit



SIMPLY VISIT

magazinesdirect.com/fft/D42R

OR CALL

0330 333 1113 quoting D42R

Terms and conditions: Offer ends October 17, 2024. Price guaranteed for first six months. Allow up to six weeks for delivery of first issue (eight weeks overseas). Subscription rate includes postage. *Savings based on cover price. Payment non-refundable after 14-day cancellation period. For enquiries, head to magazinesdirect.com/terms, email help@magazinesdirect.com or phone +44 (0) 330 333 1113. UK phone lines open Monday to Friday, 8.30am-7pm and Saturday, 10am-3pm. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than the landline rate and may be included in your provider's bundle. **Access to the digital library will end with your subscription.

THE RETURN OF THE GALACTICOS

Jude Bellingham, Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo helped Real Madrid to become continental champions yet again last season – now they've signed Kylian Mbappe and Brazilian teenage sensation Endrick, too. Can the new Galacticos fare better than their Noughties predecessors and dominate Europe for a generation?

Words Ed McCambridge
Additional reporting Felipe Rocha



16 de julio de 2024

Emirates
FLY BEYOND

“Good afternoon, everyone. I’m going to try to speak Spanish.”

As ice-breakers go, Kylian Mbappe’s was about as well-rehearsed and effective as they come, eliciting a roar from the sun-kissed stands of the Santiago Bernabeu. After striding down a royal-blue catwalk leading to a stage in the centre of the pitch, Mbappe – flanked by club president Florentino Perez, the man who makes everything possible – delivered his coronation speech to 80,000 adoring Madridistas. “I spent endless nights dreaming about this,” he beamed. “Today, I’m one happy guy.”

Tickets to the event had sold out two days in advance. Growing up on the outskirts of Paris, a young Mbappe had slept beneath posters of Cristiano Ronaldo on his bedroom wall; now he was standing in the same spot where his idol had stood 15 years earlier, his No.9 shirt having sold twice as many replicas as Ronaldo’s No.9 had by the time of their respective unveilings (the No.7 shirt still belonged to Raul at that time).

The Frenchman volleyed footballs into the stands and posed for selfies with those lucky enough to have secured front-row seats. Here he was, at last, adorning the venerated all-white of Real Madrid.

Yet this was more than a welcome party. It was a declaration of war. Mbappe’s capture wasn’t the result of a super-club looking to rekindle its glory days, but the reigning Spanish and European champions bolstering an already superstar squad with the world’s most feared attacker.

Nor was Mbappe recruited to refresh an ageing frontline. Real Madrid’s success last term was, in large part, thanks to a trio of young forwards – Vinicius Junior, Rodrygo and Jude Bellingham, who bagged 64 goals and 33 assists between them as Los Blancos secured their second Liga and Champions League double in the past three seasons. At 25, Mbappe is older than all three of them.

Other clubs wouldn’t have considered signing yet another star forward. Real Madrid signed two. Joining Mbappe is Endrick, the teenage sensation from Palmeiras in Brazil, whose £52m transfer was arranged in 2022 but completed only now he has turned 18.

Along with Bellingham, Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo, the new arrivals are already being dubbed the new ‘Galacticos’, taking on the label once carried by Real Madrid’s star-studded post-millennium team that included Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Ronaldo, David Beckham, Raul and Roberto Carlos.

“This is absolutely a new Galacticos era,” *Marca’s* Real Madrid correspondent, Joel del Rio Muradas, tells *FourFourTwo*. “Florentino Perez has brought together three of the four most valuable players in world football: Mbappe, Vinicius Jr and Bellingham. Add to that Endrick and Rodrygo, plus other world-class players such as Thibaut Courtois, Luka Modric, Aurelien Tchouameni and Federico Valverde, and this team must be considered as the Galacticos 2.0 – a whole

constellation of stars, led by the best coach in the world in Carlo Ancelotti.”

As Mbappe wiped the tears from his eyes and led a rousing chorus of “Hala Madrid!”, there was a sense that the final piece of the puzzle was in place. It was easy to forget how long this transfer was in the making.

“I’M IN ZIZOU’S CAR!”

The charm offensive began way back in 2012, when Mbappe was still a promising 13-year-old honing his craft at France’s prestigious Clairefontaine academy. Some scintillating performances against Europe’s top youth sides, from Real Madrid and Bayern Munich to Liverpool and Chelsea, prompted a phone call – not to Clairefontaine but to Parisian semi-professional side AS Bondy, coached by Cameroonian Wilfried Mbappe, father of Kylian. “Zinedine Zidane would like to see your son,” a representative from the Spanish icons told an incredulous Mbappe Sr.

When arguably the greatest player in your adopted nation’s history demands a meeting with your sprog, there’s only one response. The Mbappes were off to Spain.

“I’ll never forget the moment we arrived at the airport,” Mbappe later recalled. “Zidane met us in the parking lot in a nice car. He offered to drive me to training, pointing at the front seat and saying, ‘Go on, get in’.”

Starstruck, Mbappe asked the legendary playmaker if he should remove his shoes first, causing the World Cup winner to laugh and shake his head. Mbappe recalled, “I was just thinking to myself: ‘I’m in Zizou’s car. I’m Kylian from Bondy. This isn’t real – I must still be sleeping on the plane.’”

Mbappe was given a private tour of Real Madrid’s glimmering Valdebebas training centre by Zidane himself, before being taken to meet his idol, Cristiano Ronaldo. The pair posed for what has since become a famous photograph: a princeling, clad in a full Real Madrid tracksuit, beaming alongside the king. The teenager joined a training session before heading home with Zidane’s assurances that he’d be welcomed back soon enough. Yet it



“THIS IS ABSOLUTELY A NEW GALACTICOS ERA: A CONSTELLATION OF STARS, LED BY THE BEST COACH IN THE WORLD”





would be more than a decade before the youngster returned as a Real Madrid player.

For the Mbappes, education came first. It was decided that their middle son should remain in France until the completion of his studies – which, at his own insistence, would now include Spanish lessons. After rejecting Real Madrid, a 14-year-old Mbappe signed instead for Ligue 1 outfit Monaco.

“It was in the principality that he transformed into the hottest prospect in world football,” Spanish football expert Guillem Balague tells *FFT*. “He broke into their first team as a 16-year-old and surprised everyone with his pace, his directness and his hunger to score goals. This was an extraordinary young footballer. There was huge hype around him all over Europe.”

After Mbappe helped Monaco to a shock Ligue 1 triumph and a Champions League semi-final as an 18-year-old in 2016-17,

Above and left
“Today, I’m one happy guy,” Kylian Mbappe tells 80,000 Madridistas; Zidane and Perez finally get their man

Real Madrid made their first official bid. A £165m offer was accepted by Monaco but, again, Mbappe’s family thwarted the deal, because the player’s father was concerned that first-team minutes could be harder to come by in the Spanish capital.

The Qatari-backed Paris Saint-Germain swooped, confirming a season-long loan that would become a permanent £165m deal the following summer. With Barcelona star Neymar also arriving in the summer of 2017 for £200m, it represented an unprecedented summer outlay.

Over the next four years, Mbappe morphed into a superstar and serial winner, picking up three Ligue 1 titles, three Coupes de France and the World Cup with Les Bleus in 2018, the 19-year-old being named Best Young Player as he scored four goals, including one in the final. But in the summer of 2021, with a year left on his PSG deal, rumours began to swirl that he was seeking a new challenge.

Real Madrid tabled two offers in quick succession, of £137m and £154m. Both were rejected by PSG, who had just signed Lionel Messi from Barcelona and were intent on winning their first Champions League title.

In doing so, the Parisians made it clear that they were willing to risk losing their talisman for nothing a year later, rather than allow Real Madrid to force their hand. Their hope

was that Mbappe could be tempted to sign fresh terms. But as the 2021-22 campaign drew to a close, it was suggested that the Spaniards had reached an agreement with the player, including a signing bonus of around £130m in lieu of any transfer fee owed to PSG. At last, it seemed, Florentino Perez had got his man.

“In nine years as a *Marca* journalist, I had never seen a transfer saga of this magnitude,” Del Rio Muradas recalls. “Our readers were asking us for Mbappe updates all of the time. It dominated the paper every day. Finally, it looked to be happening.”

Then, in May, the unthinkable happened. French media suddenly announced that Mbappe had signed a new two-year deal with PSG, including an option to extend for a third season, becoming the highest-paid player on the planet in the process. Reports said he would earn more than £1m per week and even have an input into transfer targets.

Mbappe’s future had become a national issue in France. Calls for him to remain at PSG even came from the country’s highest office. “I never imagined that I was going to talk to President Emmanuel Macron about the future of my career, so it’s kind of crazy,” Mbappe revealed after putting pen to paper. “He told me, ‘I want you to stay – you are very important for the country.’” ▶

Real Madrid had again missed out on this player who had looked destined to become a Madridista, and a dream signing in terms of talent and age but also in global appeal. President Perez – the man responsible for assembling his club’s first Galacticos side decades earlier – seethed, telling fans that Mbappe “would be sorry” for his decision.

“It hurt him because he trusted Mbappe’s word,” Del Rio Muradas explains. “It seemed that the deal was closed, but then he renewed. Sometimes our readers think we’re toying with them, but that’s not the case. Mbappe himself acknowledges that he was very close to joining Madrid two years ago.”

Just four months later, however, fresh reports claimed that Mbappe felt “betrayed” by PSG over a number of key decisions. “The club promised they would sign a new striker so that Mbappe could play in his best position off the striker, that Neymar would be sold, that they’d sign a centre-back and that he’d be at the centre of the project,” said French football expert Julien Laurens at the time. “None of those things happened.”

Directly after the 2022 World Cup, in which he scored the most goals in a tournament since 2002 and the first hat-trick in a final since 1966, as France lost to Argentina, rumours swirled that Mbappe wanted out for real this time. Los Blancos made tentative enquiries but, having felt misled by the player six months earlier, no offer was forthcoming.

By the summer, with Mbappe then entering the final 12 months of his contract and informing PSG that he wouldn’t be activating his extra year, the French club ramped up the pressure to sign a new deal, excluding him from their summer tour of Japan.

“If Kylian wants to stay, he needs to sign a new contract,” club president Nasser Al-Khelaifi sniffed. “We don’t want to lose the best player in the world for free.” Right on cue, an offer landed on their desks. This time, however, it didn’t come from Madrid, nor indeed any club in Europe.

Saudi Arabian outfit Al-Hilal submitted a world-record bid, understood to be worth £259m. What’s more, they weren’t even seeking a long-term arrangement, indicating that they were willing to pay the World Cup Golden Boot winner £170m – rising to nearer £600m with commercial arrangements – for a one-season stay.

Admirably, Mbappe was unmoved. As the 2023-24 season got underway, and the forward reclaimed his place in PSG’s team despite refusing contract negotiations, Europe’s elite clubs began to circle. Arsenal’s Mikel Arteta insisted his club “needed to be part of the conversation” and Jurgen Klopp said that only money would hold Liverpool back from pursuing the PSG star. In reality, though, it always felt like a one-horse race.

In February 2024, four months before his contract was set to expire, *Marca* reported that Mbappe had officially agreed terms with Real Madrid. By March, those terms had been revealed: a £128m fee with a further £13m a year in salary after tax, plus image rights.

By June, the contract was signed, 12 years after the hunt began. Finally, the Frenchman

THE ORIGINAL GALACTICOS



Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos were four of the biggest stars of Real Madrid’s first Galacticos era. *FourFourTwo* sat down with them for two cover stories, 10 years apart.

Having met up with the quartet in early 2003, shortly before David Beckham joined the Bernabeu party, *FFT* tracked the four down again in 2013, to chat about that cover and their recollections of a memorable era.



“I’m older now and I’ve got less hair,” Zidane chuckled, looking back at the 2003 cover. “I was lucky to be able to play with those players. I experienced something very special with them, at the world’s best club.”

Figo concurred. “When I look at that 2003 magazine cover, I think of the good atmosphere, the talent and the friendship,” he said. “Look at us: it looks like everyone is laughing. It was a lovely time.”

was ready to be unveiled. The Bernabeu was prepared for his coronation – the stage set, the catwalk unfurled. Kylian Mbappe was Real Madrid’s at long last.

THE NEXT BRAZILIAN SUPERSTAR

By comparison, Real Madrid’s other major summer arrival was relatively straightforward, the transfer having been agreed 18 months earlier, midway through

Below Because signing Mbappe wasn’t enough, Madrid have also snapped up 18-year-old star Endrick from Brazil **Right** Oh yeah, and Jude’s still there as well



the World Cup. While Mbappe was lighting up Qatar, Los Blancos revealed they had pipped a number of European super-clubs to the signature of Palmeiras forward Endrick, then only 16 years old.

The teenager was already being touted as a future superstar, despite having only just broken into the Palmeiras first team. If three goals in his first seven senior appearances weren’t ample evidence of his qualities, a reported 170 goals in 172 academy showings went some way in explaining the extraordinary hype.

Real Madrid’s decision to activate Endrick’s £52m release clause raised a few eyebrows (Palmeiras president Leila Pereira described the deal as “the biggest negotiation in the history of Brazilian football”). But those who had watched his development closely knew the player that Carlo Ancelotti was getting.

“The boy is special, no doubt about it,” former Brazil, Santos and Manchester City star Elano tells *FFT*. “He belongs to that group of super-talented players that Brazil has produced in the past: Neymar, Ronaldinho, Ronaldo and others. He’s another rare case of a youngster who convinces everyone they’re special; youngsters born with incredible talent.

“The main thing is the mental power he has at such a young age – his psychological strength. I’d also emphasise his impressive physicality and his nose for goal. It’s unusual to see a player of his age with his maturity.

“Endrick is the whole package: technical quality, combined with physical strength and great mental power.”

Just before sealing a second consecutive Brazilian top-flight title with Palmeiras, the youth international was handed a first senior Seleccion call-up by caretaker manager Fernando Diniz in November 2023. Making his debut against Colombia in qualification for the 2026 World Cup, he became Brazil’s youngest debutant in 57 years, at the age of 17 years, three months and 27 days. He then bagged his first goal in a Wembley friendly against England in March, becoming the youngest male player to score for club or country at the stadium. He backed it up by scoring again in a 3-3 draw with Spain three days later, then another against Mexico on his next appearance in June.

“It’s no wonder he quickly got onto the national team’s radar,” Elano says. “From the age of 16, he was already playing at the highest level in Brazil, being decisive in big games, scoring goals and winning titles with Palmeiras. He was an important figure in those achievements, too.”

As with any youngster, there’s still a lot to learn. In the 2022 Sao Paulo Youth Cup Final, Endrick sparked a physical altercation by attempting a rainbow flick over an opponent near the corner flag. Last November, he appeared to punch an opponent to the ground following a tussle on the halfway line. But Elano, who was capped 50 times by Brazil between 2004 and 2011, believes they’re just natural teething problems.

“I don’t see any provocation on his part,” the former midfielder explains. “There are

“MBAPPE ARRIVING MEANS JUDE MIGHT PLAY MORE OF A MIDFIELD ROLE. HIS GOALS AND ASSISTS MAY SUFFER, BUT THE TEAM COULD BE BETTER FOR IT”

more important things than worrying about whether a player is lashing out or dribbling at the right time or the wrong time. With youngsters of the calibre of Endrick or Neymar, trying to stand out in Brazil, it is normal for them to overdo it at some point. They learn over time, with the help of more experienced professionals. I really don't see anything wrong with those displays of talent or aggression. It's part of the show.”

Now the aim is for Endrick, who bizarrely lists Bobby Charlton as a childhood hero, to continue his development at a club where he may not be considered a guaranteed starter.

“He was an important player at Palmeiras and that created the ideal setting for his talent to flourish,” Elano explains. “At Real Madrid, he'll have to earn his place by seizing the opportunities that come his way. He has the talent for it, and Real Madrid having a few Brazilians already will help him to adapt.”

“MADRID ARE STILL THE BIGGEST DRAW”

Indeed, Endrick's signing closely mirrored Real Madrid's previous captures of Vinicius Jr and Rodrygo. That pair also arrived as highly-coveted 18-year-olds from Brazilian clubs – Flamengo and Santos respectively.

They didn't come cheap, either: Vinicius arrived in 2018 for £39m and Rodrygo jetted in a year later for around £40m. Together at the Bernabeu, the wingers have evolved into world-beaters, winning two Champions Leagues and three La Liga titles apiece.

Last season represented a high water mark for both. Rodrygo bagged 17 goals and nine assists in all competitions, and scored home and away in March's Champions League quarter-final triumph over Manchester City.

Vinicius, meanwhile, continued his rise to the summit of world football with 24 goals in 39 appearances, including the second in Real Madrid's 2-0 victory over Borussia Dortmund in the 2024 Champions League Final. It was the second time that the Brazilian had scored in the biggest club game in European football, following his winner against Liverpool in 2022. Those performances have made him the favourite to win the Ballon d'Or, not least with Rio Ferdinand, but his contributions away from the pitch have created their own legacy.

Spanish football's ongoing problem with racism has met its match in Vinicius. Having been continuously targeted by racist abuse inside and outside football grounds – an effigy wearing his jersey was hanged from ▶



“IT’S A PLEASURE TO SEE YOUNG BRAZILIANS HAVE A STARRING ROLE FOR REAL MADRID. VINI AND RODRYGO HAVE MADE HISTORY THERE”



a Madrid bridge in 2023 – the 24-year-old has demanded tougher punishments for culprits.

It’s not been an easy ride, with La Liga president Javier Tebas unhelpfully branding the player’s complaints as “insulting” to the organisation’s efforts – yet Vinicius has continued to passionately call for change, even breaking down in tears during one press conference in March.

“He hadn’t been considered a leader within the Real Madrid dressing room previously,” journalist Balague tells *FFT*. “But his ongoing fight against football’s racists has seen him take on greater responsibility.”

As Vinicius and Rodrygo continue to flourish on and off the field, those back in Brazil have come to see Los Blancos as the ultimate finishing school for their brightest talents. “They’re players that everyone likes to watch, and Brazil is happy to see them shine,” says Elano, who coached a young Rodrygo at Santos. “So, it’s a pleasure to see these youngsters playing a starring role for Real Madrid. It’s not easy to build a legacy there, but Rodrygo and Vini have already made a lot of history there.”

Last term saw the Samba duo dovetail spectacularly in attack, together with Englishman Jude Bellingham, Real Madrid’s big 2023 signing from Borussia Dortmund. Bellingham was only 20 at the time but he’d been expected to make an impact in Spain’s capital after shining in the Bundesliga; very few people, however, could have foreseen how crucial he would become, so quickly.

The Birmingham City youth product’s debut campaign, in which he sometimes

operated in what was near enough an unfamiliar false nine role, brought 23 goals and 13 assists in all competitions. Highlights included late winners in both of the Clasico league fixtures against Barcelona and collecting the Kopa Trophy for the world’s best young player at the 2023 Ballon d’Or ceremony. In May, Ancelotti dubbed the Englishman “the best in the world”.

“Jude quickly elevated himself into one of the world’s great players, for club and country,” former Real Madrid and England striker Michael Owen tells *FFT*. “At Real, he has developed that big-game energy, that swagger, that attitude. We saw it for England at Euro 2024 as well. Playing for a club like Real Madrid isn’t easy when all eyes are on you and every poor performance is pounced upon; if you can respond to that and stay at the highest level, then you belong with the best in the world. He’s incredible.”

At the time of his signing, Bellingham could have gone almost anywhere in the world, having held talks with Liverpool and Manchester City before plumping for Real Madrid. His £88.5m transfer fee has looked more like a bargain with each passing week. Similarly, the fees splashed out for both Vinicius and Rodrygo are seen as absolute steals in hindsight.

Clockwise from above Vini and Rodrygo; don’t throw it, Jude; kings of Europe... again; Rudiger is “a great guy”, says Ancelotti; will young Turkish talent Arda Guler still get minutes?

Given Real Madrid’s track record, it seems highly likely that Mbappe’s free transfer (even with a huge signing bonus factored in) and the sum paid for Endrick will come to be considered smart investments. The club’s considered approach to transfers has been crucial in keeping them at the summit of world football, despite paying off heavy debts, keeping onside of UEFA’s profitability rules and funding a £1.5bn redevelopment of the Bernabeu, completed in September 2023.

“They’ve had to be very savvy in the market in recent years,” Balague explains. “They’ve kept clear of bidding wars and only gone after players they’re absolutely certain on. Gradually, they have brought their debts under control while making improvements to their squad and facilities. It’s impressive.”

Despite Forbes naming them the world’s richest football club in July – a 2023-24 revenue of £713m putting them top for the first time since 2017-18 – money is tight, as evidenced by Perez’s persistent wrangling for the foundation of a European Super League.

“In terms of on-field success, marketing and merchandise, they’re ahead of rivals,” Balague says. “But they’re competing with clubs backed by billionaires and entire states: the likes of Manchester City, PSG, even Newcastle. They’re unable to offer the type of fees others can. The European Super League is seen as a way to redress that balance.”

So, how are Real Madrid still pipping those clubs to the likes of Mbappe, Endrick and Bellingham? “Prestige,” Balague states, matter-of-factly. “We’ve seen again and again that when it comes to prestige, Real



Madrid are ahead of everybody else. Mbappe, Endrick, Bellingham and other stars could have gone anywhere, and could have earned more money elsewhere. But the white shirt, the history and the ambition of Real Madrid is something no other club can compete with. They're still the biggest draw."

BATTLE FOR THE BALLON D'OR

The burning question now is how – or even if – all of Mbappe, Vinicius, Bellingham, Endrick and Rodrygo can play together. Ancelotti found success last season playing a 4-4-2 diamond, sometimes switching to 4-3-3. There simply isn't room for every member of that quintet in his frontline. Balague believes that the mistakes of history must be learned.

"The original Galacticos team often featured all of Zidane, Ronaldo, Raul, Figo and Beckham – and Roberto Carlos bombed forward as well," Balague recalls. "President Perez demanded that his gems play every match. It was a thrilling spectacle when it clicked, but they were defensively vulnerable and won little silverware. Ancelotti needs to find a better balance with this team."

When all are fit and firing, sacrifices will surely have to be made. One man, however, may be exempt. "Dropping Mbappe isn't an

FOLLOW THAT!

After a 12-year wait for *La Decima*, Real Madrid have won the Champions League in six of the past 11 seasons

2013-14
WINNERS

2014-15
Semi-final

2015-16
WINNERS

2016-17
WINNERS

2017-18
WINNERS

2018-19
Last 16

2019-20
Last 16

2020-21
Semi-final

2021-22
WINNERS

2022-23
Semi-final

2023-24
WINNERS

option," says Balague. "He arrives as one of the greatest players in the world – a transfer year in the making. He'll probably start at centre-forward with a Brazilian on either side. Vinicius Jr is too good to leave out on the left-hand side. That leaves Rodrygo and Endrick fighting it out on the right.

"You also have to factor in Real Madrid's other youngsters, such as Arda Guler, who had a brilliant Euro 2024 with Turkey. He'll also fight for game time. But Mbappe is nailed on, I believe."

What, then, of Bellingham, who shone in an advanced central role last season? Having previously starred as a midfielder for Dortmund, the 21-year-old could be moved back alongside the likes of Eduardo Camavinga, Tchouameni and Valverde. That switch would be made smoother by the recent retirement of veteran playmaker Toni Kroos and the declining powers of Modric, who turns 39 in early September.

"The arrival of Mbappe means Jude might have to give way a bit and play in a role that he hasn't been used to playing since he joined Real Madrid," says Owen, who scored 16 times in 45 appearances for the club.

"I think he'll be more box-to-box now – more of a midfielder. His numbers in terms of goals and assists will suffer, but the team might be better for it overall."

Whatever his position, Bellingham will surely expect to share the limelight a bit more this season. The Stourbridge native emerged as Real Madrid's matchwinner and *de facto* on-pitch leader in 2023-24, but Mbappe's arrival will challenge that status. On the club's pre-season tour of the USA, Ancelotti – a dab hand at managing big egos – insisted Bellingham will still be a key man.

"Nothing changes for Jude," the Italian told reporters. "The first season, he surprised me, because he showed fantastic quality and maturity. This season will be no different. He is one of the best players we have and he'll support the team with his quality."

Ancelotti's famed peace-keeping powers appeared to be called upon during that tour



– which included neither Mbappe nor Bellingham, following their Euro 2024 exploits – as rumours emerged of a spat between Endrick and veteran centre-back Antonio Rudiger. The German defender, known for his physicality, was filmed barging the teenager a little overzealously, which reportedly led to a dressing room bust-up.

"An issue between Rudiger and Endrick?" asked Ancelotti, adopting a look of comical mock surprise. "No, no – nothing happened. Rudiger just 'welcomed' Endrick to the team. He'll do the same when Mbappe comes. Antonio's a great guy."

Ancelotti may be skilled when it comes to keeping superstar squads harmonious, but it's the presence of another figure that truly ensures hierarchy is respected. "Nobody at Real Madrid comes close to President Perez in terms of ego," Balague tells *FT*. "He's the boss and, when players sign for Real, it is made clear that they are there to represent the badge before themselves.

"It works, too. Perez is the reason so many superstars can play together."

Even so, Real Madrid's quintet of new Galacticos will undoubtedly have one eye on personal glory while they bid for collective silverware. Of the past 10 winners of the men's Ballon d'Or, six were representing Los Blancos at the time. The other four were won by Lionel Messi. While Vinicius is the frontrunner for this year's gong, Bellingham has also been in contention and Mbappe, who witnessed first-hand Neymar's failed attempts to win the prize during their time together at PSG, knows he is now ideally placed to challenge in the years ahead.

"There's no denying that would have been a factor in his decision to join Real Madrid," Balague says. "Ronaldo, Modric and Karim Benzema have all been honoured in recent years after shining for Real Madrid. Mbappe wants that status soon."

Naturally, Los Blancos are hot favourites to win every competition they're in this term, including another Champions League title to take their overall tally to 16. The club lifted Big Ears in 2002 with Zidane, Figo, Raul and Roberto Carlos in the side, but were unable to repeat the feat after adding Ronaldo Nazario that summer and Beckham a year later. Perez's first generation of Galacticos ultimately fell short, at least in terms of trophies won. But the current crop appears better placed to succeed.

"The first Galacticos changed the entire football industry," says *Marca's* Del Rio Muradas. "But the new Galacticos can dominate from both a marketing and a footballing standpoint. This team is far more balanced in all positions, and that's important when you have so many stars in the team. I truly believe they have the potential to win everything. I don't think we are yet aware of the full scale of what Real Madrid have created."

The term 'Galacticos' still elicits images of the icons of yesteryear. However, in Mbappe, Bellingham, Vinicius, Rodrygo and Endrick a new cast is ready to take up that mantle.

A new Galacticos era has arrived. ●

THE LONG ROAD BACK

Aston Villa won the European Cup in 1982 but didn't grace Europe's top club competition for 40 years following their title defence. Now they're in the Champions League, after a journey featuring Moscow misery and a Spanish saviour

Words Chris Evans
Additional reporting
Andy McGrath,
Ed McCambridge





A large banner runs across the length of Villa Park's North Stand, emblazoned with the greatest moment in Aston Villa's history. "Shaw, Williams prepared to adventure down the left," it reads in block capitals. "There's a good ball played in for Tony Morley... oh, it must be... and it is! Peter Withe!"

Brian Moore's hallowed commentary from the 1982 European Cup Final describes the goal that won Villa their only continental crown. That achievement puts the club on a pedestal alongside history's greatest ever teams, despite having only ever featured in the competition on two occasions. Well, until this season, that is.

A fourth-placed finish in the 2023-24 Premier League means Unai Emery's men are the first Aston Villa side in 42 seasons to embark upon a campaign in Europe's premier club tournament, and the first ever to compete in the Champions League. With a minimum of eight matches guaranteed as part of the new, extended group stage, Villa will host at least four big European nights – as many as it did during the victorious run of 1981-82 – beneath the infamous banner that celebrates their historic triumph.

"I'm very proud and privileged it's up there," admits Morley, the winger who set up the game's only goal as his side beat Bayern Munich 1-0 in the final more than four decades ago. "I'm glad they've found a place for it because it's the biggest part of Villa's history, and I hope it stays there. I don't go down to Villa Park and look at it every time I'm there, but somebody might phone me up and mention it. I say, 'Oh, it's one of those things', but of course I'm proud of it."

While many Villans in the stands are too young to remember the vintage that won

“REACHING THE FA CUP FINAL IN 2000 WAS GOOD, BUT VILLA FANS EXPECTED MORE FROM SUCH A LARGE CLUB”

the First Division title, European Cup and European Super Cup in three golden seasons during the early '80s, Champions League qualification has resurfaced those happy memories in others. Back then, the home supporters made a big difference as Villa thrashed Valur and then battled past Dynamo Berlin, Dynamo Kyiv and Anderlecht in three nerve-jangling knockout rounds to reach the final in Rotterdam. They'll need to conjure up that sort of spirit again if they're to progress in this year's Champions League.

"Villa Park was sensational during our run," recalls Morley, who put Villa into the final by scoring the only goal across two legs against Anderlecht. "You'd walk out on a Wednesday night and see steam and smoke rising out of the Holte End. It was tribal, and people were baying for Villa to win. When you walk out to that, it makes you realise how lucky you are to be playing for such a great football club."

A BRUSH WITH HELL

Morley confesses that it was only years after the European Cup triumph that the win's significance truly became clear. At the time, Aston Villa had looked capable of enjoying

a prolonged period of success, but the premature break-up of the team when Doug Ellis seized control of the club triggered a barren spell that even brought relegation to the Second Division in 1987, just five years after lifting Ol' Big Ears. As holders, they had been knocked out by Michel Platini and Juventus in the quarter-finals in 1983.

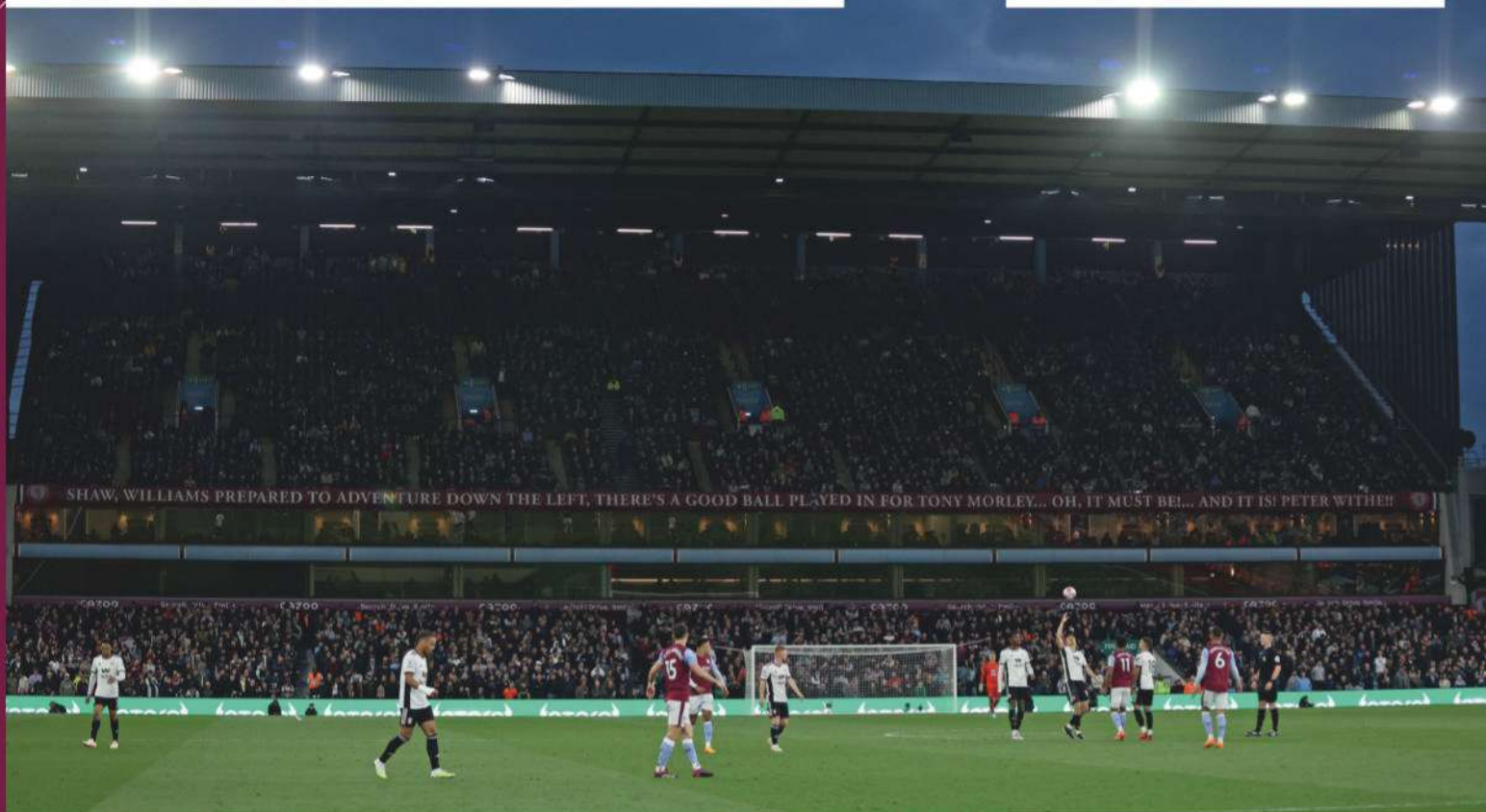
"After winning the European Cup, the mid-to-late '80s wasn't a brilliant time for Villa," says Jay White, chairman of the Isle of Wight Lions supporters club. "As a kid, growing up and starting to understand football and the heritage of the club, the importance of the European Cup win was huge. But we had been relegated not long afterwards, and it was only the early '90s when we started to claw it back."

"For a few years, the European Cup win was almost underplayed, but then there was a bit of a changing of the guard and a lot of the ex-players were back on the scene. I was born in 1985, so one of my biggest memories from a European Cup perspective was in 2002 when I attended the 20th anniversary of the win. I was there with all the ex-players – the whole gang – and that was probably when it was really brought to life."

Conquering Europe had almost become a myth; a hazy memory that sometimes felt more like a wistful dream than something that had happened not too long before. The landscape was changing, not just for Villa but for football as a whole.

An immediate return to the top flight after relegation eased the impact of that, before a season of struggle in 1988-89 when they stayed up by a single point. Considering how close Graham Taylor's outfit had come to the drop, their second-placed finish the following year was an astounding turn of fortunes. Back then, a runners-up spot was only good

Below Historic commentary of a club's historic peak deserves nothing less than a banner the length of a football pitch



enough for a place in the UEFA Cup, where they suffered a second-round defeat to Inter.

Villa yo-yoed up and down the league, lurching from another relegation battle to another top-of-the-table challenge. Re-establishing themselves as a force in the newly formed Premier League was crucial – and it nearly resulted in them winning the rebranded division’s inaugural title in 1992-93.

A team boasting Paul McGrath, Dalian Atkinson, Tony Daley and record signing Dean Saunders were vying for the championship until the final weeks of the season, when their three straight defeats handed the first of many Premier League titles to Manchester United. Not only did it mean Villa had missed out on becoming champions of England, but it also consigned them to the UEFA Cup once more, while United had a crack at the Champions League – ‘Welcome to Hell’ treatment in Galatasaray and all that – in only its second year of the new format.

Villa would become a regular fixture in the UEFA Cup, qualifying in five out of six years between 1993 and 1998 thanks to two League Cup victories and a run of top-seven finishes. Despite that, the Villans progressed past the second round only once, reaching the quarter-finals in 1998 before bowing out to Atletico Madrid on away goals following extra time – though there were still plenty of memorable European moments to cherish.



Above Giuseppe Bergomi and his eyebrow nobble
Below Up for De Kuip! Villa stun Bayern

“I remember being there when we played Stromsgodset: we were 2-0 down in the first leg with little over five minutes left and we pulled it back to win 3-2, with Darius Vassell coming on to score two late goals,” White recalls. “The one that stands out the most for me was in 1994, when we beat Inter on penalties in the first round after beating them 1-0 in the second leg. I was at the back of the old Trinity Road with my grandad when Phil King scored the winning penalty to see us through. It was incredible.”

With the Premier League in full swing, the challenge to remain in the upper echelons of the table was becoming ever greater. Other clubs were splashing the cash, and while the number of European places was growing, so was the level of competition to get one. Soon, Villa’s regular UEFA Cup appearances relied on qualification through the Intertoto Cup instead, which meant playing competitive matches in July in a mad scramble to get into Europe through the back door.

Their first attempt was ended by Celta Vigo at the semi-final stage in 2000. A year later, a 5-2 aggregate victory over Basel saw Villa triumph and return to the UEFA Cup. ‘Winning’ the Intertoto Cup wasn’t an achievement that called for an open-top bus parade, though – the three victorious clubs didn’t even receive a trophy. The level of success that fans could expect was slipping.

“In the couple of years that I was there, we got into Europe and had an FA Cup final

appearance,” says goalkeeper David James, who was with Aston Villa between 1999 and 2001. “But there was always this understandable undertone from the fans that, from the European success of the ‘80s to the League Cup successes of the early ‘90s, reinvestment in the club hadn’t occurred and where were they going? Getting to a cup final was good, but Aston Villa fans expected more from such a large club.”

“WHAT IS HE DOING?!”

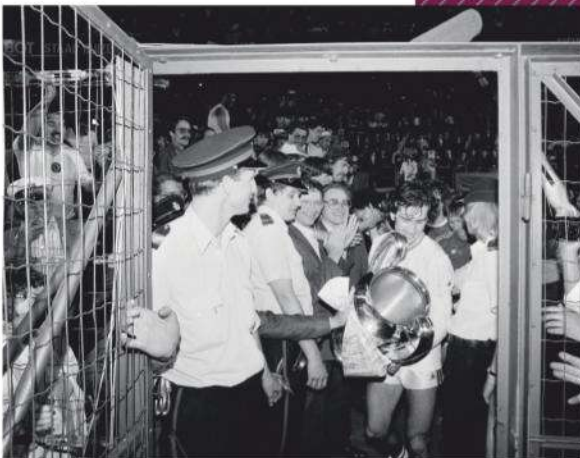
Villa became entrenched in mid-table, leapfrogged by other clubs, with excitement at a premium. Then Martin O’Neill arrived as the club’s manager in 2006 and started to build an energetic young side that breathed new hope into the Villa Park faithful.

All of a sudden, they were the plucky upstarts; challengers to the established top four of Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and Chelsea. A stingy defence marshalled by Curtis Davies and Carlos Cuellar provided the base for the likes of Ashley Young and Gabby Agbonlahor to do damage further forward.

Champions League qualification appeared to be a real possibility, even if Villa didn’t have the same depth of the squad as their rivals. O’Neill was painfully aware of this, and with the top four in his sights during his third season in charge, in 2008-09, he decided to put all of his chips on the Premier League. He sacrificed a promising UEFA Cup campaign by resting his strongest team for a last-32 second leg at CSKA Moscow – a pragmatic decision, but not one that inspired people.

“I was so excited – Moscow was the first European trip I’d ever been on,” says White. “But then you started to hear whispers that we were taking a weakened side, so straight away you were thinking, ‘Hold on a minute: we’ve flown halfway across to the world to the most intimidating place I’ve ever been in my life’. And now you’re looking at the team sheet, thinking, ‘OK, what’s going on?’

“There were 250 or 300 Villa fans tucked away in the corner and all you could hear was this roar and growl of the CSKA Moscow fans. Then we lost. Everybody was like, ‘What is he doing?’. Yes, it was difficult, but it was a huge chance to progress. For some reason, he decided to sacrifice it to focus on the league, which didn’t work out as planned.” ▶



ELEVENTH HEAVEN

Prior to this term, 10 English clubs have appeared in the Champions League group stage in at least one campaign

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Manchester United | 25 |
| Arsenal | 20 |
| Chelsea | 19 |
| Liverpool | 15 |
| Manchester City | 13 |
| Tottenham | 6 |
| Newcastle | 3 |
| Blackburn | 1 |
| Leeds | 1 |
| Leicester | 1 |

Villa were fourth in the Premier League and six points ahead of fifth-placed Arsenal with 12 games left when they lost 2-0 in Moscow. Their well-rested first team drew at home to Stoke that weekend, conceding twice late on, then lost four games in a row and drew the next three. That six-point lead over Arsenal was now a 10-point deficit, and Villa's next win came when they were mathematically out of the race. Finishing sixth sent them not into the Champions League, but into the inaugural season of the Europa League.

Another assault on the top four came the year after, but another mid-season stutter, with three wins from 13 between Christmas and the end of March, put Villa six points behind Tottenham in the final Champions League spot. Frustration was building. Five days before the start of the 2010-11 season, O'Neill quit, amid a rumoured disagreement about a lack of investment in the squad.

The writing was on the wall. Although new manager Gerard Houllier led Villa to ninth, an inertia had set in at Villa Park. As owner Randy Lerner tightened his belt, five successive finishes in the Premier League's bottom six culminated in relegation to the Championship in 2016, with only 17 points.

There would be no instant return this time. Finishing their first season in the bottom half provided a reality check, then a play-off final in the second provided a loss to Fulham. The 2018-19 campaign seemed to be heading in a similar direction until Dean Smith inspired a 10-game winning streak that salvaged fifth place, earning another crack at the play-offs, and Villa were promoted at the third attempt.

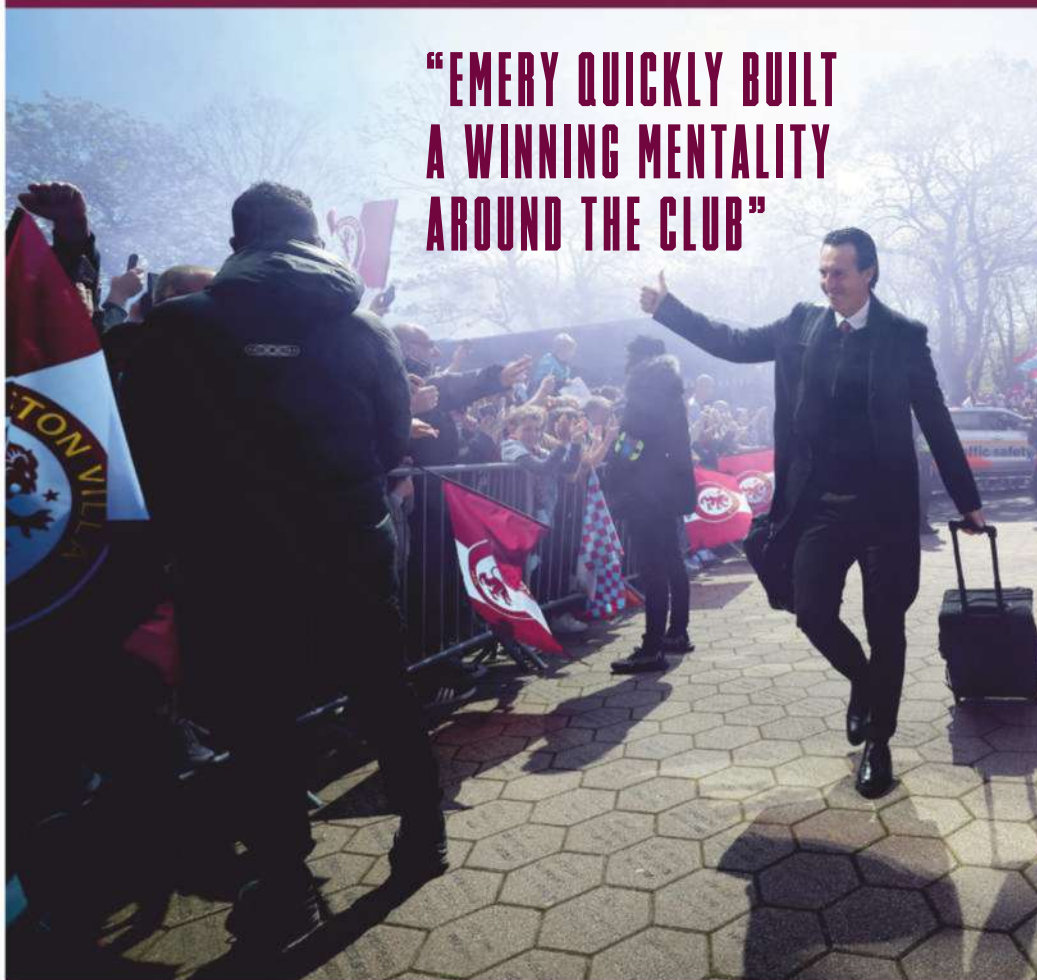
Dreams of Europe were still a long way off, however. Safety was secured only with Jack Grealish's goal in a final-day draw at West Ham, not to mention a goal-line technology error against Sheffield United that had gifted Villa a point without which they would have been relegated. Two more bottom-half finishes followed, and Villa were outside the drop zone only on goals scored when gaffer Steven Gerrard was sacked in October 2022.

Owners V Sports, headed up by billionaires Nassef Sawiris and Wes Edens, had bigger plans, and recruited former Arsenal manager Unai Emery from Villarreal to deliver on that intent. It resembled a coup at the time – and since then, Villa haven't looked back.

Emery's impact was instantaneous: Villa beat Manchester United in his first game. He turned a team that had been struggling to score into an exciting side that could trouble the best defences, and when he managed to tighten up at the other end as well, Villa surged up the table. A 10-match unbeaten run propelled them into the European conversation and a 2-1 win over Brighton on final day sealed seventh place, qualification for the Europa Conference League, and Villa's first continental campaign in 13 seasons.

THE MIRACLE WORKER

Emery was building something, but nobody expected that Aston Villa would achieve what they did last season. A 5-1 defeat away to Newcastle on the opening day was a bad



**“EMERY QUICKLY BUILT
A WINNING MENTALITY
AROUND THE CLUB”**

start but after that, a run of two defeats in the 17 matches leading up to Christmas had the Villans flying. Starting December with back-to-back 1-0 wins over Manchester City and Arsenal, four days apart, even had some fans dreaming of an unlikely title challenge. The first of those was a performance of total domination: Villa had 22 efforts on goal and racked up 2.4 xG while Erling Haaland, Phil Foden & Co. failed to register a single shot after the 11th minute.

Though their form tailed off somewhat in the new year, Villa held on to fourth place. Champions League qualification was all but confirmed when two late Jhon Duran strikes rescued a point against Liverpool in their penultimate fixture, and Tottenham's defeat to Manchester City the following night set corks popping in the West Midlands.

Emery took a lot of the plaudits, having shown up the doubters who had turned the Basque boss into a target of ridicule after his spell at Arsenal. A league double over the Gunners, including a 2-0 victory in April that handed Manchester City the initiative in the title race, must have been satisfying.

"Emery has brought that spark and belief back to Aston Villa," says former striker Dwight Yorke, who scored 98 times in 287 matches for the club. "He had a lot to prove after the way things ended at Arsenal, but he has shown everyone what a fantastic manager he is when he's give the time and resources he needs. He has redeemed himself in British football. It wasn't as if Villa was going to be an easy ride, either. There was huge expectation when he arrived, but he has dealt with that and delivered.

Clockwise from below Jesus walks; Watkins celebrating was a common sight last season; at least O'Neill was in Moscow that night; Gerrard blows it; happier times return



"Emery's main change was a cultural one: building that winning mentality around the club. That also stems from your philosophy – getting players to buy into your system and trust your style of play. His style is one that the very top clubs play, so he was essentially telling players that the time had arrived for them to play like a top club. They needed to believe they were capable of that. He built that culture. Recruitment has been fantastic, too: he bought players who clicked quickly and helped to take Villa to the next level."

The backbone of Villa's success has been a formidable home record. They had put together a 17-match unbeaten run at Villa Park before Newcastle won there in January and, despite that New Year wobble, they recovered to pick up some crucial points on their own patch before the season was out.

Success has been achieved with an attacking swagger rarely seen in that part of the country. The 76 league goals scored was Villa's highest tally in a 38-game top-flight season since 1913; Ollie Watkins' 27 goals in all competitions, the highest total for a Villa player since Andy Gray in 1976-77. Adding 13 league assists also showed that Watkins' value lies in more than just goals.

"I see a lot of myself in Ollie Watkins," Yorke says. "He's a creator, a dribbler and a finisher, a bit like I was back in the day. You saw from his number of goals and assists last term that he has a little bit of everything. His work ethic is also admirable. He's a top, top player. You don't get to that level, scoring that many goals and contributing creatively, unless you're a fantastic footballer."

"It took him a little while to reach those levels, but now he is established. He's one of those players you can pick again and again, every week, because his level is always high and he has shown that he can be trusted consistently. That's what the top players do."

"Where does Watkins go from here? Can he produce that again this season, while also performing in the Champions League?"

It's a question facing a number of Villa's biggest stars, many of whom are short of experience in European competition. Last season's run to the Conference League semi-finals will have helped greatly, even if

the 6-2 loss on aggregate to eventual winners Olympiacos was a disappointment. The quality of their players isn't in doubt.

"Emi Martinez is a character in goal and he suits Aston Villa because he winds people up – it's something different to the way that other goalkeepers keep their goals," David James tells *FFT*. "John McGinn, for me, was in line for player of the season in the Premier League in the first few months last year, but he had dips in form and an injury that impacted that. Ollie Watkins' form has been fantastic. It just looks like a group of players who've bought into a manager."

Juggling priorities across the Champions League and Premier League will be hard, and Villa will want to ensure it isn't a one-night stand. But given the pace of progress so far, there's positivity that this is only the start.

"I've been involved with Villa for 40 years and I think the club is in the best position it's ever been in," adds European Cup winner Morley. "They've got fantastic owners who are businessmen – football is a business and they know how to get the best out of it. They have put their hand in their pockets when the manager wants something. They've invested in the training ground. Villa took another step to crash the top four, but there's still a way to go."

After so long away from the top level of European competition, though, Villa fans would perhaps be remiss not to simply enjoy the Champions League experience. White gives a rallying cry: "We'll have eight games minimum and four at home, whatever happens, so let's get Villa Park rocking for those, and live in the moment. We're all guilty of trying to focus too far ahead – let's get behind the team now. To be stood in the Holte End when that music plays, there will be goosebumps and there will be emotion in that stadium and on the pitch."

Whatever happens, Aston Villa have already achieved so much, so quickly. But that won't stop fans dreaming of the improbable. Villa Park already has a banner celebrating the year they became kings of Europe – any chance of another one? If the last two years are anything to go by, Emery's men will give it everything they can. ●

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

THE NEW CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Europe's biggest club competition has become even bigger – *FFT* explains what to look out for in the revamped format, including Thursday night matches, chess and French pirates

Words Chris Flanagan

EXTRA QUALIFYING SPOTS HAVE GONE TO SURPRISE PACKAGES, AS BOLOGNA AND BREST MAKE DEBUTS



MORE TEAMS

For the first time since the 1998-99 season, the Champions League proper will not begin with 32 clubs. Back in 1999, the competition expanded from 24 teams; this year, it has increased again to 36.

So, where do the four extra teams come from? There was one extra place available via the qualifying rounds, while the two best-performing countries in European competition last term each received another spot. England had an unexpectedly poor season on the continent – Aston Villa were the only Premier League club to reach a European semi-final – so those places went to Italy and Germany. This meant that Borussia Dortmund, Champions League runners-up in 2023-24, qualified despite finishing fifth in the Bundesliga.

It also benefited Bologna, fifth in Serie A, who will play in the Champions League for the first time – though they've lost the boss who upset the odds to get them there, with Thiago Motta having joined Juventus. He has been replaced by the appropriately-named Vincenzo Italiano, who took Fiorentina to the Conference League final in each of the past two seasons. Scotland international Lewis Ferguson was made Bologna captain last season but injured his ACL in April and isn't due back until the end of the year.

The fourth extra Champions League spot went to Europe's fifth-best league, Ligue 1, helping another surprise package to qualify. Brest (below) finished third in the French top tier, their highest-ever placing, thanks in no small part to the managerial skills of former Sunderland midfielder Eric Roy – Les Pirates have few stars and their ground on the Brittany coast holds fewer than 16,000 fans.

It's not just the Champions League that's expanded to 36 teams, either; so, too, have the Europa League and Conference League, now officially renamed from the not-at-all clunky Europa Conference League. ▶





PREVIOUSLY, THERE WAS AN OPEN DRAW FROM THE QUARTER-FINALS ONWARDS – THAT’S GONE AS WELL



MORE MATCHES

Obviously, the idea behind this new format was to increase the total number of matches in the Champions League, with the intention of increasing the value of television rights, as well as bringing in more gate receipts. It was largely a concession to Europe’s top clubs; an attempt to head off agitations for a European Super League, while keeping the competition under UEFA’s control, with no need for a breakaway event that could cost the governing body prestige – and a fortune.

Including the new play-off round, the knockout stage now has 45 matches, up from 29. The league phase has 144 matches, up from 96. That’s because not only are there more teams, but each club will play eight fixtures in the league phase, compared to six as before. Whereas clubs previously played the same opposition both home and away, the eight matches will now be against eight different opponents – four at home, four away. Each team will play two games against teams from pot one (one at home, one away), two from pot two, two from pot three and two from pot four.

So, when are they fitting in the extra two matchdays, to allow each team to play eight times? The last two midweeks in January, that’s when. Then comes the draw for the play-off round (don’t forget the play-off round), with those matches taking place in February before the last 16 starts in March.

The Europa League follows the same schedule, with one exception. To give each competition a proper launch week of its own, the first matches of the Champions League take place from September 17 to 19: that’s Tuesday, Wednesday and, shockingly, Thursday. The first matches of the Europa League take place on September 25 and 26.

The Conference League’s knockout schedule copies the other two competitions, but the league phase is different: because

MORE CONFUSION

The Champions League group phase is no more, so forget the traditional groups of four, which had been in place since the competition’s formation in 1992. Some were concerned that it was a tired format, with too many dead rubbers in the weeks before Christmas, and it has been replaced by the ‘league phase’ – every team involved goes into one big 36-team division. You may have heard it called the ‘Swiss system’, as a similar format has been used for various sporting competitions and takes its origins from a chess tournament in Zurich in 1895.

Now, read this carefully because we shall explain it only once. As with any competition UEFA dream up these days (Nations League, we’re looking at you), the new league phase of the Champions League is complicated.

At the end of the 36-teams-in-one-group group stage, the overall top eight will advance straight to the last 16. The sides finishing ninth to 24th will go into a play-off round, while the clubs finishing 25th to 36th will be eliminated. The play-off round will be seeded: ninth or 10th will face 23rd or 24th, determined by a draw, while 11th or 12th will face 21st or 22nd, and so on.

The winners of each play-off round tie will progress to the last 16 – also seeded, to ensure that the team that finished first in the league phase will face one that finished



15th, 16th, 17th or 18th. The side that finished eighth in the league phase will play a team that finished ninth, 10th, 23rd or 24th. Confused? That’s numberwang!

Previously, there was an open draw from the quarter-finals onwards. That’s gone, too. Again, it’s seeded, like a tennis draw, so that the teams who finished first and second in the league phase will be in opposite halves of the draw, unable to play each other until the final on May 31, and unable to face the teams who finished third or fourth until the semis. It means that the finishing positions of the league phase could be critical to who ends up winning the competition. The knockout stages of the Europa League and Conference League also follow this format.

Clockwise from top The new setup is going to captivate fans across the globe; Girona are set for their debut; Juventus return; Stuttgart will be mixing it with the elite again; the expanded format means Dortmund fans won’t have to just watch on TV

there isn't the same money-making potential (let's be honest here), each team plays only six times. To facilitate that, the league phase draw has divided clubs into six pots rather than four, and teams will play six different opponents. The Conference League starts on October 3, with the sixth and final set of group fixtures taking place in a midweek of its own, with no Champions League or Europa League action, on December 19.

NO DROPDOWN

You may have noticed no mention of beaten Champions League teams dropping into the Europa League mid-season. That's because they aren't going to. Since 1999, teams who finished third in their Champions League group headed into the UEFA Cup or Europa League, and in 25 seasons, that produced nine UEFA Cup or Europa League winners who had started the campaign in the Champions League group stage – among them, Chelsea in 2013 and Sevilla twice.

Sadly, Sevilla's perennial cunning plan to finish third in their Champions League group and then lift the Europa League yet again has now been foiled (although they finished 14th in La Liga last term, so there was no danger of them qualifying for Europe this season anyway). There's no dropdown between the Europa League and the Conference League either; Olympiacos were in last season's Europa League group stage, before winning the Conference League.



HELLO, BEEB

Not since 1994 has there been Champions League football on the BBC. That changes this season. The Beeb have won the rights to show a Wednesday night highlights show for each of the next three seasons, bringing the competition back to terrestrial TV for the first time since ITV lost their rights in 2018.

Plucky little Amazon are also joining the party, broadcasting first-choice live matches on Tuesday nights all the way through to the semi-finals, with TNT screening every other fixture. The Europa League and Conference League will remain exclusively on TNT.

WHAT ELSE TO WATCH OUT FOR?

Bologna, Brest and Aston Villa aren't the only surprise qualifiers from major leagues: Girona make their Champions League debut after stunning Spain by finishing third in La Liga, having lost only one game before February.

Meanwhile, Stuttgart return for the first time in 15 seasons. Die Schwaben pipped Bayern Munich to second place in the Bundesliga in 2023-24, under 42-year-old boss Sebastian Hoeneß (son of Dieter and nephew of Uli). But they've lost key players – among them, top scorer Serhou Guirassy and defender Waldemar Anton to Dortmund, as well as Hiroki Ito to Bayern.

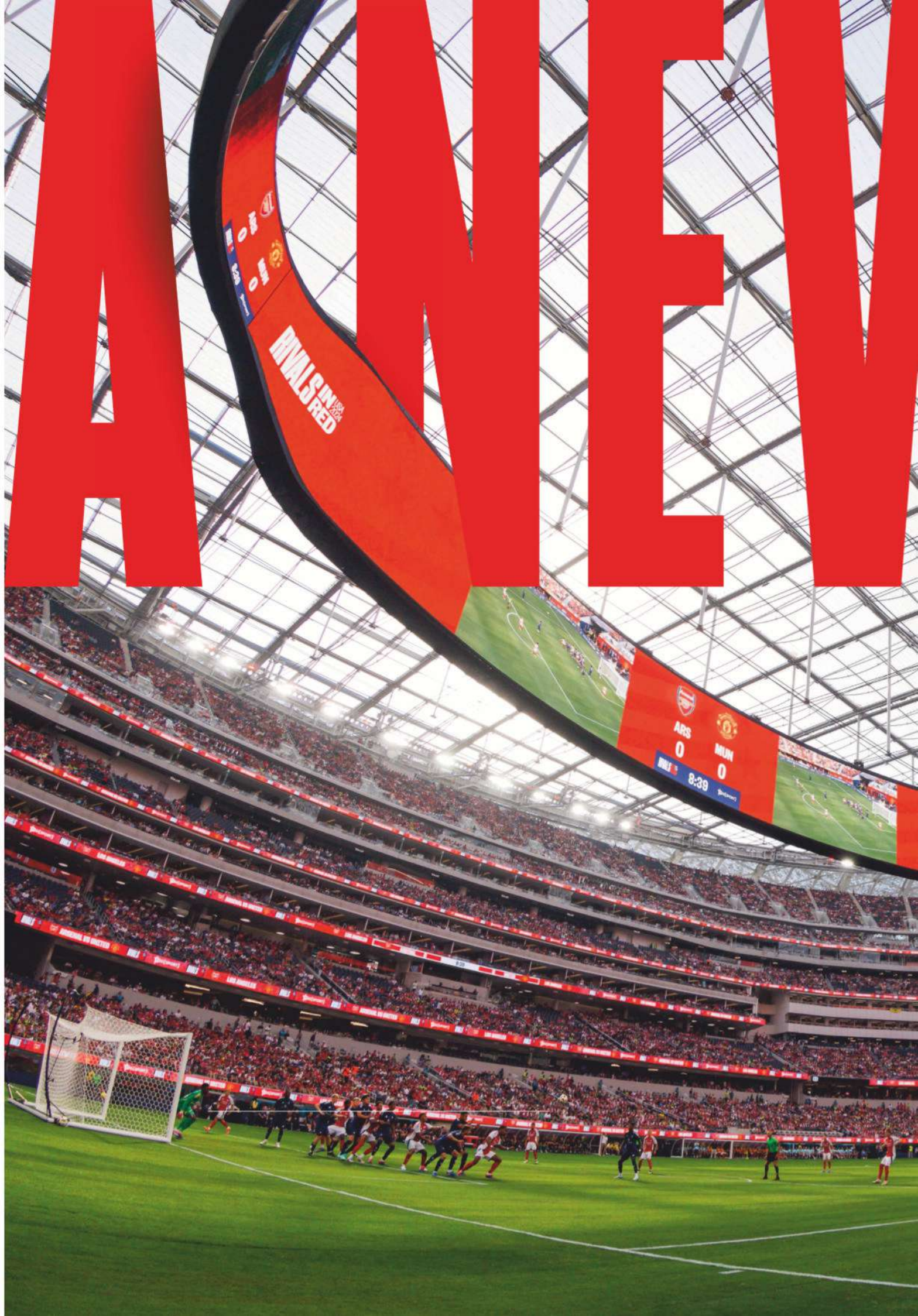
Bayern, under new boss Vincent Kompany, dream of banishing the ghosts of their painful defeat to Chelsea in 2012, with the 2025 final taking place at the Allianz Arena again. A third England-born star joined their squad in July when Michael Olise followed in the footsteps of Harry Kane and Eric Dier.

Bayern and Dortmund are top seeds in the league phase, as are RB Leipzig with their history of zero German titles and one single progression past the Champions League's last 16. Yet Bayer Leverkusen are not, despite romping to the German double in 2023-24 without losing a game all season in any competition until the Europa League final in May. Xabi Alonso's charges hope to prove they're a genuine contender for *this* trophy.

After a year away, Liverpool are back under new boss Arne Slot, whose only previous campaign in the Champions League saw Feyenoord finish third in their group behind Atletico Madrid and Lazio last term.

Juventus also return, following the chaos of the 2022-23 campaign when they lost five of their six Champions League fixtures and were deducted 10 points in Serie A for false accounting, meaning they finished seventh rather than fourth. They were then banned from the Conference League for breaching UEFA Financial Fair Play regulations, months before Paul Pogba failed a drugs test and was suspended for four years. The Old Lady finished third last season, bringing some normality back to proceedings in Italy...

...then Max Allegri was sacked two days after being sent off in the Coppa Italia final, when he had responded by ranting at match officials, publicly waving off the club's sporting director, then reportedly threatening a journalist. Things are never dull in Turin. ●

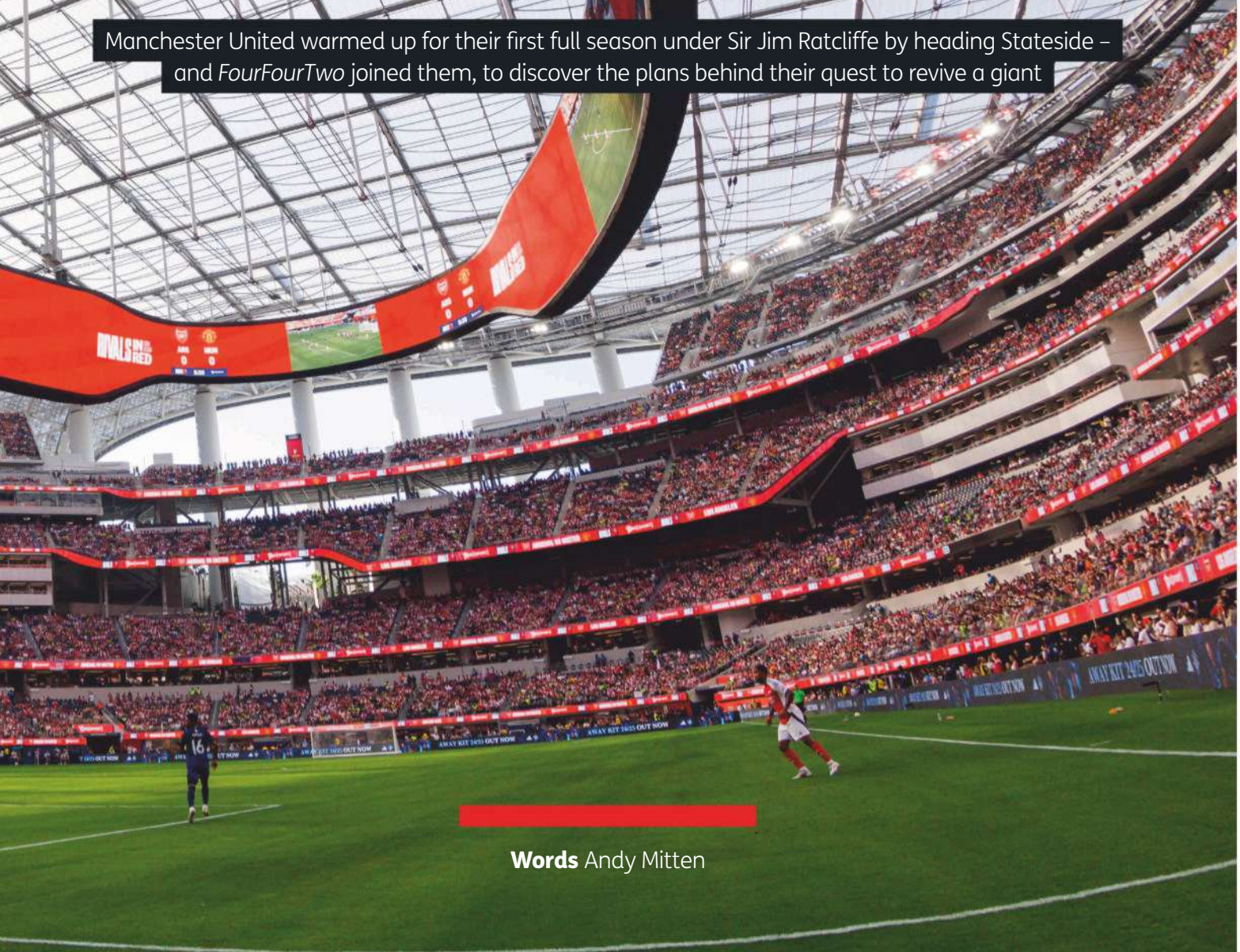


RIVALRY IN RED

ARS 0 MUN 0
MUN 3 8:39

WELFARE

Manchester United warmed up for their first full season under Sir Jim Ratcliffe by heading Stateside – and *FourFourTwo* joined them, to discover the plans behind their quest to revive a giant



Words Andy Mitten

Three smart coaches decorated in Liverpool's *You'll Never Walk Alone* livery edge slowly into heavy traffic in the rain outside Columbia's Williams-Brice Stadium. The Reds have just beaten Manchester United 3-0 in a college football stadium that boasts a larger capacity than Old Trafford and Anfield. Despite being staged in a South Carolina city with only 136,000 residents, well off the big-city track usually beaten by visiting European giants, it's the only game to have sold out during Manchester United and Liverpool's 2024 US pre-season tour, with 77,559 spectators inside the stadium to witness it.

With a severe weather warning and thunderstorms threatening the game, there's relief that it was played – soon after the final whistle, both English football giants are in a race to return to Manchester Airport. The word from both camps is that whoever gets there first will get unloaded first and the other team will have to wait. It's a fun, secret little battle for staff, another dimension to a storied rivalry, the image of two giant planes racing through the night across the Atlantic.

To get away quickly, Liverpool's players take part in no post-match media, while Manchester United put manager Erik ten Hag in the mixed zone and young player Rhys Bennett fronts for local TV. Liverpool duly get their headstart, but with the roads so jammed, they don't move fast. To their dismay, they then see Manchester United's coach speed past under police escort. The Red Devils reach the small airport first and take off four minutes before Liverpool, landing their chartered Virgin Atlantic Dreamliner at Manchester at 11.49am the following morning, 14 minutes before Liverpool's Atlas Air 747.

A TRIP TO MEET ROBBIE WILLIAMS

Manchester United and Liverpool, England's two best-supported and most successful clubs, adopted a similar approach to their pre-season tour of the USA, right down to where they wanted to be for their final game. Following criticism that previous tours were exhausting, they wanted to be in America's Eastern Time Zone, not three hours further west as Manchester United's pre-season tour in 2023 had been, which involved the team zigzagging from California to Texas and back.

The club's travelling staff was slimmed down under the club's new decision-makers, led by Sir Jim Ratcliffe, to 120 – fully 40 fewer than Liverpool. Both see the US as a key market. Manchester United have been touring the US regularly since 2003, playing to huge crowds in the biggest stadiums.

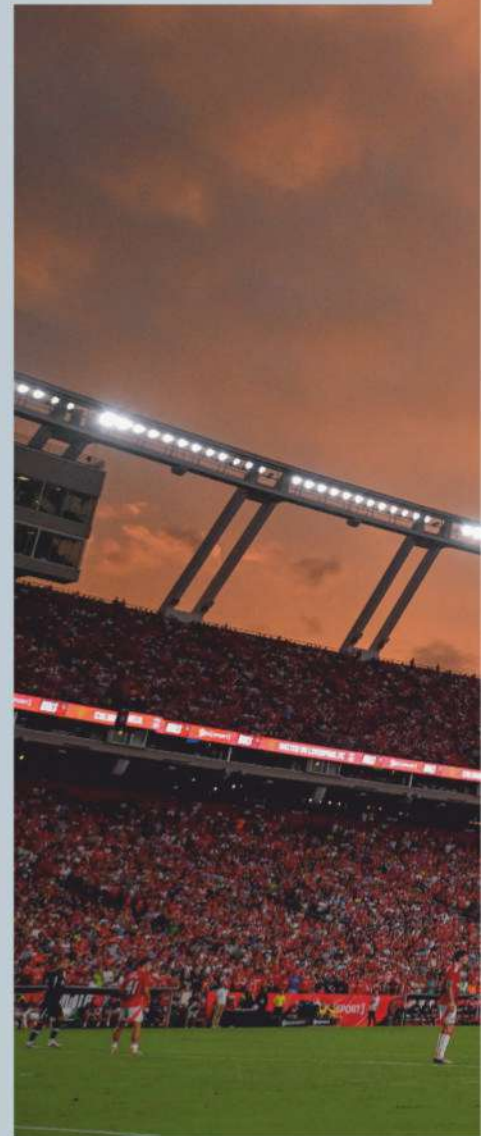
There are several reasons why United keep returning to the country that shares part of their name. The advances paid by promoters

PLAYERS CAN ENJOY RELATIVE ANONYMITY IN LOS ANGELES, WHEREAS ON TOURS TO ASIA, HOTELS ARE BESIEGED BY FANS



help the club to make a ballpark overall profit of £15 million from such a tour. Then there are the existing and potential sponsors in the world's biggest economy, plus a growing consumer market that can stand \$150 match tickets (around £130) in large venues, and a lot more for executive tickets, as well as \$140 replica shirts. Kits are launched to record sales – Manchester United's blue second strip came out while the team were in Los Angeles – with influencers engaged to promote them to a market of consumers who may know little about the club or their results, but now know that their shirt looks cute.

Managers acquiesce because their clubs are following the money and because the training facilities Stateside are of high quality. Players, often consumed by American culture, choose to holiday in Los Angeles or Las Vegas anyhow. They can enjoy sunshine and relative anonymity as small fry in LA's urban sprawl, where Robbie Williams will invite Harry Maguire and a couple of team-mates to one of his houses on their day off during the 11-day trip. They travel and train hard but are often spotted by the rooftop pool of their hotel, or walking around Beverly Hills, shopping or taking a coffee. This wouldn't have been possible on tours to Asia where the hotels are besieged by fans.



The appeal of LA is one reason why Kobbie Mainoo, granted three weeks of holiday after helping England to reach the final of Euro 2024, chose the city as a place to chill after his breakthrough season, though he pops in to say hello to his team-mates. The midfielder was coming to prominence on last season's tour before an injury against Real Madrid in Houston. That game, originally scheduled for LA, was criticised because it meant more back-and-forward travel.

It was promised that this pre-season would be different, and it was – shorter in duration, fewer miles, three US games instead of four, a slimmed-down staff, one training centre in LA and one hotel (the discreet SLS in Beverly Hills). Players were given a plan including designated sleep and meal windows, with bespoke meals, a hydration programme and compression garments to increase blood circulation. We couldn't say for sure if it'll bring about any last-minute winners, but the Red Devils are now into details; training was scheduled to support players to shift their body clocks, with considerations made around exposure to light at the right time of day.

Pre-season is a chance for new players to integrate, with 18-year-old Lille recruit Leny Yoro made to feel at home by his Parisian-born team-mate Hannibal Mejbri

Clockwise from below No filter required; his Euro 2024 snub made Rashford available; forget Eric and Ernie – here's Erik and Arne; taking the Manchester rain to California

and the French-speaking Amad Diallo.

Manchester United's travelling squad is light on big names, but Casemiro wasn't selected in Brazil's Copa America squad while Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Harry Maguire weren't part of Euro 2024, so all of them are in the US – Casemiro, as skipper.

The Brazilian does no media because his future at Manchester United has been uncertain, but he takes the captaincy seriously and is aware that it isn't just about what he does on the pitch. At Manchester United's training base at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), he spots young supporter Alex Neild, who has travelled from Manchester to support his heroes. Casemiro takes Alex's wheelchair and pushes the delighted fan towards the main group of players for photos. There are around 1,000 supporters who've been invited to the session from the bleachers, mostly members of Manchester United's official supporters' clubs. They watch Rashford looking sharp, coach Darren Fletcher joining in training and the mood being positive.

For the non-playing senior staff – many of them new, after almost all of Manchester United's previous leadership team departed when Ratcliffe took over – it's a chance to network and get a feel for the club. Sir Dave Brailsford, director of sport for Ratcliffe's

INEOS group, is at UCLA, where the upbeat vibe contrasts with the dire ambience in the same location in 2018 as Jose Mourinho put on the face of someone who didn't want to be in the job. Mourinho was relieved of his responsibilities a few months later.

VAN NISTELROOY IN, 250 STAFF OUT

Erik ten Hag's position was in serious doubt before May's FA Cup final. However, after his side stunned Manchester City at Wembley, fans overwhelmingly wanted him to stay and he's in confident mood on tour, looking more relaxed than at the end of last season.

That cup final victory injected optimism into the fanbase for the entire summer. The Dutchman knows that fans have limited patience, though, and serious improvement is expected for 2024-25. He says repeatedly that injuries ruined his plans last season, as United finished eighth in the Premier League.

When he is asked, "Can you give us just one reason why there were so many injuries?", Ten Hag instead lists several: "The number of games; the fixture list; many teams across the Premier League have injuries; bad luck," he says. "We had bad luck because almost all of our injuries were across the back four."

Gloomily, he adds that things could be even worse with the new extended formats ▶

COMING TO AMERICA

Ten Premier League clubs played friendlies in the US this summer – with mixed results...

| | P | W | D | L |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Liverpool | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Crystal Palace | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Wolves | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Arsenal | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Manchester City | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| MANCHESTER UNITED | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Bournemouth | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Chelsea | 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| West Ham | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Aston Villa | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |



for European competitions this season, adding: "It's the survival of the fittest". In LA, Rasmus Hojlund and new signing Yoro both start well against Arsenal before picking up injuries, which rule them out for a significant period of time. They're the only clouds over Manchester United's California base.

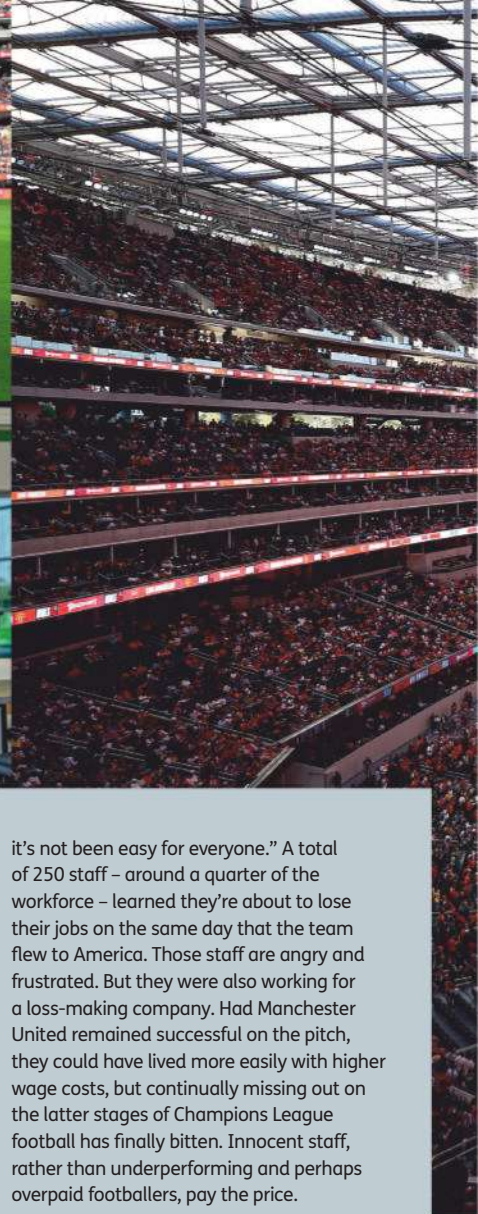
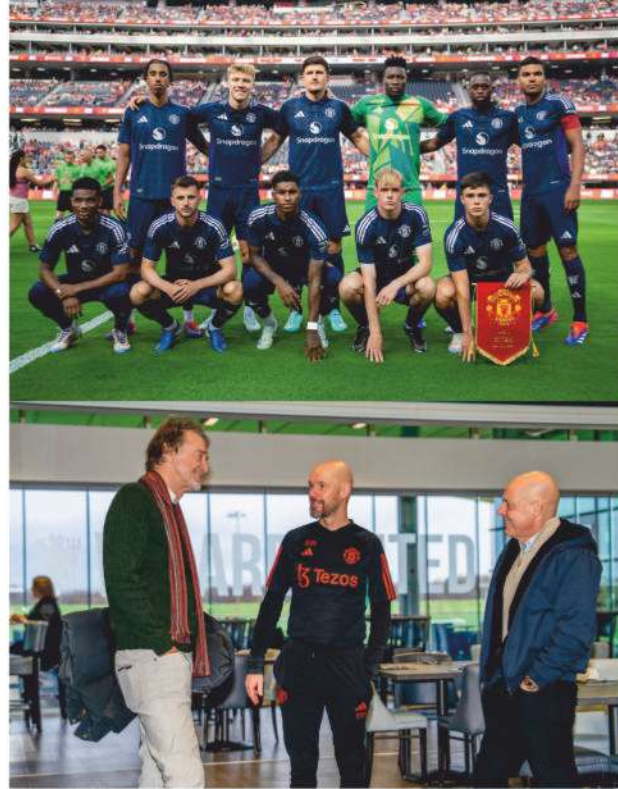
Ten Hag and those above him have made changes and at UCLA he is surrounded by new staff, from new coaches Rene Hake and Ruud van Nistelrooy to sporting director Dan Ashworth and technical director Jason Wilcox. Another new first-team coach, Andreas Georgson, is announced while United are in LA. He, like Van Nistelrooy and Hake, had previously been a manager at a team in a smaller European league: Van Nistelrooy at PSV, Hake at FC Twente, Utrecht and Go Ahead Eagles, and Georgson – a Swede – at Lillestrom in Norway.

Van Nistelrooy and Fletcher (one of the few to retain his job) chat informally with the travelling journalists. They'll likely do little external media because Ten Hag, like most managers, wants to be the voice of his team, although his players are all obliged to speak. Under Ratcliffe, Manchester United will have more voices talking to the media, alleviating the pressure on Ten Hag to have an opinion on everything. It won't be difficult – the Glazers didn't speak.

"For the team, last season was a real disappointment, but we finished on a high," Harry Maguire tells *FFT* in LA. "There has been a lot of positive energy after that. There has been a lot of changes within the club with the hierarchy and the staff around the manager. I think that will help us. Ruud is an excellent coach – you can tell he's addicted to football. He loves analysing the game. I've been really impressed by his ideas."

Van Nistelrooy arrived as a coach after turning down the chance to manage Burnley. The Dutchman looks well and his arrival was appreciated by fans who remember him as a club legend. Players also revere him.

"He was a deadly striker and for him to pass on his knowledge straight away meant



LA'S SOFI STADIUM IS SPARKING GENTRIFICATION IN THE AREA – SOMETHING SIR JIM RATCLIFFE WANTS AROUND OLD TRAFFORD

he had everyone's respect immediately," Jonny Evans explains. "Joining United is a great move for him and for the club. He seems very open and wants to improve people. You can see that he's early enough in his career that he's hungry to do well and pass on his abundance of knowledge. He's quite obsessed with defensive structure."

Evans also speaks sensitively about the job losses going on at Old Trafford. "It's been difficult to see," he admits. "The new owners feel that's the direction they want to go, but

it's not been easy for everyone." A total of 250 staff – around a quarter of the workforce – learned they're about to lose their jobs on the same day that the team flew to America. Those staff are angry and frustrated. But they were also working for a loss-making company. Had Manchester United remained successful on the pitch, they could have lived more easily with higher wage costs, but continually missing out on the latter stages of Champions League football has finally bitten. Innocent staff, rather than underperforming and perhaps overpaid footballers, pay the price.

Most supporters see pre-season as an opportunity to look for signs of improvement, but few will read deeply into the results. A decade ago, Manchester United put three goals past Real Madrid in Michigan with 109,318 spectators in attendance, and then another three past Liverpool in Miami, as part of six straight wins in pre-season. One staffer thanked new boss Louis van Gaal for restoring order after David Moyes' spell. Then United lost their opening league game at home to Swansea, drew at Sunderland and Burnley, and lost 4-0 at MK Dons, all before August 2014 was over.

STADIUM INSPIRATION

What Manchester United do off the pitch with Ratcliffe at the helm is as intriguing as what happens on it. The tour's first match is in LA's stunning SoFi stadium, which can lay claim to being the best in the world. Mindful of their aim to build a world-leading stadium at Old Trafford, the club invite officials and the travelling press pack to a guided tour of the SoFi on the day after Arsenal beat Ten Hag's men 2-1 (though United win a penalty shoot-out, pre-arranged for entertainment purposes). Off-record comments are made and the story that follows is that Manchester United intend to build, from new, a 100,000-capacity stadium at Old Trafford.

Andrew Cole, in the US as one of the Red Devils' legends, puts his name to an article





on the club's website advocating a new stadium for Manchester United. "We have seen a glimpse of the future in Los Angeles, both on and off the pitch," he says. It's clear Ratcliffe is pushing for that over redeveloping Old Trafford.

The SoFi is situated in the private 300-acre Hollywood Park 'world-class sports and entertainment destination', and was built at the behest of LA Rams owner/chairman Stan Kroenke, head of the holding company that owns Arsenal. With 70,000 seats expandable to 100,000, including 260 luxury suites and 13,000 premium seats, it sits on a privately funded development that is three times the size of Disneyland and twice the size of the Vatican City. It's bang in the middle of the long-derided Inglewood neighbourhood and is sparking gentrification – something Ratcliffe wants around Old Trafford.

Manchester United have also visited Real Madrid's redeveloped Bernabeu this year, as well as following Chicago Bears' Burnham Park project and their plans to use a stadium as a catalyst for regeneration. The new stadiums have vast screens and make Old Trafford look cramped, but what of their soul?

Change is in the air, but fans will hope that a beer won't cost £14, nor that £80 will be required to park your car, as it is at the SoFi. While Premier League football is increasingly popular in the US, and long-time fans can

Clockwise from below left "It'd be Ruud not to"; Ratcliffe (left) has recruited Brailsford (right) to help Ten Hag (centre); eleven brave souls run the pre-season injury gauntlet; SoFi, so good

now watch every match at home, the exact demand to see Europe's biggest club is not always easy to measure precisely.

Tickets to see Manchester United against Arsenal are subjected to dynamic pricing – that is, they go up and down according to demand – and those behind the goal halved in price from \$240 in the 24 hours before the game. That's a well that top clubs keep drinking from. The attendance is an impressive 62,486 – just 10,000 short of the crowd that watched the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup Final – and includes Arsenal fan Justin Bieber as well as singer Niall Horan, who plays at the adjacent LA forum after the match. Bieber tries to stay incognito in a suite but gets recognised; fans lower shirts from the seats above for him to sign.

One person who doesn't try to look anonymous comes in a blue Manchester City shirt, but the American crowd lacks the aggression and naked tribalism of an English equivalent. People barely notice.

It isn't just the main SoFi stadium that's on the new regime's radar. Manchester United's new CEO, Omar Berrada (previously at Manchester City), new chief communications officer Toby Craig (previously at Manchester City and Chelsea) and chief operating officer Collette Roche visit the newly opened Cosm adjacent to the SoFi before the Arsenal game. Smaller and less famous than

Las Vegas' Sphere, Cosm is an immersive space holding 2,000 people and has a giant screen offering 'shared reality'. If Manchester United are building anew, it's not a stretch to say that a Cosm-type venue at Old Trafford would work. Fans could watch games there, surrounded by the action. There's also a 6,000-capacity YouTube theatre.

After LA, United make the short flight down the Pacific coast to San Diego, to face Real Betis in a far-from-sold-out Snapdragon Stadium. Snapdragon technology powers cars, VR glasses, phones and PCs; it's owned by Qualcomm Technologies, who have their headquarters in San Diego. Snapdragon have recently become Manchester United's shirt sponsors and are delighted at their raised profile. They became the first company to state that they would be interested in putting their name to any new Old Trafford. All of that happens while the team are in the US.

STRAIGHT INTO COMPTON

The team rush back to the airport following their 3-2 victory over Betis. They must be in the air by an 11.30pm curfew, or return to LA by coach. They make it. The next morning, club officials, Ten Hag and players attend a breakfast put on by the British American Business Council of LA, along with the UK ▶

Consulate office in LA. Attendees hear that the UK is now the single largest foreign investor in the state of California. They are told how Manchester United approach commercial deals and always look to strike a balance for what is best economically for the club, while also being aware of the club's overall brand, ethos and the place it occupies in world sport.

Much is said about the vast opportunities that the US presents. It's the largest most professionalised sports market in the world, and from a football, Manchester United and Premier League point of view, they see nothing but continued growth. NBC, the current Premier League rights holders in the US, was referenced multiple times as a good partner to help all parties.

They also discussed how the club wants to maintain a healthy presence in markets such as the US by not only visiting on pre-season tours and taking the advance fees paid by a promoter, but by working with local supporters' clubs to maintain a presence all year round, as they look to support and grow the fanbase. To do that, the club hold Love United events in cities as diverse as LA or Mumbai, sending legendary former players to meet and greet fans and watch a game together. Liverpool do similar.

Andy Cole, Denis Irwin and Wes Brown travel with the team, as does Bryan Robson, who is spotted in conversation with Ten Hag. "We agreed on our favourite two restaurants in Hale, where we both live, before we spoke about football," Robson tells *FFT*. The FA Cup trophy has been brought along, too, as the legends glad-hand fans and sponsors, hold question-and-answer sessions, and visit those less privileged as part of their community outreach.

Manchester United go to the hard-bitten Compton to meet the Compton Cowboys,

Below Nag herds with attitude
Bottom Zirkzee is the latest addition to United's attack

a crew who work with horses to provide a positive influence on inner-city youth, combat negative and historically inaccurate narratives surrounding the area, and pay homage to Black Americans in Western and equine heritage. Kids are taught to ride and keep horses. It's smart.

But Manchester United are also better now at knowing the few fans who have travelled from the UK to support the team. Those supporters are informed of training sessions they can attend. The players – or, at least, those doing media rather than remaining silent because their Manchester United futures are in doubt – stay on message.

"The tour has been really good – it's always good to come to the USA, train and see our

fans," Maguire tells *FFT*. "You see just how big the club is when you come to places like this, and the worldwide support that we have."

Maguire also speaks of his own situation, having missed Euro 2024 due to injury. "The last couple of months have been a real disappointment for me – one of the toughest moments of my career to date," he says. "I'm just happy to be back to play my first game in three months. I got into a good place mentally and physically last season with my form, but then my body broke down on me."

Every player has their own story and their own hopes for the season ahead. As well as Yoro, United have added 23-year-old Dutch forward Joshua Zirkzee to their ranks.

"Everyone is optimistic in pre-season and at United, you hope that with all of the changes, something positive comes from them," Evans says. "It was unfortunate with Leny that he got an injury straight away, but everyone is looking forward to see how Joshua gets on, how he integrates into the team and adapts, because the schedule gets busy pretty quickly."

The Red Devils touch down in Manchester with just five days of training before taking on their City rivals in the Community Shield. This is a new Manchester United, yet it's difficult to assess from the tour how good the new Manchester United are, without being swayed by that natural pre-season optimism that Evans talks of.

There were bright points. Mason Mount is playing again, though the feeling within the club is that he still needs to assist or score more. Sancho is back in the fold, for now. Rashford looked focused in America and the tour was positive for young players including Toby Collyer and 17-year-old Harry Amass.

Manchester United feel that Yoro and Zirkzee are young, exciting, developing talents who will replace older players on higher wages, in Raphael Varane and Anthony Martial. That's the direction in which the club want to take their squad. Ten Hag was integral to both signings, though he is fine with working with Ashworth, Wilcox and other new people around him. It's not as if Manchester United's recruitment has worked especially well over the past decade.

Ratcliffe asked for patience from fans; there's little of that from online supporters of the super-clubs, who tend to expect instant gratification, yet the decision-makers, led by INEOS, enjoy a fair wind because they're not the Glazers, because Ratcliffe is putting money into infrastructure and players rather than taking it out, and because he has been hugely successful in business. There's faith in the Mancunian from most that he wants to make a real difference and return the club to glory. If not, why is he bothering?

Manchester United's star has dimmed and eighth-placed finishes are not acceptable, but just as Liverpool played in front of 90,000 spectators in Melbourne a decade ago having finished seventh, so the Red Devils retain vast worldwide appeal. And if the resurgence takes longer than fans hope, at least Manchester United beat Liverpool in the race back to the airport in South Carolina. ●

"EVERYONE'S LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING HOW JOSHUA ZIRKZEE ADAPTS, BECAUSE THE SCHEDULE GETS BUSY PRETTY QUICKLY"



SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

Discover cover options for car, home and travel insurance, plus broadband and more.



GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.go.compare).



30 WORST STARTS EVER

FFT recalls the most disastrous beginnings to a campaign, via protests, torched cars... and Alan Carr's dad

Words Tom Hancock



30 MARSEILLE

There's never a dull moment when Marcelo Bielsa is involved, as l'OM learned when the passionate Argentine led them into Ligue 1's 2015-16 season. Marseille lost their opener 1-0 at home to Caen and Bielsa immediately resigned, saying, "I have completed my work here". A tad dramatic? For him, not really.

DID THEY TURN IT AROUND? Well... sort of. Marseille eventually finished 13th – their lowest league placing in 15 years.

29 BOURNEMOUTH

Several clubs found themselves in a pickle at the start of the 2008-09 League Two season: Luton were docked a whopping 30 points while Rotherham and Bournemouth were deducted 17. The Cherries looked doomed to non-league after winning just three of their first 18 matches, but then they appointed a first-time boss by the name of Eddie Howe...

DID THEY TURN IT AROUND? Indeed! They avoided relegation with a game to spare.

Clockwise from top left A rare shot of Bielsa at Marseille; Gretna were "living the dream" – then a nightmare; Dover and out; Sampdoria wave goodbye to Serie A; Eddie Howe, Cherries' cheeky chappy

28 AIRBUS UK BROUGHTON

The works team of the local aircraft factory, Airbus UK Broughton failed to take off at the start of the 2022-23 Cymru Premier season. They lost 30 of their 32 league fixtures in the Welsh top flight, winning none, ultimately finishing on -4 points having been deducted six – a terminal decline, you could say.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Managing to field ineligible players on two separate occasions, hence the points deductions.

27 SAMPDORIA

Italian champions, Coppa Italia winners and European Cup finalists in the '90s, Sampdoria found themselves in dire straits in 2022-23. Amid off-field problems that almost led to bankruptcy, La Samp lost seven and drew three of their first 10 Serie A matches, recording their first win as late as October.

DID THEY TURN IT AROUND? No. They finished well adrift of safety, then made an awful start in Serie B under Andrea Pirlo.

26 GREтна

Gretna were in dreamland in 2007, having completed a remarkable rise from the fourth tier of Scottish football to the top flight in three years. Little did they know the end was near – Gretna lost 11 of their first 13 Scottish Premier League games, while owner Brooks Mileson withdrew his backing due to illness.

DID THEY TURN IT AROUND? By 'the end', we mean the end of the club: Gretna finished bottom of the league and then went bust.

25 DOVER

Dover began their 2021-22 National League campaign on -12 points as they had failed to fulfil their 2020-21 fixtures amid the financial strain of COVID-19, and yet it wasn't so much a poor start as an entirely horrendous season – they first won in late January, at the 25th time of asking, and then just once after that.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Leading 5-2 away at high-flying, Hollywood-owned Wrexham and 5-4 in stoppage time... before losing 6-5.



24 SHEFFIELD UNITED

Sheffield United took four points from their opening 16 First Division games in 1990-91, failing to secure a win until their final home match of 1990. They fared much better in the new year, winning seven on the spin and ultimately finishing 13th, safe by 12 points.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Following another poor start in 1991-92, boss Dave Bassett moved the 1992 Christmas party forward to August, figuring they'd then improve earlier. They did.

23 FORTUNA DUSSELDORF

Fortuna Dusseldorf couldn't have made a more miserable start to the 1991-92 Bundesliga season, losing six out of six and sacking Josef Hickersberger. It wasn't a good year for Hickersberger, who'd been appointed there after quitting as Austria's manager following a defeat to the Faroe Islands – the North Atlantic minnows' first ever win.

DID THEY RECOVER? They got better (how could they not?) but did still finish bottom.

22 BRECHIN CITY

Playing in Scotland's second tier for the first time in 11 years, Brechin found it tough going in 2017-18, picking up four points from their first 20 games. Even that proved to be the part-timers' only points of the campaign, as they became the first side since 1892 to go winless for a whole Scottish league season.

THEY SAID "We'll go down as a better team," said chairman Ken Ferguson. Brechin were in non-league within three years.

21 CRYSTAL PALACE

Crystal Palace appointed Frank de Boer to replace Sam Allardyce for the 2017-18 season. They soon wished they hadn't. The Dutchman oversaw four consecutive defeats in the league, with Palace failing to score a single goal, and De Boer was swiftly fired.

DID THEY RECOVER? Yup. Roy Hodgson was more pragmatic and – having first extended Palace's run to seven losses without scoring – ultimately guided the Eagles up to 11th.



20 DONCASTER

Donny's 1997-98 campaign began with a 20-game winless stretch and ended in relegation... and chairman Ken Richardson awaiting trial for hiring three men to set fire to the club's Belle Vue ground. The Yorkshire outfit dropped into the Conference with a Football League record of 34 defeats.

THEY SAID "A devious man" – Richardson, in the words of the judge who convicted him for conspiracy to commit arson.

19 FC GRENCHEN

Grenchen made a nightmarish start to the Swiss fourth tier's 2014-15 campaign, a run of nine consecutive defeats culminating in a 10-0 drubbing by FC Luzern's youth team. They managed only one win and picked up just five points from a possible 78, finishing last with 16 goals scored and 147 conceded.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Sporting director Renato Brun went nuclear after the loss to Luzern's kids and fired the whole team.

Clockwise from top left "IIIIIT'S AUUUGUUUST!"; De Boer soon got de boot; Donny weren't on fire; an unFortuna-te Hickersberger



18



15



14

WORST STARTS



17



13

18 BOLTON

Being a founder member of the Football League in 1888 meant nothing when Bolton were almost booted out in 2019. Fighting financial oblivion, the Trotters had just five senior players registered for their first few League One fixtures and, having miraculously drawn 0-0 with Coventry before then, lost consecutive games 5-0, 5-0, 5-0 and 6-1.

DID THEY RECOVER? Starting on -12, Bolton finished last in a COVID-truncated campaign.

17 GREUTHER FURTH

Playing in the German top flight for just the second time, in 2021-22, Greuther Furth set a record for the worst Bundesliga start by taking one point from their first 14 outings. The Bavarians lost 5-1 to Stuttgart on the opening weekend but drew with Arminia Bielefeld... then lost 12 on the bounce.

DID THEY RECOVER? Not really, winning just three times in all, although a final return of 18 points was at least *slightly* respectable.

Clockwise from top left Bolton's kids found life tough; a result to forget for Ajax; Canaries in tears; Ancona's Dino Baggio; hurt for Furth

16 LOUGHBOROUGH

Loughborough's tally of eight points in their final Second Division campaign in 1899-1900 is a Football League record that is unlikely to be broken without points deductions. The Leicestershire club had to wait until January to clinch their sole victory in a season in which they shipped 100 goals in 34 games.

DID YOU KNOW? 1900 didn't just mark the end of Loughborough's time in the Football League – the club ceased to exist altogether.

15 AJAX

Even one of the most successful clubs in European football history aren't immune to a shocking start, as Ajax discovered last season. The perennial Dutch champs went into November 2023 bottom of the Eredivisie table, having just lost 5-2 to PSV for a fifth straight defeat – a club record in the top tier.

LOW POINT Being spanked 4-0 at home by rivals Feyenoord in a match abandoned due to fan violence, and finished days later.

14 NORWICH

In 2009, Norwich hit their lowest point in half a century when they were relegated to the third tier of English football. Things soon deteriorated further: they were eviscerated 7-1 at home by Colchester on opening day, and a father-and-son supporter duo threw their season tickets at manager Bryan Gunn.

DID THEY RECOVER? And some! Replacing Gunn with Colchester's gaffer, Paul Lambert, Norwich won back-to-back promotions.

13 ANCONA

Surprisingly promoted from Serie B in 2003, Ancona tried to improve their Serie A survival chances by making no fewer than 18 signings, including stars such as Dino Baggio and Mario Jardel. It didn't work: the side from Italy's Adriatic coast were winless until April, in their 28th match of the campaign.

DID YOU KNOW? Six years after that miserable episode, Ancona went bust. The phoenix club lasted just seven years, too.



12 CHELTENHAM

Cheltenham made Football League history at the start of the 2023-24 season. They failed to score in their first 11 League One outings, finally finding the net against Derby in October – up to then, their only strike in any competition had been a Bristol Rovers own goal in the Football League Trophy.

DID THEY RECOVER? Almost! Under Darrell Clarke, who replaced Wade Elliott, the Robins fought hard but succumbed on the final day.

11 CHELSEA

In 2015-16, the reigning Premier League champions unravelled from day one: Chelsea drew 2-2 with Swansea, and Jose Mourinho – days after signing a new deal – laid into club doctor Eva Carneiro for treating Eden Hazard when Mourinho felt he wasn't really injured.

DID THEY RECOVER? When Jose was finally fired in mid-December, Chelsea were a point above the drop zone, with nine losses in 16. Interim boss Guus Hiddink led them to 10th.

10 ALMERIA

Having narrowly avoided relegation in 2022-23, Almeria hoped to kick on and cement their top-flight status. Instead, the Rojiblanco went 28 games from the start of the season without winning, even throwing away a 2-0 lead over Real Madrid in January, duly setting an unwanted record in La Liga.

DID YOU KNOW? Almeria didn't triumph at home until the final weekend of the campaign – when they thrashed Cadiz 6-1.

09 MANCHESTER UNITED

Back in the early 1930s, Manchester United were far from the dominant force they went on to become. They began the 1930-31 First Division campaign by losing their first 12 games – still an English top-flight record – and went down 6-0 and 7-4 at home to Huddersfield and Newcastle respectively.

DID THEY RECOVER? Unsurprisingly, no. The Red Devils were relegated after finishing bottom of the pile with 115 goals conceded.

Clockwise from top left The end for Cheltenham; Almeria weren't good; Benevento got off the mark in style; it's Alan Carr's dad; Eva Carneiro (right), doing her job

08 BENEVENTO

Benevento's maiden Serie A campaign in 2017-18 was as good as over by December, beginning with a run of 14 consecutive defeats. Their first point of the season was well worth the wait, however, as the Witches snatched a draw against Italian giants Milan through a brilliant stoppage-time header from their goalkeeper, Alberto Brignoli.

THEY SAID "I went up there, closed my eyes and jumped" – Brignoli makes it sound easy.

07 MAIDSTONE

The Stones never got up and running at the start of the 1992-93 Fourth Division season. Boss Graham Carr, the dad of comedian Alan, had left amid mounting financial problems; the club had just two players and no ground, and were liquidated before a ball was kicked.

DID YOU KNOW? Before going out of business, Maidstone had a mad plan blocked to relocate the club to the North East and merge with Newcastle Blue Star.



06

01



04



03

WORST STARTS



01

06 SHEFFIELD UNITED

Having bounced back up, Sheffield United hoped to make it stick in 2023-24. In fact, a single point from their first 10 games set a record for the worst start to a Premier League campaign – Derby’s historically bad 2007-08 side had amassed six points by then. **LOW POINT** September’s 8-0 demolition by Newcastle at Bramall Lane, featuring eight different goalscorers, was the worst league defeat in the Blades’ 134-year history.

05 IBIS

At the end of the '70s and start of the '80s, Brazilian lower-league outfit Ibis went three years and 11 months without tasting victory – a Guinness World Record. Embracing the ‘worst team in the world’ tag, some fans weren’t overjoyed when they ended another barren run in the 2010s with a few wins. **THEY SAID** “This is destroying our history” – protest leader Nilsinho Filho after an unexpected good sequence of results.

Clockwise from top left Blades making history; Stuart Pearce – a wise old head; fireworks at Pescara; dead and Buryed

04 LONGFORD

Midway through the 2015-16 season, Longford turned to Stuart Pearce as their saviour. The England and Nottingham Forest legend, then 53, had been retired for 14 years when he penned a one-match deal with the Gloucestershire non-leaguers, who had lost every game of the season until then. **DID THEY RECOVER?** In Pearce’s solitary appearance, Longford were only beaten 1-0 by Wotton, but lost every remaining match.

03 PESCARA

Pescara won just once during the first half of the 2016-17 Serie A campaign... and they were awarded those three points because their opponents, Sassuolo, fielded an ineligible player. Things didn’t get much better – the Delfini recorded two ‘proper’ victories all season, finishing rock-bottom. **WEIRDEST MOMENT** Supporters attacked the club’s Christmas party with fireworks and set fire to two of the president’s cars.

02 FORT WILLIAM

Based in the foothills of Ben Nevis, Fort William endured two particularly bad Highland League seasons in 2017-18 and 2018-19, going two campaigns and 707 days without a win. They spent the entire latter season on minus points after fielding ineligible players and conceded 245 goals. **DID THEY RECOVER?** They finally recorded a league win in September 2019, then dropped into the North Caledonian League.

01 BURY

The Shakers were on a high in the summer of 2019, having been promoted back to League One. Then disaster struck. Beset by serious financial issues, the club were unable to start the season and the EFL eventually booted them out, bringing an end to Bury’s 125-year Football League history. **DID THEY RECOVER?** Bloodied but unbowed, Bury regrouped in the ninth tier in 2023-24 and began making the long journey back.

“

I WAS REJECTED NINE TIMES AS A YOUNGSTER...
THEN I FOUND MYSELF WINNING THE WORLD CUP
AGAIN, WITH PELE HANDING ME THE TROPHY.
I COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED IT

”

Only one man has played in three consecutive World Cup finals – and Cafu won two of them. The iconic Brazilian shares his outstanding career with *FourFourTwo*, including the time he almost joined Chelsea

Words Marcus Alves





ORDEM E PRO

Cafu couldn't believe his ears. He had just been introduced at half-time by Carlo Ancelotti to play his final 45 minutes in a Milan shirt, as he bid farewell to Rossoneri supporters in May 2008 following five seasons at San Siro. It was then that he heard the question that still shocks him to this day.

"What are you smiling about?" referee Roberto Rosetti asked, while showing the veteran right-back a yellow card during Milan's 4-1 win over Udinese. It took a few seconds for Cafu to fully understand what had confused Rosetti – after all, a broad smile had been his trademark during his stunning career. He once said that if it were up to him, he would live on a football pitch.

"Without a smile, I'm a dead man," the 54-year-old tells *FourFourTwo* today. "You'd never see me without a smile during a game, not even if an official made a wrong penalty call. There are several ways to convince them to reconsider a decision. You can complain, you can swear, you can be aggressive, but you'll only annoy them by behaving like that.

"I can tell you that I probably deserved to be yellow-carded way more than I was for some of the fouls I did, but I wasn't because I had a smile on my face.

"A smile goes a long way."

THE GALACTICO THAT NEVER WAS

Cafu certainly had plenty to smile about in his playing days. Not in his wildest dreams did he ever think he would leave Jardim Irene – a favela in Sao Paulo where, at one point, he lived in a single-bedroom house with his parents and five siblings – to conquer the world and have a red carpet to walk on wherever he travels. He overcame many a failed trial to find a club in his formative years, before becoming arguably the best right-back of all-time.

He can only chuckle when asked how he feels when people call him that. "It makes me happy," Cafu explains. "It's impossible to translate into words how proud and honoured I feel when I get that kind of recognition, especially when you bear in mind that Brazil alone – and I'm not even bringing names from other countries to the table – had legends such as Carlos Alberto, Leandro and Jorginho playing in my position in the past. It blows my mind.

"But, in truth, do you know why it feels like this? Because, honestly, I never thought I would achieve everything that I achieved during my career. I pictured myself becoming a footballer, yes, winning trophies with my club, getting to the national team, playing in a World Cup and bringing it home.

"All of that, I pictured myself doing. But if you'd asked me if I could imagine becoming

the only man in history to have played in three consecutive finals? No, I couldn't. Or wearing the captain's armband and lifting the 2002 trophy? No, I couldn't. Or being Brazil's most-capped player ever? No, I couldn't. Or featuring in 20 World Cup games? Again: no, I couldn't. I didn't plan any of that. It all happened naturally."

There's no way that Cafu could have planned it when he found himself approaching 18 years old and still playing Sunday football with cameramen and other employees from one of Brazil's largest television networks, Bandeirantes, every weekend. It was in one of those games, however, that he got himself on the radar of a third-tier side called Itaquaquecetuba. He ended up signing for them, then a while afterwards came a turning point in his life, as they were invited to play a friendly against Sao Paulo's youth team.

Sao Paulo had already been rejected Cafu at three trials, so he knew it could be his last chance to impress them. And that he did, receiving an offer at the final whistle to spend a month training with them, before they made a decision on whether they wanted to keep him at the club. Such was the pressure of the whole situation, he didn't even tell his parents about it until he was finally approved and could start a new chapter in his career.

"I don't hold a grudge against anyone for saying 'no' in the past," Cafu recalls. "What happened, happened, and that's it. It's not easy to be told at such a young age that you're being released for your own good, but it makes you stronger. My only reaction was to say 'Thank you' and leave. I never really got angry and reacted in a way that I would regret afterwards.

"I always believed in my potential because I knew that, in football, not always the best stood out, but instead the most dedicated and disciplined one – the professional athlete in the true sense of the term, and not a mere footballer. If you asked me to cross 15 balls, I'd cross them with a smile on my face, as happy as I could be, because that would help to improve my game.

"That was the mentality that Tele Santana demanded from you at Sao Paulo. He was one of the most annoying managers you could have, but in a good way. He was annoying with those who had potential and could do more. I always told the other boys that the day he stopped nagging you, then something would be wrong. I always listened to his advice."

Under the legendary coach, who had previously led Brazil's memorable 1982 World Cup side, Cafu won it all at Sao Paulo, including the Brazilian league, the Copa Libertadores twice and the Intercontinental Cup twice. It was also at this time that he had a career-changing moment, switching from the right side of midfield to right-back due to an other player's injury.

Although he wasn't too excited about it at first, that decision would soon pay off. The 20-year-old was called up by the national team for the first time and was strongly



Above Yes, Cafu was young once
Above right The clothing brand, Makakooo, was launched with the mission of fighting racism across the globe





linked to Real Madrid. The Spanish giants even travelled to Brazil to secure his signature but had to return home empty-handed, much to the dismay of Cafu.

"I could have played for Real Madrid," he explains. "We had several meetings, but Sao Paulo were preparing for the Intercontinental Cup and refused to let me go, arguing that I was a key piece for the team. Of course I was flattered to hear that, but at the same time, it was Real Madrid – you don't know if they're coming for you twice, right? I wish I could have played for them.

"So what did they do? As they couldn't return without a full-back, they signed another player on loan – Vitor – but told Sao Paulo that Vitor wouldn't stay there long and that they'd take me when he returned. Unfortunately, things worked out differently."

Despite the frustration, Cafu remained focused, shining for Sao Paulo the same way he had always done and being crowned South America's best player in 1994. That same year, he fulfilled his dream of being picked for the Brazil squad for the World Cup. He was supposed to only be a back-up option to his idol, Jorginho, but in the final against Italy, the Bayern Munich right-back felt discomfort early in the first half and had to be replaced. Seleccion boss Carlos Alberto Parreira immediately called for Cafu.

"When Jorginho put his hand on his thigh for the first time," Cafu recalls now, "Parreira turned to the bench and asked, 'Cafu, are you ready?' I need you to warm up'. I was like, 'I'm already warmed up'. I had been training, waiting for this chance, for 32 days.

"For someone who assumed that they were going to the World Cup only to gain

experience, to all of a sudden have the opportunity to play on such a stage, and replace the man you admired, was a lot to process. I've always respected the hierarchy; I knew that was Jorginho's moment. But I knew that when my moment came, I wouldn't let anyone steal it from me. That was the beginning for me."

IL PENDOLINO ON THE MOVE

After winning the final via a penalty shoot-out, Cafu headed back to Sao Paulo, then finally left for Europe in the winter to join Real Zaragoza. He arrived in Spain as a World Cup winner but struggled to get the expected minutes, partly because of the competition provided by local hero Alberto Belsue, and also because of the three foreigners limit. Surprisingly, Cafu lasted just six months there and returned to Brazil to sign for Juventude, then Palmeiras – both clubs owned by the Parmalat company.

It would take another couple of seasons for Cafu to have a second taste of European football, with no looking back this time. He hit the ground running for Roma despite arriving relatively late in his career, aged 27, and not knowing a single word in Italian prior to the move. The Giallorossi played their part.

"They could have put me with Aldair to share a room, but instead they placed me with [Georgia-born Russia international] Omari Tetradze," Cafu explains. "We would spend 24 hours looking at each other and watching games, unable to have any kind of conversation. That was some experience. But it encouraged me to learn the language way faster and feel much more at home." ▶



Left Cracking away kit, even better player
 Right USA 94, when Ronaldo was Ronaldinho
 Below right Sao Paulo moving Cafu to full-back worked out well



"IN THE USA 94 FINAL, PARREIRA SAID, 'WARM UP'. I ALREADY WAS. I'D BEEN WAITING FOR THIS"



Such was the full-back's impact in the Eternal City, he earned the nickname *Il Pendolino* ('The Express Train') from fans for his runs down the right flank. He'd reach the peak of his six seasons there in 2000-01 when he helped Roma to win only their third Serie A title, and their first in 18 years.

"Our team was amazing – truly incredible," he tells *FFT*. "We had Gabriel Batistuta, Vincenzo Montella and Marco Delvecchio in attack, Francesco Totti and Marcos Assuncao in midfield, plus Aldair, Zago, Walter Samuel and Vincent Candela at the back. There was so much talent everywhere.

"But we had to beat other sensational sides. Serie A was arguably the best league in Europe then. The main favourites were Milan, Juventus, Lazio, Parma and Inter. After winning the first five games, however, we said in the dressing room, 'We might have a shot at winning this'. And we did. That was really special."

At the end of the season, his fourth in Italy, Cafu had an important decision to make: stay at Roma or accept an offer from Chelsea. As tempted as the Brazilian was by a move to Stamford Bridge, Roma president Franco Sensi didn't allow him to join Frank Lampard, William Gallas, Emmanuel Petit and Boudewijn Zenden in being recruited by Claudio Ranieri that summer.

"Chelsea made an official approach, but Sensi told them, 'Forget about it – nobody takes our boys from here and we are going to keep this team for a long time,'" Cafu recalls. "He used to say that we were all his children. It would have been a nice experience to play in the Premier League – in 2001 it was already one of the biggest leagues at the time – but we couldn't reach a deal.

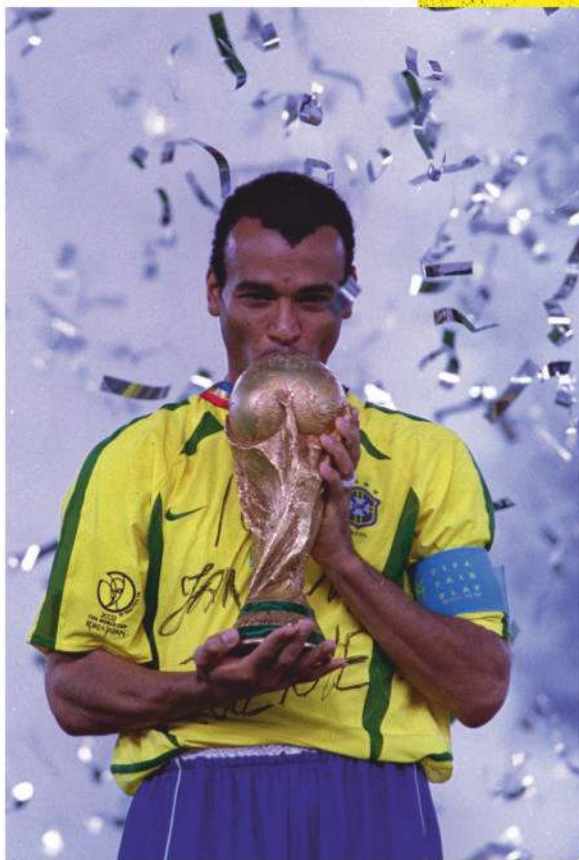
"I still follow it and I love watching Kevin De Bruyne – he plays with such ease, it's impressive. I'm a Liverpool fan, though. I've visited the club a few times and I enjoy their history, their stadium atmosphere, their songs. I even got the chance to meet Jon Flanagan, who was dubbed 'the next Cafu', and we took a picture together. I still remember that day."

"HOLD YOUR HORSES, PELE"

Cafu was no longer the inexperienced boy from the 1994 World Cup who couldn't thrive at Zaragoza and returned home at the earliest opportunity. He was one of the world's best full-backs, and a leader for a Brazil side who reached the World Cup final again in 1998, then another in 2002.

"I was a different footballer," he agrees. "It's one thing to be a substitute for your national team: you do your best in a game and if it works, OK, and if it doesn't, you're not the starter anyway. You return to the bench for the next match and that's it. But to have the status of an undisputed starter, as I had in 1998, is a much bigger responsibility.

"That year, we reached another World Cup final, but couldn't win it against France. I wouldn't say it was frustrating, though, because that would have been getting kicked out in the group stage or the last 16.



"I could offer you a series of excuses for that defeat – Ronaldo feeling sick, having a convulsion, an epileptic fit, how it made the team nervous and unable to play the same way – but we have to remember that we faced a difficult opponent who had their best performance of the tournament that day, while we had our worst. Unfortunately, we conceded three goals the way we did: two one of them from dead balls, both scored from Zinedine Zidane, who had never scored a header in his career.

"When we arrived back in Brazil, the fans acknowledged our efforts and supported us. It was a totally different mood compared to the one we had when we left for Japan and South Korea in 2002. We were not a kind-of discredited team by the Brazilian people, but a totally discredited one. If anyone comes to me now and tells me they believed in us, I'll answer right away: 'You're lying.' No one believed in us. We had qualified only in the last game, amid giant pressure.

"But the captain's role is to reverse situations like that. I told everyone, 'I have

been here before and there's only one way to bring the fans back to our side: by winning our first match at the tournament. If you fail to do that, they'll be saying, 'See, I told you so!' So, that first game was key for us. We had to find a way to win – and we did."

Despite some Rivaldo-based drama in that opener against Turkey, Brazil progressed to the quarter-finals to face England. Winning all four previous games, and scoring 13 goals in the process, meant Selecao supporters were by their side once again. Coming from behind to secure a place in the semi-finals after Michael Owen's opening goal was some test for Cafu and his team-mates, however.

"Ronaldinho's free-kick is naturally mentioned when we discuss that day," he recalls, "but, for me, one of the crucial moments happened before that in the first half, when Lucio failed to control a ball and Owen scored. We couldn't afford to lose Lucio, so our job was to bring him back to his best. We kept telling him, 'We need you; we are here with you; don't let your head drop, forget about the goal as it's already in the past; we have the entire game to win this but we can only do it if you're well, brother, so let's go together'. It all worked out. That made me believe we could win the title."

Beating Germany in the final remains Cafu's favourite memory, along with lifting the trophy the way he did – by climbing onto a small glass podium while precariously wearing his studs, assisted by Pele.

"Did you see what I did?" the legendary No.2 laughs. "I told Pele to wait to give me the trophy. That was Pele, man... even my father spoke to me about it. But I was blind – I climbed on the podium and could have cracked it with my boots, but I didn't care, I wasn't really thinking it through. That's the only explanation for asking Pele to wait. I was just too excited!

"To have been rejected in nine trials early in my career, hearing people say that I would never become a footballer, and find myself in that moment, winning the World Cup again and having Pele handing me the trophy – that was just too much. It felt like I didn't need anything else in life."

As a two-time World Cup winner, Cafu was welcomed back at Roma but then, having been told that the club wanted to focus on younger players from the following season onwards, he decided to return to the place that had made him the happiest: Japan, the venue of that 2002 World Cup win.

JAPAN OR MILAN?

Cafu had agreed a pre-contract to join Yokohama F Marinos in mid-2003. Then something he hadn't envisaged happened.

"I was definitely moving to Japan – I had already received part of the money and everything was ready," Cafu admits. "But then Leonardo called me to say that Ariedo Braidà [Milan's sporting director] needed to speak with me. I thought, 'They might want to ask me about some player'. I met them in Rome and Leo told me, 'Carlo Ancelotti wants you'. I said, 'But I'm 32, Leo'. He



“WHEN ANCELOTTI TOLD ME TO REST, I FOUGHT WITH HIM, SAYING, ‘I DON’T NEED TO REST – I’M NOT OLD YET’”

insisted. He said, ‘Ancelotti wants you and Adriano Galliani already said that they don’t accept “no” as an answer’. I was surprised. I said, ‘Are you sure about this? Don’t you prefer a younger player?’ But they were really persistent, saying, ‘No, no, Ancelotti wants you to play at least 12 games a season’.

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m not going there to play only 12 times a year, but let’s see what happens.’ I warned them about my Yokohama situation and told them that if they were serious about the offer, I would call Yokohama, explain the whole thing, apologise and send their money back. I went to the bank that same afternoon and, less than 24 hours later, the reimbursement was with them. I was 32 and this was Milan – it was almost impossible to reject.

“I ended up spending five years with them, playing nearly every game in four. When Ancelotti told me to rest, I fought with him, saying, ‘I don’t need to rest – I’m not old yet’. I played the same way I’d always done.”

“I was a bold type of full-back, who wasn’t afraid of playing, dribbling, defending,

Top left Cafu was part of a very, very, very good Roma side
Left Just out of shot, Cafu is kicking Pele off the podium
Above Lifting the Champions League trophy in 2007 with Milan meant he had won everything there was to win

hearing what the press would say. I was never afraid of playing. I’ve always said, ‘I’ll impose my rhythm, and that’s that’. Lots of people used to say I didn’t mark players, but you hardly ever saw someone scoring on my back. Sometimes, you’d hear a coach telling the two full-backs not to attack and I was like, ‘Are you staying behind, Roberto Carlos?’ He’d say, ‘Of course not’. I’d say, ‘And neither will I’. You have three centre-backs and two defensive midfielders, so what’s the point of doing that? I read the game very well, though, so I knew when to go forward.”

So why Brazil don’t produce world-class full-backs any more? “Because instead of bringing our creativity to European football, we’re just copying them,” Cafu says. “People used to come to Brazil and Argentina all of the time, looking for players, because of our talent, our dribbling, our capacity to do the unthinkable, our joy of playing football. Now we want to be like Europe. That’s why we find ourselves at a lower level in recent years.”

The two-time world champion, once described by Alex Ferguson as having ‘two

hearts’, retired in 2008, signing off against Udinese with that aforementioned booking and a rare goal. He remains an omnipresent figure in football through numerous projects, the latest being Makakoo, a clothing brand launched with the mission of fighting racism in Brazil and around the world. *Macaco* is the Portuguese word for monkey.

“Thankfully I’ve never suffered racism in football, but the issue is there and it’s up to us to do something about it,” Cafu explains. “That’s a matter of education. A child isn’t born a racist, saying people are different from others – they repeat what they hear.

“That’s a society problem, but what happens in a stadium has 10 times bigger repercussions. We have a voice that is respected in football, so with this brand our goal is to say ‘no’ to racism and show we’re all equals. Fifteen per cent of our sales will be donated to organisations in Brazil, Colombia and Ghana.”

It’s a small step that can allow everyone to do what Cafu enjoyed doing the most throughout his remarkable career. Smile. 🍌

SOUTHAMPTON

WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN

Southampton needed just one season to return to the Premier League. Now they're back, and – just as they did following their last promotion there, in 2012 – they've come with potential future England internationals in tow

Words Chris Flanagan



After 101 minutes of action at Wembley in May, referee John Brooks blew his whistle. Adam Armstrong removed his shirt, twirling it above his head as he charged off to celebrate with Southampton's fans. It was the greatest moment of his career – he was the match-winner in the play-off final, sending the south coast club back into the Premier League.

One problem, though: Brooks had actually blown for a foul to Leeds, not for full-time. Armstrong sheepishly looked around, put his shirt back on and moved back into position. "I went too early, didn't I?" the striker laughs, recalling the moment to *FourFourTwo*. "I had looked at the scoreboard, we were past the amount of time the ref said he was going to play, then he blew his whistle. I was praying they wouldn't score from that free-kick – I would have been a meme for years..."

The incident went viral anyway, but by then, Armstrong didn't care. Leeds didn't score from that free kick, and within seconds the 27-year-old could celebrate promotion and the goal that made the headlines. "I've never had a feeling like that in football," he says, having slotted home the game's only goal after 24 minutes. "Will Smallbone slipped me through and I wasn't sure if I was offside or not, because there was VAR in the final. I just thought I would hit it as hard as I could across goal and hope it went in."

With 85,000 in the stands and a whole season at stake, his calmness made the difference. "They're pressure moments – before the game, the atmosphere gave me goosebumps," Armstrong explains. "But everything goes out of the window during the 90 minutes: you concentrate on what you've got to do. To score the winner at Wembley is what kids dream of. It's hard to put into words the feelings we went through that day. Maybe nothing will top it."

Now, Southampton have returned to the Premier League after a year away, determined to show they're there to stay.

REPAIRING THE WOUNDS

History is on Saints' side. They've been promoted to the top flight three times previously – after going up in 1966, they lasted eight years; after ascending in 1978, they survived for 27. Adam Lallana was part of the squad that reached the Premier League in 2012, having risen from League One with consecutive promotions. On that occasion, the club remained there 11 years.

"It's great to be back here in red and white," says the 36-year-old midfielder, looking fondly across the St Mary's pitch as he speaks to *FFT* at an event to model the club's new PUMA shirts. This term, he has returned to Southampton for a second spell on a 12-month contract, after previously moving on to join Liverpool, then Brighton.

"It was 10 years ago when I left," he says. "I've always had a special place for this club. My son is in the academy and we've lived in



the area for years. Back-to-back promotions were really special with the group we had in my first spell – Ipswich did it this year but it doesn't happen too often."

In Lallana's first stint, promotion wasn't the end of the story. Aided by the mid-season arrival of Mauricio Pochettino, replacing the double-promotion-winning Nigel Adkins, they quickly progressed to finish in the Premier League's top eight for four seasons in a row, twice qualifying for the Europa League and even beating Inter at St Mary's. And that was after finishing 14th in their first season up – a relatively comfortable league position, once they had climbed out of the drop zone at the halfway point.

"I'm not sure it felt comfortable!" confesses Lallana, who hopes to use his experience to help the club. "I've been speaking to a few of the younger players. I've been in this league for the last 12 seasons, so I know what's required to stay in the Premier League; what habits you need to see day in, day out on the training pitch, and the application you need.

"My message to Saints fans is that there are going to be tough moments, where we might have lost two or three on the bounce, when we need them to stay calm, stay behind the team and stay behind the manager. It's not going to be easy. But we've got good players and an unbelievable young coach. I'm quietly confident."

Former Scotland international Russell Martin – actually born and raised on the south coast, in Brighton – has impressed many onlookers in a fledgling managerial career that saw him implement an attractive brand of passing football at MK Dons and Swansea, then convert that into promotion



"IT'S GREAT TO BE BACK HERE. I'VE ALWAYS HAD A SPECIAL PLACE FOR THIS CLUB"

in his first season at Southampton, via a club-record, 25-match unbeaten run.

"He's got great ideas, he's so enthusiastic, and he's forward-thinking," Lallana says of his new boss, who is just two years his senior. "I knew before the end of last season that I was coming back here – the deal was agreed regardless of what league the club was in. But it was a huge bonus for me when the lads got promoted.



"I've loved my first few weeks back at the club. When you get to my age, you take it year by year. I don't know at this point how long I'll play on for – we'll see what happens towards the end of the season. I just want to enjoy this year as much as possible. I still feel I can offer something on the pitch and I can help the young players, too."

Lallana's £25m exit to Liverpool in the summer of 2014 came after he had just captained Southampton to eighth place under Pochettino. The midfielder was the second of six players to make the switch from St Mary's to Anfield over the course of four years, following Rickie Lambert and preceding Dejan Lovren, Nathaniel Clyne, Sadio Mané and Virgil van Dijk.

"That last season with Mauricio was special – I've never lost contact with him, as he was an enormous figure in helping to shape my career and a big reason why I got

Anti-clockwise from top left Armstrong puts Saints 1-0 up at Wembley; and celebrates too soon; Lallana is back in red and white; bouncing back at the first attempt

my move to Liverpool," says Lallana, who won the Champions League and the Premier League on Merseyside. "Not all of the fans were happy that I left, and it wasn't an easy decision, but I don't have any regrets. The trophies I won were a reward for hard work throughout my career, not just during my years at Liverpool, but to get promoted out of League One and the Championship with Southampton. I enjoyed my time at Liverpool – and I enjoyed my time at Brighton, too."

"It was bittersweet when I left here last time, but I can repair some of those wounds. I'll always give my utmost for this club."

"I'LL ACHIEVE MORE THAN MY DAD..."

Lallana was one of eight players from Southampton's 2012-13 campaign – their first back in the Premier League – who would go on to play for England at senior level. Also shortlisted for the PFA Player of the Year award in 2014, the midfielder represented the Three Lions at that summer's World Cup and Euro 2016, and scored the only goal of Sam Allardyce's one-match reign, in Slovakia.

The current squad has the potential to produce future England stars, too. Taylor Harwood-Bellis, the ball-playing centre-back who was four when Lallana made his first Southampton debut, captained England's under-21s to European glory last summer.

"That was unreal, winning a trophy for your country," the 22-year-old tells *FFT*. He emerged from the same Stockport Metro Junior League that produced Phil Foden and followed him to Manchester City, before making his debut under Pep Guardiola in a League Cup tie at Preston in 2019, aged 17.

"That gave me a lot of confidence," the defender says. "I only had a short time under Pep but I learned the calmness to play, and tactical knowledge. There are other ways to beat teams – not just kicking it as far as you can, but having the courage to play football."

Loan spells at Blackburn and Stoke followed, as well as link-ups with Vincent Kompany at Anderlecht and Burnley, whom he helped to automatic promotion in 2022. Many expected he'd return to Turf Moor and gain his first taste of Premier League football.

"I'm not going to lie: I wanted to go back to Burnley," Harwood-Bellis recalls. "But later ▶

SOUTHAMPTON

in the window, I found out it wasn't going to happen. I explored other options and I didn't want to turn down Southampton, because of the size of the club. It was a chance to get another promotion, and after speaking to the gaffer, it was a no-brainer."

Arriving on another season-long loan, Harwood-Bellis secured that second successive promotion. "Not many people have done that, so it's something to look back on and be proud of," he says. "I have learned a lot from the gaffer here. He tells me what I'm doing well and what I need to do better. I've still got more to learn."

As part of the deal agreed last summer, Southampton would make the loan move permanent for a £20m fee if they returned to the Premier League. "It couldn't have gone more perfectly," Harwood-Bellis says. "This was what I set out to do: to get my Premier League move, at a club I love playing for. This is where I see my long-term future. Every kid wants to play in the best league in the world – now I've got to stay there."

The defender has long been tipped as a future senior England international. This summer, he watched Cole Palmer score in the final of the Euro 2024, having played alongside his friend for Manchester City and in winning last year's Under-21 Euros. "I sent him a text during the Euros this summer to say that he was a pleasure to watch," Harwood-Bellis tells us. "We went to school together; he's a great guy and there was no doubt he was going to do what he has done, because he is a top player who works hard."

And also an inspiration to follow that path into the senior side himself one day? "I hope so – that's the aim," Harwood-Bellis says. "I'm hoping my time will come. But I've got to play in the Premier League first, and play at a high level. That's my focus right now."

This season, he has been joined at Southampton by a player he has sometimes partnered in central defence for England Under-21s: Nathan Wood, a £3m summer recruit from Swansea, where the 22-year-old played under Martin previously.

"I nearly came here last summer but it didn't happen for various reasons – that was a disappointment," Wood admits to *FFT*. "I was close to going to his MK Dons team when I was at Middlesbrough, too. It's massive when a manager believes in you, but especially as a young player. When you get that one person who believes in you and



gives you the chance you've been looking for, it does a lot for your confidence.

"The best thing about him is the detail he goes into – it massively improves you as a player. I definitely felt that at Swansea."

Playing against Martin's Southampton side last season was altogether more tricky. "It wasn't nice!" Wood says, laughing. "The game against them at St Mary's was my first game back for three months after injury, and it was 5-0. They were a really good team."

Like Harwood-Bellis, this is also Wood's debut Premier League season, although he has been highly rated since becoming Middlesbrough's youngest ever player, aged

Clockwise from top left Harwood-Bellis and his pal, Cole Palmer; Nathan Wood is in his first top-flight season; Harwood-Bellis lifts the Euros trophy after England beat Spain in the final... for the U21s in 2023

16, in 2018. He was born in the North East when his father – the former Crystal Palace and England Under-21 international, Dean Gordon – was a Boro player in the top flight.

Wood is determined to achieve even more as a footballer than his father did. "One hundred per cent – I will as well, he knows that!" the defender laughs. "He gives me bits of advice now and then. There was a point when I started playing week in, week out at Swansea that I respected the career he had, because as a kid you don't understand it until you're in those shoes. He played a lot of Premier League games – that's something I respect and hope to do as well.

SAINTS' ENGLAND EIGHT

An impressive number of Southampton's 2012-13 squad went on to make Three Lions debuts



AUGUST 2013
RICKIE LAMBERT



NOVEMBER 2013
ADAM LALLANA



NOVEMBER 2013
JAY RODRIGUEZ



FEBRUARY 2014
LUKE SHAW



SEPTEMBER 2014
CALUM CHAMBERS



NOVEMBER 2014
NATHANIEL CLYNE



MARCH 2017
JAMES WARD-Prowse



NOVEMBER 2017
JACK CORK

“Becoming Middlesbrough’s youngest player was amazing. It was one of the best moments of my life. At the time, you just go with it – you’re young and enjoying the ride. I’m still young now, but it’s six years ago, although it feels like yesterday. Coming to Southampton is a step up for me, but I feel like I can play at this level now. Everyone wants to be in the Premier League and wants to play for England. They’re my aims.”

FOLLOWING TONEY AND SOLANKE

Others in the Southampton squad may well have that same international ambition, too – among them another centre-back, Ronnie Edwards, who arrived this summer from Peterborough, and winger Samuel Edozie. Both played for England U20s last term.

Even at 27, Adam Armstrong hasn’t given up on his international dream either, having been part of the England squad that won the Under-20s World Cup in 2017.

Score some goals in the Premier League and it might not be too late: Lambert propelled Southampton to the top flight in 2012, then made his England debut at 31.

Armstrong began his career at Newcastle, on the club’s books at the same time as Ivan Toney, who dropped into the EFL before rising all the way to a role at Euro 2024. “It’s every kid’s dream to play for England, and I’m not going to sit here and say it isn’t,” Armstrong admits. “But it’s not something I’m thinking about now.”

Armstrong’s focus is on showing he can thrive on his second go at the top flight. After he had scored 28 Championship goals for Blackburn in their 2020-21 campaign, his first two Premier League seasons with Southampton delivered just four altogether.

“It was an eye-opener,” he says. “I played for Newcastle in the Premier League when I first came through, but just 10 minutes as a young lad, which was unbelievable. When I joined Southampton, I came to the Premier League thinking I’d deserved it because of what I had done at Blackburn.

“The first two seasons were tough. I was in and out of the team and we got relegated, which was the worst feeling in the world. When that happened, though, I didn’t think my Premier League chance had gone – that never goes through a footballer’s mind. I’m 27, I’m still young, and there’s always an opportunity – football can change just like that. And we had an unbelievable season in the Championship, which was needed.”

Armstrong scored 21 league goals and returns to the Premier League with the confidence of having found the net regularly with the same players he’s playing with now, under the same manager. His ex-England U20 pal Dominic Solanke also struggled at first to score regularly in the Premier League and suffered relegation, with Bournemouth, but found his form in a promotion campaign and carried it into the top flight. Like Solanke, Armstrong is armed with a point to prove.

“Different styles, different managers,” he says. “This manager has been great with me and the lads: he has given us the confidence



“I WAS PRAYING THAT LEEDS WOULDN’T SCORE – I WOULD HAVE BEEN A MEME FOR YEARS”

Above Adam Armstrong nets in a pre-season friendly away at Eastleigh

to use our strengths and play as a team again. How we play is brave: everyone wants to get on the ball and create chances. Luckily, I was on the end of a lot of them last season. I hope that I can do something like Dominic Solanke did. I’m always confident in myself.”

Southampton have already had one player called up to an England senior squad within the past few months. Women’s goalkeeper Kayla Rendell got the nod to join Sarina Wiegman’s Lionesses for a Euro 2025 qualifier against Sweden in April, despite her club side playing in the Championship.

“I’ve been with England’s Under-23s for a few years now; I was on camp and I got a call from the manager, asking if I could go to a meeting,” Rendell tells *FFT*. “I was a bit scared, like, ‘What’s going on?’ I thought I was getting told off! But I was told, ‘Sarina wants to call you up’. I hurried back to the room, packed my bags and met Sarina for dinner with the rest of the team. It was daunting, walking into dinner with them all sitting there, but they welcomed me and Sarina was lovely. My first experience with the team was at Wembley – it was surreal.”

The 23-year-old didn’t come off the bench for her debut, and has since had a spell out injured, but wants to prove herself worthy of more call-ups by helping Saints to push for promotion to the WSL. Like Southampton’s men’s team, they finished fourth in the Championship last term, but just seven points off top spot. They only formed in 2017, before rising from the Hampshire Women’s League Division One, and turning pro in 2022.

“I was working part-time at Screwfix beforehand, so it was a change for me, but something I’d dreamed of since I was a kid,” says Rendell with a smile. “We’ve got the full backing of the club, which is amazing. They put everything into the women’s team. The training facilities are incredible. I’ve been at the club for eight years – every year they recruit better players to help us progress.”

Atlanta Primus, daughter of Portsmouth legend Linvoy, has been part of the squad, while Marieanne Spacey-Cale, the England great, stepped aside as head coach at the end of last season to head the club’s women’s and girls’ programme instead.

The team play all of their matches at St Mary’s, with a new record figure of 13,438 present for last season’s Continental Cup clash with Arsenal. “It’s massive for us to play at St Mary’s – we love it,” striker Rianna Dean says. “It’s a family here, both men’s and women’s teams. There’s no divide. Playing at St Mary’s shows that. Now, the WSL is where we want to be, and hopefully this year will be our year.”

The men’s team, already in the top flight, are hoping things will be more settled in the Premier League this time. Their relegation season saw Ralph Hasenhuttl, Nathan Jones and Ruben Selles all have spells in charge.

“The season we went down, we had three managers – there’s a lot more stability now,” Armstrong says. “The main aim is to stay up. This is a Premier League club in my opinion, and we’ve got to show that on the pitch. If we stick together, and we keep sticking to what we know, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

If Southampton do manage to secure their Premier League safety in May, one suspects Armstrong will make doubly sure the final whistle has blown before twirling that shirt above his head. ●

Southampton have linked up with PUMA on a four-year deal, with bespoke kits for all teams, from the men’s and women’s first teams through to the academy

WHY LAMINE YAMAL IS ONLY GOING TO GET BETTER

Spain's teenage winger was Euro 2024's breakout star after showing his potential at Barcelona – but that's just the start

Words Adam Clery

Ask yourself what you were doing at 16 and the answer probably isn't "being regarded as one of the world's best footballers". One of the best *Pro Evo* players in your Year 11 maths class, at a push, but that's about it.

After a breakthrough season in Barcelona's first team, followed by European Championship displays that frankly defied belief, Lamine Yamal – inevitably named Young Player of the Tournament following Spain's triumph in the final, the day after his 17th birthday – has already



established himself among the elite, despite being less than two weeks older than *The Simpsons Movie*. He's on a career trajectory that could see him end up as an all-timer.

While a solitary cameo in 2022-23 made him Barça's youngest player in over a century, at 15, it was in 2023-24 that Yamal made his mark, across no fewer than 51 appearances. His stunning rise stemmed from the club's inability to flex their muscles in the transfer market, but no amount of money would have bought them the impact of this La Masia graduate.

01 VENT

It immediately became obvious that Yamal was blessed with a level of technique well beyond his years and well beyond his peers. His control, dribbling and quality of final ball made him an immediate presence. Xavi even tweaked Barça's style to suit him better: Yamal was told to stay high and wide, offering the maximum attacking threat when his team-mates looked to give him the ball.

But even more telling than this instruction is that the youngster was trusted to make those positional assessments himself. His reading of the game was already at such a level that his manager was confident he'd simply know where best to be. From there, his ability on the ball allowed him to ghost past defenders and his quality of delivery, on either foot, would see him drive towards goal or deliver wide from the byline.

He ended the season in the top 10 per cent across Europe's 'Big Five' leagues for the total number of ball carries and successful take-ons, and in the top five per cent for chances created directly from take-ons. Such figures hadn't been seen at Barcelona since Lionel Messi; comparisons were duly made.

**THOUGH HIS DRIBBLING
HAS CAUGHT THE EYE,
YAMAL'S DELIVERY IS
HIS GREATEST WEAPON**

02 VIDI

When Yamal was fast-tracked into the senior Spain side for Euro 2024, Luis de la Fuente harnessed one of his unique talents.

There's a basic tenet of defending: if an attacker is comfortable going either side of you, the safest strategy is to allow them more space. It affords you more reaction time, makes the feints less fatal and gives you a headstart in any subsequent foot race.

The problem is that it opens up a small gap from which to cross, and for all that Yamal has caught the eye with his dribbling, his greatest weapon is actually his delivery. He'd routinely look to whip the ball into the perfect area between the goalkeeper and defenders, and racked up four assists. His technique was especially eye-catching against Croatia, as he lofted the ball with the height and rotation to make it appear destined for the far post, but the addition of top-spin instead caused it to drop towards the near post, for Dani Carvajal to prod into the net.

Yamal finished the tournament not only with the most assists but also the highest xA (Expected Assists) by some distance – such was the consistent quality of his delivery.



SCAN HERE TO
WATCH MORE
TACTICS VIDEOS

03 VICI

Yamal's next challenge is this: can he maintain this form at his club, now the whole world has seen what he's capable of? Well, nothing is for certain... but yeah, he can.

Under Hansi Flick's stewardship, Barcelona are expected to gradually move away from their traditional possession-based style, played under Xavi last season, and press their opponents proactively and higher up the pitch. That could suit Yamal perfectly.

In 2023-24, Barcelona ranked only eighth in La Liga for the number of goals scored by regaining possession in the final third of the pitch. It accounted for around six per cent of their goals, while stat-leaders Athletic Bilbao clocked in at just under 20 per cent, so it's an area that Barça can make huge strides in.

Yet Yamal has already shown an aptitude for high-pressing football, recording the joint-most successful tackles in the final third of all of the league's attacking players. In fact, with regards to the total number of combined tackles and interceptions, he already ranks in the top five per cent of all attackers across the 'Big Five' leagues.

Just another mind-bending statistic to add to Lamine Yamal's growing collection.



FABIAN HURZELER'S BRIGHTON COULD BE UNLIKE ANYTHING YOU'VE EVER SEEN

The Seagulls' 31-year-old manager earned his reputation by leading St Pauli to the Bundesliga – with a rather unorthodox style of play...

When Brighton & Hove Albion announced their successor to the outgoing Roberto De Zerbi, the appointment felt as if it had been plucked straight from your last *Football Manager* save. Being handed one of the Premier League's most exciting squads and renowned global scouting networks was... a bloke in his early 30s who most people hadn't heard of.

Eight years ago, Fabian Hurzeler was managing in the German amateur leagues. Now, following stints with the national youth setup and his name-making stewardship of St Pauli, the 31-year-old is stepping into the English top flight. If unorthodox build-up phases and innovative off-ball movement do for you what, say, fireworks do for normal people, that's great news.

There's something uniquely captivating about a manager who inherits a squad with six players older than him, but Tony Bloom doesn't do 'novelty factor' – in fact, Hurzeler has a burgeoning but deserved reputation as a maverick. There's no judgement here if you didn't catch much second-tier German football last season – there are only so many hours in the day – so this is how he set up his team in his only full season of management.

**HIS ST PAULI MIDFIELDERS
WOULD ABANDON CENTRAL
AREAS ENTIRELY, TO MAKE
SPACE IN THE MIDDLE**

01 A BACK THREE... BUT NOT REALLY

The key to St Pauli's success was an unusual setup. Though it initially resembled a 3-4-3, when building from the back they'd quickly morph into something not unlike De Zerbi's own Brighton system – but with a twist.

The wing-backs were instructed to push high and wide, dragging markers as far from the central area as possible, while the central centre-back would push into midfield to become a *de facto* No.6. That, combined with a goalkeeper supremely comfortable on the ball (Nikola Vasilj completed the fourth-most passes in the team), gave them a central diamond with which to work around a press.

This wasn't a personnel thing. Eric Smith did excel in that central role but the system remained when he wasn't available. The numerical and technical superiority at the base of their play allowed St Pauli to move through the middle quickly or, if opponents committed wide players to go man-for-man, play directly into the unmarked wing-backs.

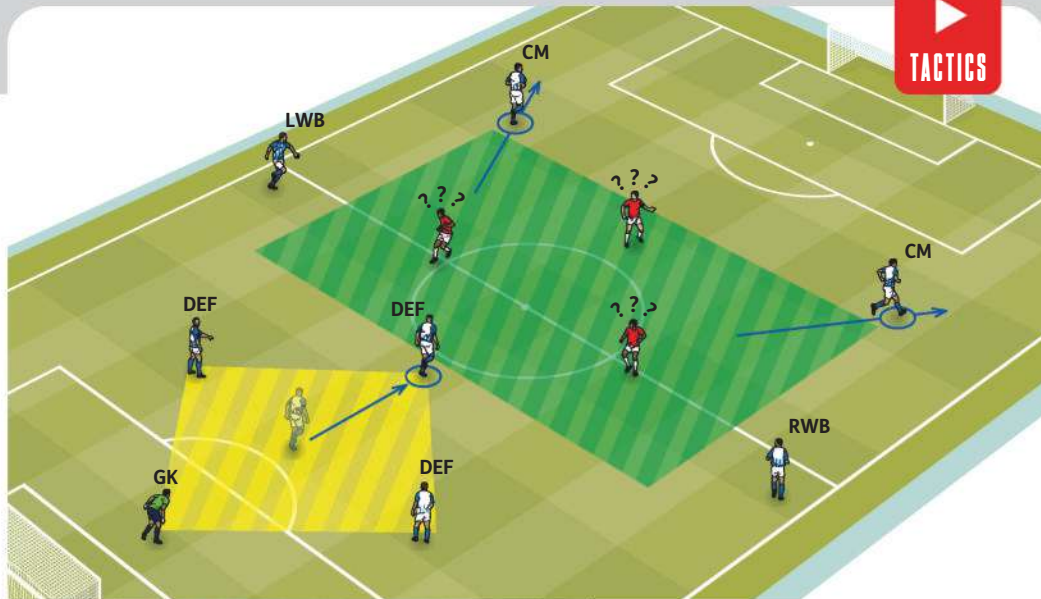
By the season's end, teams had become very wary of pressing St Pauli aggressively.



SCAN HERE TO
WATCH MORE
TACTICS VIDEOS

02 A MIDFIELD TWO... BUT NOT REALLY

From there, things started to get weird(er). With a centre-back playing as the pivot, the two actual midfielders would abandon that space entirely, giving rise to a misconception that Hurler has pioneered a system with no midfield. It could look that way at times, but the central midfielders' roles were to create space in the middle as much as play in it. Taking their cues from opposition positions (particularly those of the deeper midfielders), they pushed high, wide or both to take others with them. Often they'd create an overload with the wide attackers, but they could be up with the centre-forward instead, pinning the opposition back-line and forcing them very narrow. Either way, their designated markers had to improvise or else find themselves staying touch-tight with yards of fresh air. The logic was simple. All players, when defending, have certain spaces where they're more comfortable. Remove them from those spaces and you can create chances in the ensuing disorder. That's why no 2.Bundesliga side had more attempts on goal than St Pauli.



03 A PERFECT FIT FOR BRIGHTON... BUT NOT REALLY

At their best under De Zerbi, Brighton were a byword for tactical innovation. Their short build-up style, surprising directness and high press made them a team to be feared, due to the structure he had coached into them. Hurler's new charges have the ability and mindset to take to his more complex ideas. However, they haven't played with the sort of freedom that a lot of his other ideas require – at least not at Brighton. While De Zerbi spent two years training the Brighton Symphony Orchestra, Hurler's St Pauli players were reading sheet music in the build-up but had to blend it into jazz as they got closer to goal. A club with genuine ambition should always be looking for ways to evolve, though. Appointing a coach who can blend their own innovations with what worked well in the previous regime is, theoretically, the way to progress. This will be no simple task for Hurler, but if he's up to the challenge, then Brighton could very quickly return to being appointment viewing in the Premier League.



HOW LIVERPOOL RULED EUROPE IN 2004-05

Twenty seasons ago, they unexpectedly won the Champions League in Rafa Benitez's first campaign – what was the key?

Scott Carson has seen things you people wouldn't believe. Manchester City winning an era-defining Treble... Niko Kranjcar's speculative punt squirming past him on a sodden Wembley turf... all those moments will be lost in time, like tears down Steve McClaren's umbrella. But, footballing replicant or otherwise, Carson was on the bench for one match that'll never be forgotten: the 2005 Champions League Final at Istanbul's Ataturk Stadium.

Twenty years ago, Rafa Benitez was hired to replace Gerard Houllier at Liverpool, but defeats at Olympiacos and Monaco put the Reds in danger of a group-stage exit from the Champions League. Needing to beat the Greeks at Anfield in their final game, they trailed at half-time, but a remarkable revival secured a 3-1 win and Liverpool's place in the last 16 (remarkable not least because the heroes before Steven Gerrard's stunner were Florent Sinama Pongolle and Neil Mellor).

From there they beat Bayer Leverkusen, Juventus and Chelsea, helped by Luis Garcia's 'ghost goal', then went into the showpiece as underdogs, gave Carlo Ancelotti's imperious Milan a three-goal headstart, and still won.

The game's greatest moments are never really about tactics or systems, but on this occasion... it sort of was. Benitez got it all wrong in the first half, remedied it superbly in the second, and then his players pulled off what is, rightly, called the Miracle of Istanbul.

01 THE PROBLEM

It's an uncomfortable truth given the ending, but a truth nonetheless: the primary reason Liverpool found themselves 3-0 down at half-time in Istanbul was Steven Gerrard. In the first half, Milan exploited him at will.

With Ancelotti playing a narrow diamond and Benitez instructing Xabi Alonso to be the designated 'sitter' in Liverpool's midfield, Milan's movement forced Gerrard to make positional decisions he repeatedly got wrong.

For the second goal, after making a similar mistake for Andriy Shevchenko's disallowed strike, Gerrard was attracted out too far to the right-hand side, leaving Alonso stranded between Andrea Pirlo on the ball and Kaka waiting for it behind him. For the third, Gerrard was rolled by the Brazilian with ease, having run after his own misplaced pass.

There were other issues, of course. Milan's diamond left Liverpool's wide players (John Arne Riise, Djimi Traore, Steve Finnan and Luis Garcia) unsure who to mark, and Harry Kewell's early injury forced Benitez to change his gameplan on the fly. Regardless, Pirlo, Gennaro Gattuso and especially Kaka were having the most joy playing around Gerrard.

WHATEVER BLAME GERRARD WAS DUE FOR THE FIRST HALF, HE WAS OWED JUST AS MUCH CREDIT FOR THE SECOND

02 THE SOLUTION

Whatever blame Gerrard was due for the first half, he was owed just as much credit for the second, as his determination, attitude and ability clawed Liverpool back into the final. Introducing Dietmar Hamann at half-time was Benitez's acknowledgment that his captain was the problem, but his switch from the 4-4-1-1 to a 3-4-2-1 showed his belief that he could still offer the solution.

The back three negated Milan's narrow shape, as Finnan and Traore had often been redundant at full-back. Hamann, now on for Finnan, sat with Alonso to put a stop to Kaka exploiting spaces in front of the defence, with Riise and Vladimir Smicer (who had replaced Kewell) either side to provide width on the ball and match up Milan's diamond off it.

Gerrard and Garcia were now able to play in spaces created by Milan Baros' runs, taking advantage of the relative lack of mobility in a defence that had been unstretched up to then. It quickly paid off: with Gerrard relieved of the responsibility to balance forward runs with defensive positioning, he was free to find space in the area and flick a magnificent header into the net for 3-1. Game on.



03 THE MIRACLE

At 3-1, Milan were suddenly worried. Liverpool had a foothold on the scoreboard, yes, but more importantly they had a tangible one on the pitch, forcing the Italians deeper and deeper into their own half. Smicer probably couldn't believe the amount of space he had on the edge of the box just two minutes after Liverpool's first goal, but with Garcia, Gerrard and Baros all pinning the Rossoneri back four, he gleefully lashed a second through Dida's gloves.

As for the equaliser, the amount of contact on the foul that triggered the penalty remains a sore subject in parts of Milan to this day, but the situation was created from Liverpool's change in system. With Jamie Carragher – now a spare man in a back three against Milan's front two – carrying the ball into the final third, Baros and Garcia made penetrating runs, creating a chasm on the edge of the box for someone to drive into. The ball into Baros was perfectly weighted, his lay-off equally deft, and Gattuso could do little else but race after the arriving Gerrard and give him an excuse to go down.

Milan did regain their composure and get back on top for a sizeable chunk of what remained... but by then it was 3-3 and the rest, as they say, is *Blade Runner*.



AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND

INTERVIEW

MICHAEL SKUBALA

The Lincoln City gaffer on cutting his teeth at Old Trafford, England's futsal side and Impish dreams

Interview Chris Evans

How did the move to Lincoln happen, from Leeds United's backroom staff?

Long-term, I always wanted to get into management if the opportunity was right, but I was really conscious how that'd happen, who it'd happen with, and when, because it's a tough world to go into. Lincoln needed to fit me and I needed to fit Lincoln. It took quite a bit of time, which I liked, because they were doing due diligence. Lincoln and [director of football] Jez George do lots of digging on players and staff to make sure they're the right fit. We had good conversations with the board on the club's future and then you're in the building, playing Saturday, Tuesday, Saturday, Tuesday, which is a bit different to the pathway I've been on.

Was it difficult to deal with an early nine-game winless streak, with zero victories in December and January?

It's really easy in the modern world of football to panic. But actually, if you

trust the process, believe in it, and see a good body of work on the training pitch, then things start to move in the direction you want. You can see how quickly things can move from one direction to the other. At that point, we had a lot of injuries across the front line and were unlucky because they were all in the same position, then a lot of midfielders were out at the same time after that. But we managed to get players back and do some good work in the transfer window to get some bodies in, and at that point the pieces eventually came together. Football is about aligning the jigsaw puzzle, more so than people realise.

You were nominated for Manager of the Month as Lincoln went on a run of 16 matches unbeaten to get into play-off contention, scoring 16 goals in three straight wins over Barnsley, Cambridge and Bristol Rovers in March. There must have been a real buzz about the place at the time...

We came off in January knowing we were in every game and then we got a result at Burton with 10 men. We did change the style and the way we wanted to play. Then we went to the next one and before we knew it, we were thinking, 'We can do this, because we are clicking'. The run was incredible. The players were incredible – the effort, the desire, the quality they showed... all credit to them. At certain times I would sit back and say, "Wow, we're a good team". We got to a position when you get some momentum, which is strong in



"WE WERE 2-0 UP AT OLD TRAFFORD – I WAS THINKING, 'WHY IS THE CLOCK GOING SLOW?'"

football, and we could chase down the pack. We didn't quite get there and that book is closed now, but it's about evolving and trying to replicate that.

Having missed out on the play-offs by two points, will repeating that run be even more difficult this season, given that there are a lot of big clubs in League One again?

There are huge clubs in League One, so the league is going to be hard. But

ultimately it's 11 vs 11 between two goals on a grass pitch, so the clubs can be big but when we go out to battle as a group, why can't Lincoln compete in every game and win the three points? It's an old cliché, but every game is a tough game. League One has many different styles – it can be more direct, it can be teams that play – and I love it because of that. It challenges you so much. There are some great coaches in League One – people probably don't realise how tactically savvy they are.

As one of those coaches, you're also a former England manager, having taken charge of the Three Lions' futsal team between 2017 and 2020. Does that experience help you at all?

I've had an eclectic journey to try to learn and develop. I try to take all of the different experiences that you get

SCOTTISH NEWS

EVER THE OPTIMISTS

Edinburgh City's fans have had to deal with financial implosion, relegations and even an aborted name change by opportunistic owners, but they're still smiling

in order to shape the way you want to do things and how you want to play. My different journey has given me different insights. Futsal has probably given me a different perspective on football to some normal English football pathways, because futsal is a very continental thing. There are some concepts and principles you can take across that are in the game, such as the intensity, and in my coaching elements – it's part of me, so there'll be some things in there. There are also some things that don't cross over at all, but understanding both worlds is the most important thing. I've also had experience of the really good, steady English pathways, working with some good young talent at England Under-18s, then going into Leeds, and working at Loughborough University before that with players who were coming out of the game. Every coach's journey is different. When you become a first-team manager, you must try to take the most out of your experiences.

How did it feel to be thrown in at the deep end during your time at Leeds, drafted in as interim boss when Jesse Marsch was sacked in February of the 2022-23 season?

I loved Jesse to bits and he was really good to me, but when he left, I was fortunate enough to lead the team into a few games, which was a brilliant experience – I enjoyed every minute of it. Maybe I'm weird and people think it's a lot of pressure, but I wanted to make the most of it and do the best job I could. You go back to what you have done for the rest of your career, focusing on the players, the tactics and being good on the grass, and keep the ship calm and support the club through that moment.

In your first game in charge, Leeds were 2-0 up at Old Trafford with half an hour to play, before eventually drawing 2-2. You must have thought this Premier League lark was easy...

We were 2-0 up and I started thinking, 'The clock is going really slow now – why is that?' [Laughs] It was a brilliant experience, though, and that probably gave me the desire to want to get back there. Maybe that's part of my decision to come and have a go at Lincoln: I've seen it and felt it at the highest level. It was amazing – and we probably should have won that game. We played them again a few days later and were brilliant for 60 minutes [before losing 2-0], but the fine lines at that level are ruthless. That's probably the biggest learning I have from taking that team: taking a top Premier League team when the players are so good, and seeing how games are decided on a knife edge. It was a great experience.

Edinburgh City's 2023-24 relegation to League Two – conceding 98 goals in 36 games – was accelerated by a six-point deduction for failing to pay players. A club with an average gate of 447 was on the brink. Again.

Drastic cost-cutting measures meant fan favourites had to go. July's pre-season friendly against Broxburn Athletic had to be abandoned after supporters set off flares; others ended almost entirely in humiliating losses.

All this on the back of a short-lived, unpopular name change, under the previous ownership to FC Edinburgh.

So why the optimism around Meadowbank? Robert Fallon – fans' representative and host of the unofficial Edinburgh City FC podcast – admits that he has found football fulfilment in the unlikely of places.

In 1999, jaded by fellow capital club Hearts, he decided he'd had enough. Four years passed before friends tempted him along to see Edinburgh City. He's been hooked ever since.

"It's just real football," he tells *FFT*, of a team that rose to the Scottish Football League in 2016. "We nearly lost this club twice in the last year. It was an emotional time for everyone involved. Administration is normally

the last resort, but it wouldn't have helped us. We don't own the stadium or have other assets to fall back on.

"You fear the worst, but the last few months have brought everyone closer together. There's been a siege mentality – led by the manager, Michael McIndoe – and it was easy to get behind a team of kids trying their

"THE MANAGER HAD TO BRING IN SOMEONE FROM AN AMATEUR SIDE TO MAKE UP THE NUMBERS"

hearts out. Success this year would be consolidation – just a normal season, free of financial worries."

Fallon was one of the diehards who boycotted games when the previous owner renamed the club FC Edinburgh in trying to tap into the tourist trade, on top of a bizarre 'dispute' with the Edinburgh City social club that owned the rights to the club's name.

Chairman John Dickson then took control in June 2023, reversed the

name-change and enticed many of the disillusioned back. He later said: "When we came in, we promised two things: that we would restore the name and make sure the supporters still had a team to follow. Now we want to build the club back up. That includes the academy, a reserve team and the women's team."

Journalist Neil McGlade has covered the club, who play at the same venue as former Scottish Football League side Meadowbank Thistle, through thick and thin. "It's a small club that never had it easy and they've got a massive job this year," he tells *FFT*.

"It's a very young group. Only recently, the manager had to bring in someone from a Sunday amateur side to make up the numbers. He won't thank me for saying this, but avoiding bottom spot would be an achievement. It's about survival.

"Edinburgh City have been knocked from pillar to post and get stick from rival supporters, whether it's about crowd figures or the redeveloped Meadowbank being called 'a glorified leisure centre'. Their supporters won't care. They still have their team."

Fans are thankful for that, at least. **Kenny Millar**





BEST & WORST



BRISTOL CITY



Lifelong Robin **Aidan Connolly** on Dean Windass nightmares, northern seagulls and besting Jose Mourinho...

XI

BEST: Adriano Basso, Bradley Orr, Adam Webster, Aden Flint, Joe Bryan, Marvin Elliott, Alex Scott, Albert Adomah, Niclas Eliasson, Tammy Abraham, Nicky Maynard.

WORST: Stefan Marinovic, Nicky Hunt, Adam El Abd, Taylor Moore, Brendan Moloney, Tyreeq Bakinson, Henri Lansbury, Hakeeb Adelakun, Ryan Kent, Lois Diony, Rodri (not that one).

PLAYER

B: It just has to be Alex Scott (right). As the chant goes, he is wonderful, and, once he gets the ball, it is beautiful, and magical.

W: Lots. Lucky dip? Nicky Hunt.

MOMENT

B: Hands down, it's Korey Smith's late winner against Manchester United in the League Cup quarter-final in December 2017 (right). Sold-out Ashton Gate, under the lights, against a Jose Mourinho side. That moment will stay with me forever.

W: Dean Windass, the Championship play-off final in 2008. Moving on...

SEASON

B: The 2014-15 League One and Johnstone's Paint Trophy double season. Winning promotion with a 6-0 victory at Bradford was the icing on the cake – it was my birthday, after all – of a great 99-point campaign. More of the same this season, please.

W: In 2012-13 we came rock bottom, although I was a mascot away at Middlesbrough, and we won 3-1, which was a little silver lining on the season.



SIGNING

B: Adam Webster was a brilliant initial investment at £3.5 million – a year later it turned into a £20m sale. Not a bad bit of business at all.

W: In fairness to Tomas Kalas, he was a quality centre-half, but he cost £8m (our record signing) and spent the majority of his time injured. He then left on a free. Less good business.

CHANT

B: In homage to the Ashton Gate Eight: "Eight men had a dream, to save our

football team. Tore their contracts up so we could go on. And 40 years on, we're still going strong. We're Bristol City, the city is ours."

W: "Sha la la la la la, ohhh Zak Vyner". Get in the bin. Who's actually come up with this utter monstrosity? Absolute rubbish.

MANAGER

B: Steve Cotterill (top) came in and saved us from what seemed a very likely relegation to League Two in 2013-14. He then led us to the league title the following season. It's a shame he left when he did, but the man will go down as a City legend.

W: I still can't believe Dean Holden was appointed in August 2020, after his caretaker spell. A great guy, and still a welcome face, but just not the man we needed for the job at the time. Would love to see him succeed with a bit more experience under his belt.

HAIRCUT

B: Frank Fielding, circa 2013-14 – a buzz cut for the absolute ages. And a pretty decent goalkeeper, too.

W: Lois Diony's 'iconic' up-do. Diony came in to be the striker to make the difference and take us up in 2018. He amassed seven appearances and scored zero goals. I think it's fairly self-explanatory that the £10m option-to-buy was not taken up, and all he's remembered for is his dodgy haircut. Let's move on. Again.

AWAY DAY

B: This one *has* to be Blackpool. I've been twice and had a great weekend both times. You go knowing what to expect – wind, cheap pints, seagulls and a scrappy game. Proper football. You really can't beat it.

W: Stoke. Easy answer. Nothing there. Boring ground. Next.

OPPONENT

B: Leeds at Ashton Gate in 2023-24 were mesmerising, to be honest. They won 1-0, but it could've been lots more.

W: The Rotherham team of 2016-17. I don't think I've seen a worse side in the Championship.

HARD MAN

B: Jack Hunt. Everyone remembers that clip away at Brentford. Bye-bye, Sergi Canos, barged over the hoardings.

W: Another hard one, but simply for getting bodied by Jacob Brown over the barrier away at Stoke a few years ago, I'll say Dan Bentley. Although it wasn't really his fault.

NEWS

A DIFFERENT CHOICE OF CLUBS

Peter Odemwingie has swapped one ball for another, having just qualified as a PGA Professional golfer. Fore!

Former West Brom, Cardiff and Stoke forward Peter Odemwingie, who also turned out for Lille and Lokomotiv Moscow on top of brief EFL stints at Rotherham and Bristol City, tended to change his clubs regularly. His infamous antics at the end of the 2013 winter transfer window – in which he set up camp outside QPR's Loftus Road ground and refused to budge (unsuccessfully) until a potential move from the Baggies went through – proved he's never been afraid to take risks, either.

Now, he's combining both passions. Five years after officially calling time on a career that yielded 65 Nigeria caps, appearances at two World Cups, four AFCONs, an Olympic silver medal and 144 goals for club and country, he's swapped one ball for another to become a professional golfer.

The simple tried-and-trusted coaching or punditry post-retirement route was not for the 43-year-old Odemwingie, who spent the past three years at university to take the requisite steps necessary to turn pro. Born in Tashkent, modern-day Uzbekistan but at the time part of the Soviet Union, Odemwingie believes his heritage played a key role in his decision

to try something new, and now he hopes to inspire a new generation to get passionate about golf.

"There's nothing wrong with following the path of punditry, coaching, becoming an agent and all the rest of it because I did a fair bit of that in the first year after retirement, to test what keeps me going and motivated," says Odemwingie. "But I have a genuine passion and love for the game of golf.

"Even if I don't leave a mark on the sport, it would be enough. I also looked at my Russian-Nigerian heritage when making my decision and found that we didn't have any elite-level golfers. Nobody from my background ever made any history in the game, so that was a space I needed to fill."

Instead of turning up at the golf course in his car and refusing to leave until he was allowed in to play, Odemwingie went about things the official way.

"First, I had to study at university for three years, and then I had to pass the playing ability test," he tells *FFT*. "It wasn't easy. I've passed all of it now, but there were definitely challenges, especially in year two at university – a lot of tests, taking on loads of information. Exams can be overwhelming, but I guess

that's where a sportsman's determination to get over the line helps. I'm happy I didn't give up, and now I'm a professional PGA golfer."

Odemwingie sees golf as a sport to be enjoyed deep into old age, providing a challenge that can fill the competitive void long after the legs have gone, and the perfect middle ground between professional football and the tranquillity of retirement.

"The added bonus of being a golfer is that I can still be a sportsman," he says. "Football careers are short, but golf offers longevity. You can keep on playing as long as you can walk. There is a seniors tour as well, which the legendary Bernhard Langer, who just retired at 66, was part of. He played for many years.

"Gary Player, another legend, used to say he just does sit-ups and push-ups and plays. For his age, he looks in great shape, so this is what golf offers: it promotes a healthy lifestyle and discipline. It's a no-brainer for me to become a PGA Professional."

Better still, Peter, changing clubs is now actively encouraged, with not a one-man protest in the wider west London diaspora in sight. Go well.

Rahman Osman

"NO ONE FROM MY BACKGROUND MADE IT IN GOLF. IT'S A SPACE I NEEDED TO FILL"



NON-LEAGUE NEWS

YO-YEOVIL ARE BACK

Back in the National League, anyway – but after a decade that brought four relegations, Glovers fans are giddy

There aren't many fans who legitimately need to weigh up if winning the National League South was a better moment than getting promoted to the Championship. But ask any Yeovil Town supporter which achievement they cherish more and you should expect at least a momentary pause.

Ever since reaching the second tier in 2013 with a fairytale victory over Brentford, the Glovers have endured a decade of steady decline, not just slipping back into League One at the first attempt but falling all the way down into non-league a few years later. The final insult: relegation from the National League into the regional divisions in April 2023, a month shy of the 10th anniversary of their triumph at Wembley.

It's a story pockmarked with mismanagement, misery and missed opportunities. But after they hit rock-bottom last season when they landed in the National League South, things have started to look up again: the Somerset club clinched the title and took a forward step for the first time in a decade.

"Last season was one of my favourite seasons as a supporter," says beaming Yeovil native Ian Perkins, who has supported the club since he was a boy. "We spent the last 10 years not scoring enough goals, not winning enough games, and it always felt as though the games we did win were away from home. So, it was amazing to be playing in a regional league where we got to go to a load of away games and really experience us winning matches, scoring goals and playing some decent football."

Back in 2013, when Yeovil reached the second tier for the first time in their history – and only 10 seasons after becoming a Football League club – it felt as if something special was brewing in cider country. But trying to lay down proper foundations on the back of their new lofty status was easier said than done, and arguably paved the way for their subsequent tumble.

"We often have the debate about whether we'd take that season [and what followed] or if we would rather have not gone up and had a steady, stable

club," Perkins muses. "But the season was unreal and so worth it. Even when we were in the Championship, though, you could probably see that we weren't quite progressing off the pitch in the way a Championship club should – and then the next decade happens."

Considering Yeovil's size in context of the division, there was no shame in going straight back down to League One, even if signing 17 (seventeen) loanees suggests a flying-by-the-seat-of-the-pants approach to their big moment. But when stars left Huish Park to stay in the Championship, rebuilding the side proved difficult. An unsettled season featuring three different managers and 40 different players ended in a second successive relegation. The dream had turned sour.

"The whole thing felt like we weren't in any position to make an effort to sustain the squad, the budget or anything," explains Gloverscast co-host Ben Barrett. "But for it to go as catastrophically wrong as it did in League One, and go down, was even more bonkers than getting promoted in the first place.



"THERE'S NO POINT SAYING WE WANT TO BE A CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM AGAIN, BUT WE CAN BE A LEAGUE TWO TEAM AGAIN"



“The early part of the League Two experience had that feel of, ‘We’re here now, so we’ll take a year or two to rebuild and then have a crack at getting out of it’, but it was then that things off the field started disappearing quite quickly.”

Another relegation battle followed. Darren Way was promoted from coach to manager midway through the season and prevented a third straight demotion, but two more years of struggle ensued before Way’s magic ran out in 2018-19 and he left at the end of March, 10 defeats in 12 games having put the Glovers perilously close to the bottom two. Caretaker Neale Marmon couldn’t arrest the slide and relegation to non-league was confirmed. Yeovil’s league finishes in that six-year spell: 24th, 24th, 19th, 20th, 19th, 24th.

It all happened to a backdrop of various takeover rumours, as owners Norman Hayward and John Fry looked to sell the club. It hadn’t just been the team that was struggling from a lack of investment – fans complained that the ground and facilities were also getting dog-eared. A protracted takeover from Rob Couhig bumbled on until it finally fell flat and the American businessman went on to buy Wycombe.

Another buyer, Scott Priestnell, eventually arrived ahead of Yeovil’s return to the National League, yet his ownership failed to stop the rot. Priestnell raised the funds for the takeover by taking out a loan against the club’s assets, so when COVID-19 decimated matchday income, he was left with little option but to agree the controversial sale of Huish Park to Somerset District Council – despite the efforts of fans’ group The Glovers Trust to find an alternative arrangement.

A play-off attempt in the pandemic-hit 2019-20 season provided brief hope of an EFL return, but Yeovil were soon back to looking downwards instead

of upwards. Amid further takeover wranglings, one episode saw prospective owners Matthew and Julie Uggla invest in the team before an ill-fated attempt to strike a deal was completed, leaving behind more financial uncertainty. (They’re now co-owners at York City, having apparently worked closely with an A-Z.)

The chaos was reflected on the pitch: a 22nd-place finish, 10 points from safety, sent Yeovil down to the sixth tier. Worse still, the club were reportedly just days away from being wound up, when local entrepreneur Martin Hellier took over in May 2023.

“Dropping into regional football was heartbreaking, but we were grateful to still have a football club because we knew how close we came to not having one,” says Barrett. “There was gratitude, but also a feeling that we needed to get moving again from minute one and make sure that we got out of the regional division and on to the real stuff again.”

Hellier, a childhood Glover, put some much-needed investment into stadium improvements and

arranged local initiatives, such as launching a special pink kit at a match with Braintree to raise money for a new breast cancer unit at Yeovil District Hospital. He also gave manager Mark Cooper a healthy budget to build a squad that catered to the league title with 95 points – a total that nearly eclipsed that of the two previous seasons combined.

But this is Yeovil, and the success wasn’t achieved without consternation. While the club were drawing in crowds of more than 6,000, breaking the National League South record three times, allegations were made about Hellier’s conduct, with claims of bullying. Hellier was then arrested in May and bailed, although he denies the charges of making death threats, harassment and sending malicious messages to a Ukrainian mother and her children.

For now, fans are focusing on the renewed hope that comes with being back in the National League.

“In terms of what’s next, the word I keep thinking of is ‘progression,’” Barrett explains. “I don’t care if we don’t go up again this season, but I would love us to be kicking around the play-offs. It’s a competitive division but there’s no big fish this year like Wrexham or Notts County, so there are 15 or 16 teams that think they can make the play-offs – and we’re one of them. But as long as we’re progressing and scoring goals and winning games, I hope it’ll be a stepping stone to getting back to the EFL.”

“We had 15 years in the EFL last time and that has to be the goal again. There’s no point sitting here and saying we want to be a Championship team again, because that’s a million miles away, but being a League Two team isn’t.”

And after the decade they’ve endured, who can blame Yeovil fans for dreaming?

Chris Evans





THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

JAN MOLBY
IZZY CHRISTIANSEN
LEE CLARK

TEAMS

Kolding
Ajax
Liverpool
Barnsley (loan)
Norwich (loan)
Swansea
Denmark

JAN MOLBY

“MY SCOUSE ACCENT WASN'T DELIBERATE, BUT IT DID MAKE IT EASIER FOR LOCALS TO WARM TO ME!”

The Danish playmaker recalls Anfield's golden era, Hillsborough heartbreak and where Graeme Souness went wrong

Interview James Hilsum

After starting your career with Kolding in Denmark and then Dutch giants Ajax, you were offered a 10-day trial with Liverpool in 1984 by their manager, Joe Fagan – when did you know you'd been successful?

It was a bit of a gamble to agree to the trial, because I had a deal in place with Sheffield Wednesday. I could have taken the safe route, but I just thought that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. However, Liverpool made it pretty clear that they were offering me a trial and nothing else – they wanted me to show them what I could do. So, I played a game in Ireland on a Monday night, and it was after that game that I sensed they liked what they had seen. I felt like I fitted in well with the way Liverpool wanted to play, because I was technically a very good player, and after seeing me, they wanted me. The gamble paid off.

Was there a big change in terms of the dressing-room hierarchy when Kenny Dalglish became player-manager in 1985?

Player-managers were quite a big thing in England at the time but not at the level we were at, as probably one of the top three clubs in Europe, so we all wondered how it would work. But Kenny did it really well, and he used the people around him. He got Bob Paisley involved a lot more than Joe Fagan did. It took a bit of time, as Kenny had to lead us in the dressing room when he used to be part of it, but he was very determined to have a style, and would step away from the lads to become a bit more distant. It worked, because when you look at what we achieved from 1985 to 1990, it's quite remarkable.

Talk us through the 1986 FA Cup Final, when you were involved in all three goals of a 3-1 derby win against Everton...

The whole day was special. It started in the Hilton Hotel in Watford, sharing a room with Ian Rush: we got up, had tea, went for a walk and came back to put on our Wembley suits before leaving. When we arrived, there were already 70,000 people outside Wembley. When you play in an FA Cup final, you hope for a perfect game, and we almost had that, coming from behind against a very good Everton team. Walking up those steps to get your medal and lift the FA Cup was great.

How did the squad pull together and continue the season in the aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster in 1989?

We decided to go back to Sheffield and visit the hospitals and talk to the survivors. This is when you realise the enormity of it all. When we came back to Liverpool, we talked to friends and relatives of those who'd lost their lives. That happened for three or four days. Then the funerals started, and we went to as many as possible. The football season was still ongoing, with everybody else playing on. Eventually, Kenny asked us to make a decision about the rest of the season, which the club would support either way. Some local lads, like Steve McMahon, felt very strongly that we shouldn't continue, but we managed to convince them. Of the

families we spoke to, most wanted us to try to win trophies. A lot was made of Arsenal winning the league title in the last seconds at Anfield, but I always felt that beating Everton [in the FA Cup Final six days earlier] mentally marked the end of our season.

How were you so reliable from the penalty spot, missing only three in your career?

It came naturally. People today talk of the need to practise and to make up your mind before you hit a penalty – I don't want to sound big-headed but I didn't do any of that. I enjoyed the whole challenge: you against the goalkeeper, where obviously you're the favourite. I never made up my mind before I hit the ball. I would wait for the goalkeeper to make a move; if he didn't, I just went low and hard to his right. Ian Rush didn't like penalties, and John Barnes took a few but didn't feel comfortable with them either, but I felt extremely confident taking penalties.

How much of a shock was Kenny Dalglish's resignation midway through the 1990-91 season, and what was the adjustment period like under Graeme Souness?

We all thought Kenny would go on to build a dynasty as manager, a bit like Bill Shankly and Bob Paisley, so you can imagine how we felt when Kenny told us that he didn't feel he was in a position, mentally or physically, to continue. Ronnie Moran came in for a while, then it was Graeme Souness' turn. He came in with the best of intentions, wanting to use his experience as a former Liverpool player as well as a player-manager with Rangers, and there was nothing wrong with his ideas – I was just surprised that such an intelligent man could be so forceful. The squad was experienced, so I was surprised that he didn't approach the change in a softer way. Then, of course, it comes down to recruitment. The issue wasn't the players he signed; it was with how they fitted into the way Liverpool played. We ended up mixing styles. Graeme wanted us to be more direct, more physical – that didn't work out well, and it took him a while to admit that. Given the chance again, he might have done things differently.

You picked up a Scouse accent very quickly after arriving in England – when did you realise you'd starting talking like a local?

I lived in the city centre, so I dealt with a lot of local people. I felt like I spoke good English when I came to the club, but it's almost a different language in Liverpool. I was quick to pick up all of those things. I did show willingness as, in 1984, it was a big thing for an English club to sign a foreign player and I think everybody thought, 'Is he going to get involved or not?' The accent wasn't deliberate, but I didn't step away from it, either. It certainly didn't do any harm, because it made it easier for the local people to warm to me. ●



TEAMS

Everton
Birmingham
Manchester City
Lyon
England



IZZY CHRISTIANSEN

“PHIL NEVILLE TRIED A LOT OF DIFFERENT IDEAS TO GET THE BEST OUT OF THE LIONESSES, BUT THINGS STILL WEREN'T QUITE RIGHT”

The ex-midfielder on boozy FA Cup celebrations, Manchester City's rise to the summit and mixing it with the elite at Lyon...

Interview Chris Evans

When you were making your breakthrough as a teenager, at Everton and Birmingham, how difficult was it to establish yourself in the first team at such a young age?

Being a youngster in those first-team environments wasn't easy. There were times when I'd get in the car and cry to my mum on the way home because you're in with the big dogs. The game has changed a lot now – there's more support and the environment is very different – but you were sort of fed to the lions as a youngster. You'd get kicked in training; people wouldn't like that you were talented. But that's just the way it was. It was always going to be tricky in a first-team environment – being exposed to it at a young age made me thicker-skinned for the future.

What was it like to come through at Birmingham while they were competing for trophies, finishing second in the WSL in 2011 and winning the FA Cup in 2012?

We had a chairman who invested in us and, in Marcus Bignot, a manager who came from the men's game with great experience, and they referred to the club structure as Moneyball, so we were squeezing everything out of the resources we had. We trained at



Birmingham University at 8pm and often wouldn't get off the grass until about half 10. We had a fantastic team, with the likes of me, Karen Carney, Eni Aluko, Laura Bassett and other England internationals playing for the club at the time. The FA Cup win was just incredible and there was a fair bit of booze on the bus back to St Andrew's.

When you moved to Manchester City in 2014, you were still studying at Birmingham University, so what encouraged you to make the switch?

I'm from south Manchester and I wanted to come home. It was my final year at uni and Man City had this really exciting project. I was regularly travelling between Birmingham and Manchester and ended up writing the majority of my dissertation on

the M6 at service stations, because I'd get in my car and drive somewhere until there was traffic, get out and sit in a coffee shop, write a bit, save it, then get in the car again and get home late. I'll never forget Knutsford or Stafford services, put it that way.

How special was it to be involved in City's development from such an early stage?

To be part of the City project from the start was amazing and I feel forever in debt to them because they pitched a project and followed through with it – which, if you think about it, is not as common as it's said. The original coach wasn't an A Licence coach, so they searched within the academy and that's where they found Nick Cushing. If somebody had told him back then that he'd become the women's first-team manager and be as successful as he has been, he probably would have laughed, but it was purely his coaching that steered us in the direction we wanted to go. We added quality players every year and that was our recipe for success.

Which achievements stand out most from your time at Manchester City?

The FA Cup win in 2017 is definitely one of the most prominent in my memory. To win that and score in the final – with a goal that basically helped me to have the career I had, because I modelled my career on making late runs into the box and scoring – was special. To do that at Wembley, in front of so many people and my family there in a box... you couldn't dream of anything better.

You were also named PFA Women's Player of the Year in 2016...

I still can't stop smiling about that, and every time I see the trophy at home, I can't really believe it. I can't say how hard I worked to take my game upwards and I suppose you get your rewards for hard work. I was lucky I was in a team that allowed me to do that, in a system that suited my play, and had a manager that believed in me – all of the things came together. My advice to anyone who wins that award now is to treasure it, because I probably didn't enjoy it as much as I should have done at the time. But nobody can take it away from me.

Was it the prospect of European success that encouraged you to join Lyon in 2018?

It was always a desire of mine to play abroad when the game got bigger. There was interest from Germany the year before, but I signed a contract extension with City instead. I'd been tempted, but I wanted to stay. When Lyon came in, I felt I would have regretted it if I didn't give it a go. It was a risk, but I absolutely loved the football and the training there, and it taught me a lot in terms of learning French and how football can be played in other ways. Of course, winning everything was good, too. But I learned a lot, even if living in France was tricky.



You played 31 times for England between 2015 and 2019. How do you compare your Lionesses experience to the success of more recent years?

I look back on my time with England as being during choppy waters and now the waters are pretty calm. We had to go through that to be where we are now, with the Euros win and getting to the World Cup final. I don't look back with regret or jealousy and I'm so proud of what I achieved as well, but if I'm being really honest, I am a bit envious of the players in that they get to play for Sarina Wiegman, because I absolutely love her coaching style and methods, and what she has done with the team. Since Sarina has come in, her relationship with the FA has been exceptional and she has portrayed herself and the team in a very positive light. It was always going to get to this point – it was just a case of when.

Phil Neville was in charge for many of your years with England – what was that like?

Phil is a lovely guy and definitely had the right intentions. There were difficult phases towards the end of Mark Sampson's tenure and then into the interim roles before Phil came in. I'm gutted we weren't able to get the best out of our squad back then. That wasn't Phil's fault, but things weren't quite right and there was a lot that still needed to be ironed out. Phil tried a lot of different ideas with the team in an attempt to get the best out of us – some worked and some didn't. We did win the SheBelieves Cup during Phil's tenure, so we tasted winning.

Why did you decide to retire from playing at only 31?

I decided that I wanted to quit while I felt good and I was on top, because I saw the game moving forward massively and quickly, and I wanted to hold my hands up and say, "I don't know if I've got it in me to keep going" – not physically or mentally, but just because of where the game is going. My thirst to do other things with my life overrode wanting to stay in the game and play for another year or two. I thought that I could get more out of life by doing something else. I just remember coming home one day and saying to my other half, "I'm done – this is it for me". And that was it. 🍷

LEE CLARK

“I WISH I’D NEVER WORN THE ANTI-MACKEM T-SHIRT. I’VE APOLOGISED BUT YOU CANNOT BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS”

The former Newcastle, Sunderland and Fulham man recounts King Kev’s entertainers, his regrets and Al-Fayed’s generosity

Interview Ian Murtagh

Let’s start with a cheeky one. Who’s better: you or your son, Bobby, the Liverpool tyro?

Oh, that’s an easy one. Bobby’s the better footballer. He’s got everything I had in terms of application, work ethic, fitness and a good passing range, but he is more physically imposing than me and has a lot more pace, which is a huge asset in the modern game. He broke through last season and has already won one more major honour than his old man, but only time will tell if he goes on to have the career I believe he is capable of having. I was fortunate to be involved with some very good teams and play at a high level for many years, but let’s face it: if Bobby carries on the way he’s started and stays at Liverpool, he’s going to have a great career and win a lot more medals along the way.

You broke into the Newcastle side at about the same age as Bobby did at Anfield...

I was 17 when Jim Smith gave me my debut, though Newcastle weren’t in the top flight at the time. Under Ossie Ardiles I was fortunate to play regularly alongside good friends who also came through the ranks – lads like Steve Watson, Steve Howey, Alan Thompson and Robbie Elliott. Bobby’s had a similar pathway, playing with a few familiar faces from the Liverpool Academy, and it certainly helps.

He ended up transforming Newcastle, but would it be fair to say that you were one of the few Geordies who wasn’t celebrating Kevin Keegan’s appointment in 1992...?

In a way, yes. Kevin left me out of his first game, against Bristol City at St James’ Park, as he’d told me a couple of days earlier that while he’d heard a lot of good things about me, my head wasn’t in the right place. It was a fair comment. I had enjoyed an excellent relationship with Ossie and it hit me hard when he was sacked because I felt partially

TEAMS

Newcastle
Sunderland
Fulham



responsible for him losing his job. I found it difficult to differentiate between being a boyhood fan of the club and being a player. Having watched him from the terraces, part of me was as excited as everyone else about Keegan coming back to Newcastle, but if I'm honest, disappointment at Ossie going was my overriding emotion. For the first few months of Kevin's reign, I was in and out of the side. But, from the summer on, I began to realise how charismatic he was, and the team and I went from strength to strength.

Having just avoided relegation in 1991-92, Newcastle stormed to promotion the following year with you playing a key role – what are your memories of that season?

The final game of the season, when we beat Leicester 7-1, is probably my favourite ever game. We were six up at half-time, playing some unbelievable stuff. Andy Cole and David Kelly both scored hat-tricks. Leicester were a decent side but, in front of a sell-out crowd in party mood, we just blew them away. Our chairman, John Hall, was quite merry afterwards – he'd had a couple of glasses! – and he went on telly and said, "Look out, Manchester United, we're coming to get you." A lot of people ridiculed him for that, but he was right, wasn't he?

Then Newcastle's Entertainers took the Premier League by storm and you forged a great understanding with Andy Cole...

Look, Alan Shearer is rightly regarded as the greatest striker of the modern era, but I do think Coley's time at Newcastle gets overlooked. Some fans don't acknowledge his contribution because he moved to Manchester United, our biggest rivals back then, but his stats with us were just phenomenal – almost Erling Haaland-esque. Andy and I were good pals off the pitch, too.

How do you look back on two successful years at Sunderland, having left your hometown club to join their bitter rivals?

I added goals to my game there and got called up by England, so the switch certainly paid off career-wise. It was always going to cause debate because of my black and white roots but I never regretted the move. Peter Reid and Paul Bracewell were huge factors in my decision – and, of course, it made sense from a geographical point of view. I played with some great players at Sunderland. Niall Quinn and Kevin Phillips was another unbelievable partnership. I didn't realise just how good Quinny was until I played with him.

But, after Sunderland won promotion with a record points haul, you were pictured in a 'Sad Mackem Bastards' T-shirt before Newcastle's 1999 FA Cup final against Manchester United, and that was the end... It's something I wish had never happened. Across 16 years, I only played for three clubs and I take great pride in what I did for all of

them. I've been welcomed back with open arms at two of them, and it's sad that wasn't always the case at Sunderland. Of course, I realise you cannot bite the hand that feeds, and I understood the ramifications of what I did. I like to think these days I've made my peace with Sunderland fans after discussing the episode on the Roker Report podcast, putting it out there how much I regretted what I did and issuing a heartfelt apology.

What was it like to leave the North East and join Fulham just as they were taking off under Mohamed Al-Fayed's ownership?

Let me tell you a story about Mr Al-Fayed. Whoever won Player of the Month was treated to a slap-up meal on the top-floor restaurant at Harrods. I was there with my wife and my two older kids, who were playing up a bit. Al-Fayed approached us and offered to take them to the store's famous toy fair. A couple of hours later they returned, loaded down with bags of toys he'd given them. What a guy. At Fulham, I was reunited with Kevin Keegan and then Paul Bracewell and, later, Andy Cole; it was a club on the up, with an ambitious chairman and state-of-the-art training facilities. It was magic.

Why was Fulham boss Jean Tigana a major influence when you entered management?

Tigana [below, centre] was ahead of his time. I learnt so much from him in terms of fitness, preparation and recovery. I considered myself one of the fittest players around, but he took it to another level. His training sessions were terrific. I took a lot of those processes into my own managerial career.

How would you assess your managerial career, with its various ups and downs?

I had four great years at Huddersfield but I was firefighting in every subsequent job. It's no coincidence that my best times were with Huddersfield as I had the perfect backroom team helping me – Terry McDermott, Derek Fazackerley and the late Steve Black, most important of them all. Blackie was called a fitness coach but I called him Performance Director because he was so influential. We lost twice in the League One play-offs but I'm hugely proud to have the longest unbeaten record in the Football League: 43 games, just ahead of the legendary Brian Clough on 42. When I got the sack, we were sitting in third place, so that was a tough one to take. ◦



THE MIXER

THE BEST OF FOOTBALL

KIT • FASHION • ART
DESIGN • TECH



FENTY X PUMA AVANTIS £250

puma.com

When Rihanna isn't demanding that unsuspecting DJs pon de replay, she can be found running the billion-dollar cosmetics empire, Fenty. It's via this enterprise that she has teamed up with Puma to release a special edition Avanti football sneaker. The queen of Barbados debuted her new wheels at Manchester City's pre-season clash with Milan at the Yankee Stadium, and they've since been sported by stars from Jack Grealish to Christian Pulisic. We like it, like it, come on.

GOT GEAR? **GET IT IN THE MIXER** SEND IT TO **@KETCHELLFC** ON INSTAGRAM



NEW ERA FOOTBALL STYLE NBA JERSEYS £39

neweracap.co.uk

There's nothing worse than cold arms, is there? So rejoice, NBA fans, because you can now wear a sleeved, collared jersey rather than a vest when supporting your team... provided your team is one of the Chicago Bulls, LA Lakers, Phoenix Suns, Brooklyn Nets or Milwaukee Bucks. New Era have designed 'soccer'-style shirts for some of basketball's most iconic outfits – it's a slam dunk! (Sorry.)



JOGA MINI SHINPADS £19.95

shopjoga.com

Health and safety? Quit being a wimp and protect your legs with shinpads the size of a postage stamp. Joga's mini shinguards promise robust defence against impacts, despite their size; worn by Jack Grealish, Lauren James and more, they offer a stylish option to those who prefer to wear their socks low. Customers who like this also bought: pink football boots, fake sleeve tattoos.



SOKITO 'SCUDETTA' FOOTBALL BOOT £174.99

sokito.com

Sokito have a reputation as the progressive footballer's boot of choice: they're made from sustainable, vegan materials, including bamboo, sugar cane and castor beans, and the laces are produced entirely from recycled plastic bottles. This is their eye-catching first speed boot, weighing in at a feathery 182 grams, so players can smoke their opponents without hurting Mother Earth. Respect.



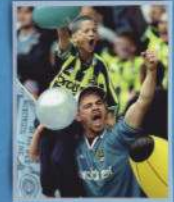
**NIVELCRACK
LATTE JERSEY**

nivelcrack.com

Seoul-based fashion brand Nivelcrack (a term for a top-flight player in Spain, apparently) are unapologetically mad about football merch and coffee, so they've decided to wed their loves with a specially designed shirt inspired by the humble latte. It features the espresso colour base, white cuffs and even a 'Latte' sponsor, just to drive the point home. Form an orderly queue, hipsters.



**REQUIRED
READING**



**We Were
Really There**
The Rebirth of
Manchester City
DAVID BERNSTEIN
with Tim Rich

**WE WERE REALLY
THERE: THE REBIRTH
OF MANCHESTER CITY**

David Bernstein with Tim Rich
pitch publishing £25

A quarter of a century ago, chaired by club hero Franny Lee, Manchester City were seen as a basket case.

As a proposed move away from Maine Road stalled due to financial issues, the club bounced between divisions and into the third tier in 1998-99. Extracting some dark humour from their predicament, City fans would sing, "We're not really here" during 'new' derby clashes against Oldham and Macclesfield.

Accountant David Bernstein was appointed chairman to bring stability to the club, and he duly did so. Bernstein refers throughout this book to official documents from his tenure as chairman, to illustrate the culture of the club at the time - these include the astronomical bar tab that the City management team and backroom staff ran up on New Year's Eve, 2000, between a 4-1 loss to Charlton on December 30 and a home match against Coventry on New Year's Day.

Looming large throughout is City's epic play-off final win over Gillingham in 1999, and the deal Bernstein sealed for the move to the Community of Manchester Stadium, now the Etihad. Without his steady hand, City may not have morphed into the giant they've become in the Sheikh Mansour era.

This is a fascinating story, well told.

Jon Spurling



CUSTOM REVERSIBLE BUCKET HAT £55

footybuckets.com

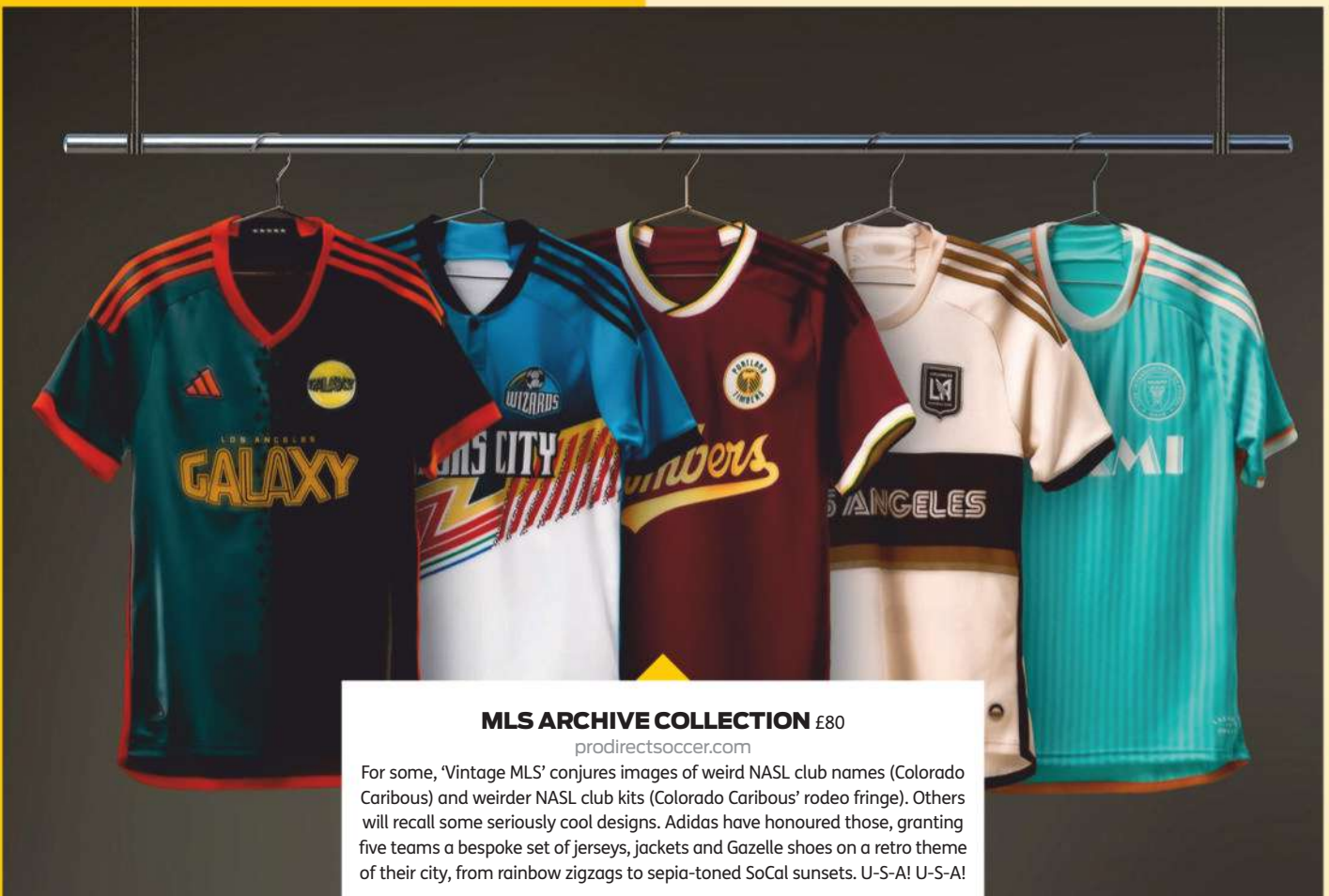
We've all arrived at a match before to find another fan wearing the same hat. The shame! Never let it happen again, with your own handmade, reversible, one-of-a-kind lid. Send in two old football shirts, outline which aspects you want in the design (badge, player name, etc) and wait for your unique bucket hat to arrive in the post. They're made by someone's mum, for crying out loud.



CUBAN SILVER FOOTBALL BRACELET €32.90

morethan90.com

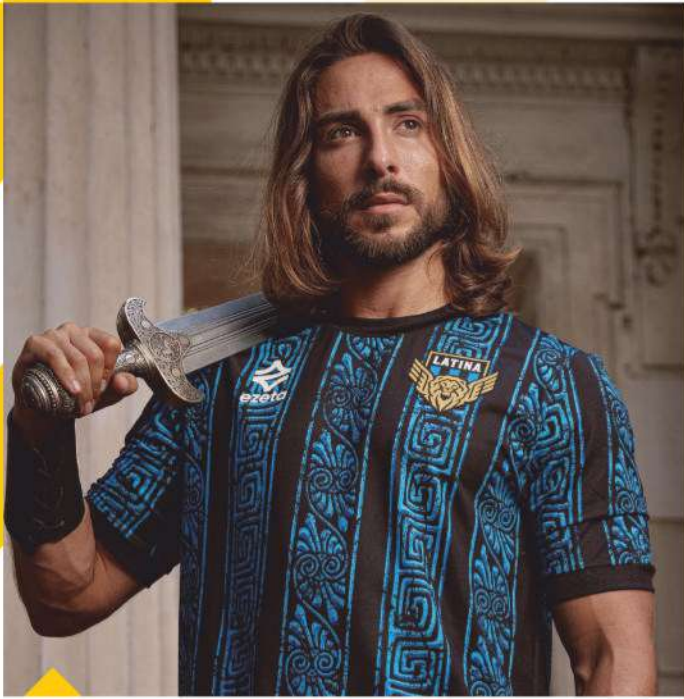
No bucket hats allowed at your sister's graduation? Banned from wearing a football shirt to that upcoming wedding? Undermine the haters with this occasion-appropriate bracelet, made of premium silver and featuring a small football pitch pendant so you can express your love for the world's greatest sport in the classiest of ways. It's the perfect marriage of passion and style.



MLS ARCHIVE COLLECTION £80

prodirectsoccer.com

For some, 'Vintage MLS' conjures images of weird NASL club names (Colorado Caribous) and weirder NASL club kits (Colorado Caribous' rodeo fringe). Others will recall some seriously cool designs. Adidas have honoured those, granting five teams a bespoke set of jerseys, jackets and Gazelle shoes on a retro theme of their city, from rainbow zigzags to sepia-toned SoCal sunsets. U-S-A! U-S-A!



LATINA CALCIO HOME SHIRT

latinacalcio1932.it

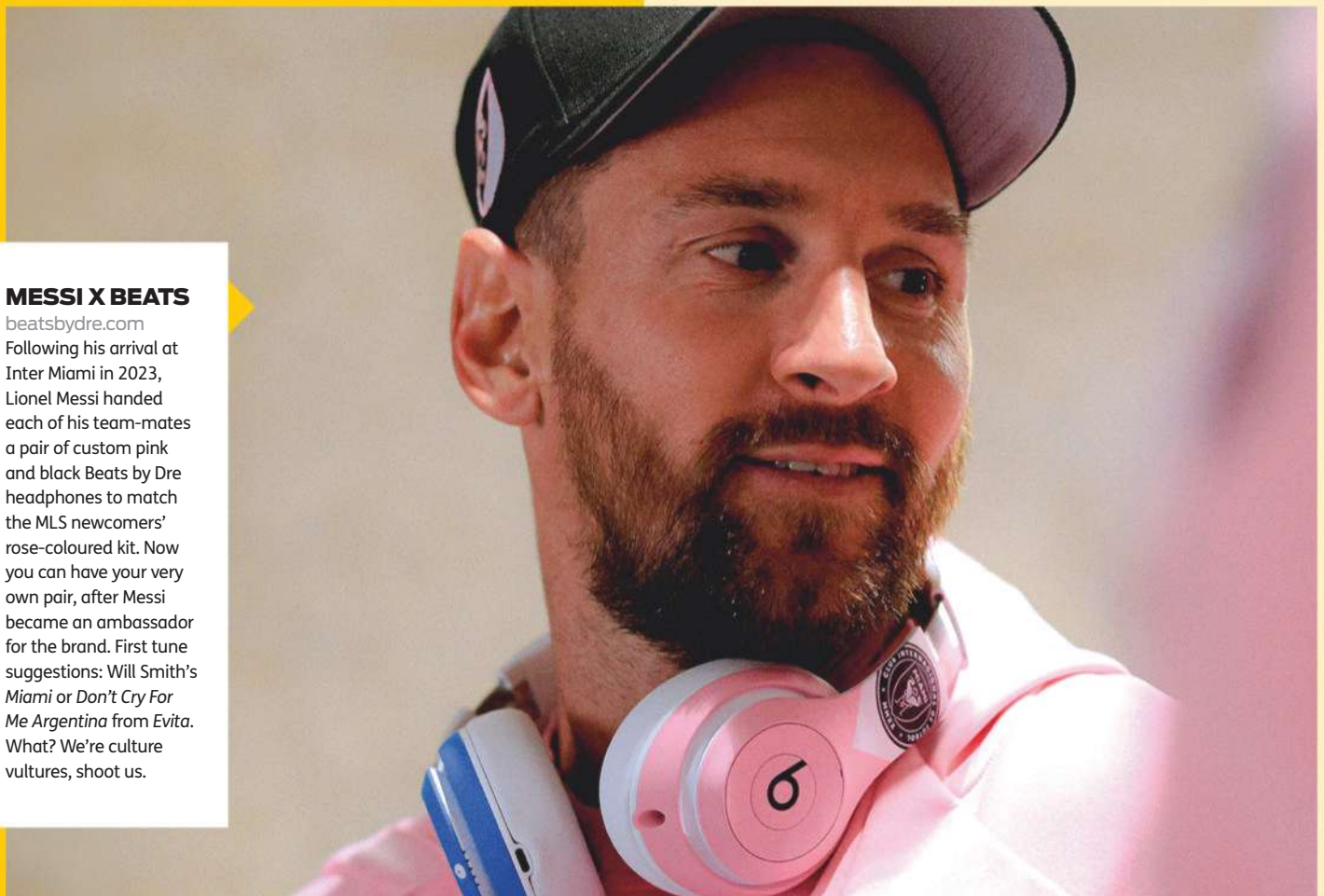
In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses encounters a powerful sorceress in Latina, a town on the coast of modern-day Italy, not far from Rome. Their meeting inspired a fifth-century vase attributed to Persephone, which lends its motifs to Latina Calcio's stunning home and away tops. The Serie C outfit are the first pro club to have a kit created by boutique designers Ezeta; they won't be the last. Epic.



ADIDAS X BAD BUNNY 'SAN JUAN' GAZELLE SNEAKER £299.99

adidas.com

Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny has taken a break from producing Latin Trap bangers to collaborate with Adidas on another pair of *fuego* sneakers, inspired by the colours of the Puerto Rican capital's sandy beaches, blue seas and historic cobblestones, plus the festival of Noche de San Juan. Me Porto Bonito, indeed.



MESSI X BEATS

beatsbydre.com

Following his arrival at Inter Miami in 2023, Lionel Messi handed each of his team-mates a pair of custom pink and black Beats by Dre headphones to match the MLS newcomers' rose-coloured kit. Now you can have your very own pair, after Messi became an ambassador for the brand. First tune suggestions: Will Smith's *Miami* or *Don't Cry For Me Argentina* from *Evita*. What? We're culture vultures, shoot us.



1860 MUNICH 'MEMBERS JERSEY' €80

tsv1860shop.org

It isn't easy to stand out from the crowd when your neighbours are Bavarian juggernauts Bayern, but third-tier 1860 Munich have nicked the spotlight with their 125th anniversary shirt. The 'Members Jersey' has the traditional club colours in a retro pinstripe design and was created by fashionatas Societas, the brains behind Italian club Venezia's consistently gorgeous clobber. Stunning.



MATCH ATAX 'UEFA CLUB COMPETITIONS 2024-25' MEGA TIN £14.99

topps.com

Do your best impression of Euro 2024 defenders by popping Harry Kane and Phil Foden in your back pocket. Match Attax return for another season, so you can stockpile football's biggest stars and trade them with friends at school or colleagues in the office. Why not kick-start your collection with a mega tin?



KIPSTA UEFA MATCHBALLS £69.99

decathlon.com

Kipsta, Decathlon's football division, claim their balls for this season's Europa League and Conference League are "the most tested in the world", offering excellent quality, unparalleled grip and unrivalled trajectory control. Having personally visited Kipsta's lab in Lille and seen white-coated nerds repeatedly firing footballs out of a cannon into a wall, FFT can confirm they are top-notch.

SHOP WINDOW

The definitive shopping guide for the football fan

CHILTERN PROGRAMMES

1st Floor, Media House, 55 Old Road, LINSLADE, Beds. LU7 2RB

To receive a competitively priced list of your club's "home" programmes (both League and Non-League and also Internationals and "Big Match"), please send a first class stamp, along with your name and address to the above address or e-mail

andrew.moore7@btconnect.com



FourFourTwo

TO ADVERTISE HERE, CONTACT THE SALES TEAM ON 01225 442244



FREE

FOOTBALL PROGRAMMES

To receive a FREE programme plus a copy of our latest catalogue (listing several thousand different mint condition Big Match, League, Scottish, Irish, Foreign and Non-League teams programmes etc.) please send your name and address to:

**STEVE EARL FOOTBALL PROGRAMMES (DEPT.FFT)
BROAD STREET, BUNGAY, SUFFOLK, NR35 1AH, ENGLAND**

or phone **01986 892621** or visit **www.footballprogs.co.uk**

The 2024 F.A. Cup Final (Man.City v Man.Utd) £15.50 (inc.p&p)

(Credit/Debit Cards & PayPal accepted)

GET SIX ISSUES OF
FOURFOURTWO FOR £9.99!

**INTRODUCING
THE WORLD'S
GREATEST TEAM**

BELLINGHAM VINICIUS JUNIOR ENDRICK RODRYGO

FourFourTwo

**THE
NEW
GALACTICOS**

With Mbappe added to an all-star attack, can Real Madrid rule Europe once more?

**THE RISE OF
ASTON VILLA**
How Emery led them back into the elite

**INSIDE
RATCLIFFE'S
MAN UNITED**
The quest to revive a giant

**ENJOY
INSTANT READING!**
Our digital editions come with the same resources included in the print edition!

CAFU • KROOS • MOLBY • SOUTHAMPTON • TYLDESLEY • ROB...

iPad is a trademark of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. App Store is a service mark of Apple Inc.

This offer is **ONLY** available via our online shop
www.magazinesdirect.com

Available on iOS or Android

MY PERFECT XI

PHILLIP COCU

The 101-cap Netherlands midfielder selects an enviable side made up of former Oranje and Barcelona team-mates, including a pair of iconic Brazilian forwards...



EDWIN VAN DER SAR

“He was one of the world’s best goalkeepers. Some goalkeepers are a bit peculiar or more introverted but Edwin is a very social person. I’m glad that he has recovered well from his cerebral haemorrhage. That was a shock for everyone who knows him well.”

CARLES PUYOL

“I met him when we played training matches against Barcelona B. He was young, running all over the place and tackling. Not everyone was happy with his aggressive style! Carles became a Barcelona icon – a true leader, with his heart in the right place. I remember him putting Eric Abidal forward to collect an award after he had recovered from cancer.”

FRANK DE BOER

“Frank was a footballing central defender; he and Jaap Stam formed a great duo for the Netherlands. He’s also one of my best friends. We have been very close for years, and our families are, too. If we do something together, it’s Frank who takes the lead, as if he still has an invisible captain’s armband. We often play padel or golf together.”

JAAP STAM

“Jaap joined PSV a year after me and we saw his qualities immediately: he was so strong, fast and good on the ball. Before the match started, strikers were already afraid of him. Jaap had a great career as one the best defenders of our generation, but he’s always remained modest. He is very down-to-earth.”

GIOVANNI VAN BRONCKHORST

“My old neighbour and we played together for one season at Barcelona, under Frank Rijkaard. Giovanni became better and more important for his teams over the years, and he was always in service of the team, as a multifunctional player and sympathetic person. He scored great goals from distance, too.”

ANDRES INIESTA

“When Andres joined Barcelona’s first team as a teenager, everyone instantly recognised that he was

a special player. His dribbling was amazing. But he was also a modest boy and eager to learn, especially by watching others. He hurt me in the 2010 World Cup Final – I was then joint-assistant coach with the Netherlands.”

PEP GUARDIOLA

“Pep is perhaps the leading manager of our generation, and as a player he could put the ball anywhere he wanted. He was a real Barcelona midfielder. Pep was also a leader, on and off the field, and discussed tactical matters with Louis van Gaal. Louis liked that.”

LUIS FIGO

“Luis had a great influence on Barcelona’s dressing room atmosphere, and it caused quite a commotion when he went to Real Madrid. I’ll never forget his return with Real at the Camp Nou, with that pig’s head. But Luis is a great guy and we remained close. He came to Eindhoven for my testimonial.”

RONALDINHO

“Ronaldinho was always laughing, and at Barcelona he made sure everyone realised again why we played football: to have fun. In the years before Ronaldinho came, we had difficult years with Barça, but partly because of him, a new vibe was created. It was miraculous what he could do with a ball.”

DENNIS BERGKAMP

“He had a velvet touch – we’ll never forget that goal against Argentina at the 1998 World Cup – and although he seems a bit introverted, he has a great sense of humour. There were a few moments when Arsenal showed interest in me and I could’ve been his team-mate, but it never happened.”

RONALDO

“I’ve never seen a better striker than Ronaldo [left]. I first met him as a teenager at PSV and he could run faster with the ball at his feet than most players without the ball, and he could score with either foot as well. He was truly a phenomenon, even with his big injuries.”

Gus Hetterscheid



THE GAFFER

GUUS HIDDINK

“I met Guus when I was a youth player at De Graafschap, then again with the Dutch team and PSV, and we’re still in contact after he made me interested in coaching. He’s a very warm person.”

THE SUBS

01 CHRIS VAN DER WEERDEN

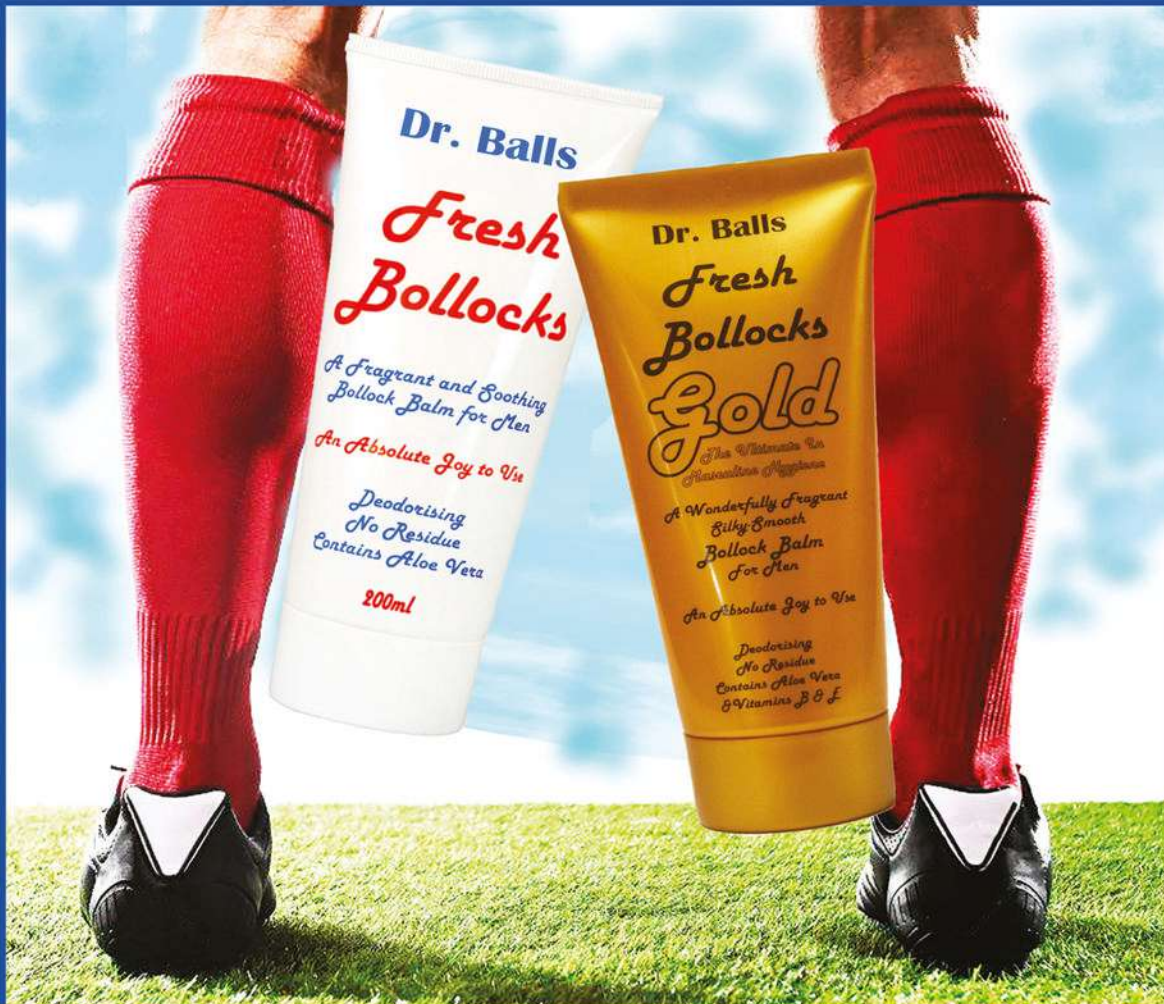
02 PATRICK KLUIVERT

03 LUC NILIS



BOLLOCK BALMS FOR MEN

who care about their personal hygiene



Fresh Bollocks is a light, silky-smooth bollock balm that's easy to use, fresh, fragrant and deodorising with no unsightly residue.

An Absolute Joy to Use.

Fresh Bollocks Original for a sporty, fresh scent or try new Fresh Bollocks Gold for a rich, masculine, woody scent. An essential addition to modern mans grooming routine.

Buy now on Amazon. Fantastic Value

Only £10 for a large 200ml tube.



@freshbollocks

www.freshbollocks.com

Dad first took you when you were six and all you remember is the noise, the noise! and you were being lifted up and high-fived by strangers and then that was it, there was nothing else but Becks and Scholes and Keane and the feeling you got every other week with Dad in the Stretford End, a feeling not miles away from the one you had when you took Eric to a museum after school and showed him



Manchester United wallpaper, 1995–1996
© Coloroll

If you're into it,
it's in the V&A

