

FOOTBALL RADAR

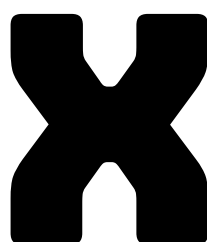


ROLIGAN JOURNAL



ISSUE FOUR

A FOOTBALL JOURNAL BY FOOTBALL RADAR ANALYSTS



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FOREWORD

1998 was a triumphant year for French football. In July, Amie Jacquet's team united a fractious nation in winning their home World Cup with typical panache, sparking wild celebrations on the Champs Elysees. Five months later, Paris witnessed another momentous event, although unheralded at the time - Kylian Mbappe Lottin was born. Last summer Gallic divisions were again briefly eased as Les Bleus became World Champions for the second time, instigating similar scenes of joy. This time, however, Kylian Mbappe was at their centre, still just 19. Trophy in hand.

Mbappe proved decisive at Russia 2018, crucially so to win an entropic second round tie with Argentina. Mbappe's chest-out blurred gallop to draw an early penalty remains perhaps the tournament's enduring image while an emphatic finish in the Moscow rain to secure French victory two weeks later drew parallels with Brazil's 1958 Pele inspired triumph. Although likening Mbappe's achievements to Pele's may seem hyperbolic, it's likely that as the 2018 World Cup recedes into memory marvel at Mbappe's tournament will only grow with greater context and eventually stand alongside other historic performances of the world game.

While many emerging talents suffer through the 'new-(insert past national great here)' prefix, such declarations have been less of an issue for Mbappe. Although comparisons with Thierry Henry's pace, deft touch and flare as well as a young Ronaldo Nazario's unerring finishing and alarming change of direction are clear, Mbappe's talent is such, his ceiling so high, that he has the potential to set himself apart. Maybe he already has.

Such an explosion of young footballing talent may be the most enthralling aspect of being a football fan and in the pages ahead Football Radar's analysts will aim to point you in the direction of those players who may be capable, even in some small way, of generating the excitement and passion Mbappe helped ignite in the millions partying in Paris last July.

This fourth publication from Football Radar's analysts, following last year's journal which centred on the next generation of young managers and magazines previewing EURO 2016 and AFCON 2017, not only focuses on the latest wave of young talent but also takes a wider look at the footballing landscape. Alongside profiles of Benfica's latest gifted midfielder, Crystal Palace's down to earth young full back and Kashima Antlers' new flying winger you will find an overview of Norwegian club Stabaek's golden generation, discussions on the struggle for power at OGC Nice, an analytical profile of Copenhagen free kick master Robert Skov and the J.League Team of the Season. A huge thank you to the dozens of analysts at Football Radar who contributed their time and expert footballing knowledge to this journal.

It seems almost farcical that Kylian Mbappe only turned 20 in December but his senior career at the turn of the year already amounted to 150 games, 73 goals and 40 assists having won every French domestic honour and the World Cup. After adding the Trophée Kopa in December, the Ballon d'Or's young player award, placing fourth for the main prize, Mbappe explained that it just made him "hungrier to go on and achieve more. My next aim is to lift absolutely every trophy." While further trophies, notably the Champions League and the Ballon d'Or itself, are yet to be captured, Mbappe's footballing destiny is perhaps a little less tangible than medals and cups.

Assuming he can avoid the disastrous injuries of Ronaldo Nazario for example, what will ultimately shape the Frenchman's legacy will be adding to a growing list of memorable, even iconic, moments. His barrelling run against Argentina may soon sit alongside images of Diego Maradona surrounded by Belgians at Mexico 86, Pele's volley in the 58 final and Johan Cruyff's 1974 turn against Sweden. While there remains many barriers to the success Mbappe is capable of, such as injury, attitude and form, what he could *win* is perhaps immaterial, even inevitable. Instead it's what he could *do* that may come to define him.

Perhaps this partially true for every young talent, the prospect of their potential often proving more captivating than what's won as a result of it. Mbappe, however, may be one of the few who could surpass the hype. Either way, thanks to a man not even alive to see Didier Deschamps lift the World Cup at the Stade de France in 1998, it's likely that the Champs Elysee won't be quiet for long.

Adam White, Editor



GENERATION

2019:

YOUNG

PLAYERS

THERE ARE FEW more captivating stories in world football than the explosion of a talented young player. Over the last century, the historical tapestry of the world's premier sport has been repeatedly embroidered with tales of young players dramatically proving they have more than just potential.

Many of these have become iconic images etched on the global footballing consciousness; a 17 year old Pele's glorious World Cup final brace in 1958, Kylian Mbappe's chest-out, pitch long, freight train gallop against Argentina last summer and many more in between.

Having profiled the next generation of young coaches from around the globe in last year's

Roligan Journal, in the pages ahead Football Radar's analysts, leading experts in an eclectic selection of leagues, discuss burgeoning talents they tip to forge a meaningful career in the international game and perhaps even produce similarly memorable moments akin to Pele and Mbappe.

From Universidad de Chile's latest tricky winger to Pohang Steelers' young playmaker to Lincoln City's teenage forward, all 45 players profiled share youth (born after 1/1/97 - 21 or under at the start of the year) and talent. Who knows, one such talent, many of whom are discussed in greater depth throughout this journal, may arrive at your club in the near future.

Adam White, Editor

OREL MANGALA HAMBURG (20)

Despite the heartbreak of their first ever relegation from the Bundesliga, HSV headed into 2018/19 with confidence having managed to hang on to many of their experienced international players who would surely make the 2. Bundesliga a cakewalk. While it has not all been plain sailing so far, Hamburg are indeed top of the division at the time of writing. However, it's not any of their veterans but a player yet to make his full international debut who has almost certainly been their strongest performer so far. Orel Mangala arrived on loan from VfB Stuttgart in the summer with little fanfare. However, since then the unflinching defensive midfielder has effortlessly stepped into a midfield trio containing both Aaron Hunt and Lewis Holtby, the team's captains and has looked every bit their equal.

The 20 year old is usually unaccustomed to the spectacular side of the game, but has proven an essential presence anchoring the side, providing a wall for the defence and the rhythm from which many attacks start. Die Rothosen have already conceded that they will probably not be given the chance to make Mangala's loan permanent, but either way, expect to see the young Belgian starring in the Bundesliga next season and for many to come. A first cap for Roberto Martínez' Red Devils surely awaits too.

TOM NUTTALL-JONES, GERMAN BUNDESLIGA 2 ANALYST - @FRFUSSBALLTOMNJ

MALANG SARR NICE (20)

Sarr has all the potential to be an elite centre half. At the tender age of 20 he has already made 71 appearances in Ligue 1 whilst also acquiring experience in Europe. Whilst being very physically imposing he also has all the technical qualities of a top quality centre half and is comfortable bringing the ball out of defence. There is not much this kid does not have and if he is able to iron out some of the lapses in concentration that he has I can see him reaching the level of a Samuel Umtiti or Eric Abidal who are comparable in style.

ANDRES CLAVIJO, FRENCH LIGUE 1 ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLANDRE

XAVIER SCHLAGER

RED BULL SALZBURG (21)

Schlager, a Linz native, was brought into the Red Bull Salzburg academy in 2009 and has not looked back. The 21-year-old midfielder has worked his way up through the youth teams and finally made his Bundesliga debut for the senior side in 2016 under then manager Adi Hutter. Although Schlager had to wait until the season that followed for more regular opportunities - often dropping down into their feeder club, FC Liefering, this did not deter the tenacious teenager. Achievements followed with the Salzburg U19 team, who won the 2016/17 edition of the UEFA Youth League in part thanks to 7 assists in 5 games from Schlager who also captained the side, although injury ultimately prevented him from featuring in the semi-final and final in Switzerland.

By 2018, Schlager had become a key player for Salzburg and a regular in the senior Austrian National Team under Franco Foda, while developing into one of the most versatile midfielders in Europe outside of the top 5 leagues and is no doubt a future target for a host of top European clubs. Salzburg's current Head Coach Marco Rose has not just moulded Schlager into a determined central midfielder but one who has the natural talent to play as a creative advanced play-maker or as a ball-winner who will cover every blade of grass over the course of 90 minutes. At just 21 years of age, Salzburg have possibly created one of the most well-rounded midfielders Austria has ever seen.

TIM ARMITAGE, AUSTRIAN BUNDESLIGA ANALYST - @FRFUSSBALLTIM

ANDREW GRAVILLON

PESCARA (21)

Gravillon has been a standout for an overachieving Pescara side. The fact he was repurchased by Inter for 10 million euros speaks for itself. The youngster who decided to play for Guadeloupe has been fantastic in the heart of Pescara's defence after adapting fast to Bepi Pillon's style of football, managing to fend off challenges for his spot from experienced veterans Hugo Campagnaro and Gennaro Scognamiglio as well as the less wizened Marco Perrotta. The defender is unusual, combining the typical toughness of your average 'Italian CB' with the new style needed in modern football - technicality and intelligence.

Adept with the ball at his feet and tasked with carrying it forward whenever possible, Gravillon has shown that there can be other types of defenders in Serie B, not just the 'no nonsense' ones. The fact that he seems to always know when to go to ground and when to stay on his feet is another impressive attribute and on top of that he is a presence in the opposition box too, already netting twice by the start of February. His only weakness would be lapses of concentration, which is typical for someone as young as him. Still, I doubt Inter will use him from the get-go and he may be a bargaining chip in a future transfer, but Gravillon is definitely destined for a bigger stage.

PETER PANKOVSKI, ITALIAN SERIE B ANALYST - @FRCALCIOPETER

ANTHONY

SAO PAULO (18)

The next star off the São Paulo production line having recently guided them to glory in the prestigious Copa São Paulo youth tournament. Antony is a classic Brazilian winger, combining pace and flair with an impressive range of passing and a real eye for goal when cutting inside from the right flank onto his stronger left foot. He has just a handful of substitute appearances to his name at senior level so far, but looks set for a breakout year in 2019 and is already attracting admiring glances from some of Europe's biggest clubs.

ANDREW WALKER, BRAZILIAN SERIE A ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLANDREW

MATHEUS HENRIQUE

GREMIO (21)

Touted as the natural replacement for Arthur, Matheus Henrique broke into the Gremio first team during the second half of the 2018 Serie A season; making 12 league appearances and illustrating his ability to dictate play in a style reminiscent of his former team-mate.

Equally comfortable dribbling past an opponent or passing through a defensive line, Henrique has proven himself to be a viable option for the Porto Alegre side who look to prioritise youth players who are technically gifted on the ball. With Henrique carrying his promising form into the 2019 State Championship season, Gremio fans have reason to be optimistic that the 21-year-old will play a pivotal role in midfield for years to come.

JOEL TURNER, BRAZILIAN SERIE A ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLJOEL

BASTIEN TOMA

SION (19)

Toma Bastien plays at Sion and is a 19 year old central midfielder. He has blossomed in the last year and his value has doubled. He has great vision which was exemplified by a through ball that bypassed nine Xamax players back in October. In 40 games up until the start of February he had 8 assists while also being part of the Swiss U21 side. His contract expires in 2020 so it will be interesting to see where he ends up.

ALEX ROBINSON, SWISS SUPER LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFUSSBALLALEX

ALPHONSO DAVIES

BAYERN MUNICH (18)

Alphonso Davies made his Major League Soccer debut aged just 15 but shot to prominence following a superb 2018 campaign. The winger was Vancouver Whitecaps' stand out performer last term, scoring eight and providing 10 assists. His form alerted some of Europe's elite and in July Davies completed a \$22 million move to German champions Bayern Munich, a MLS transfer record. The 18-year-old joined up with his new team in 2019 and has already featured twice off the bench in the Bundesliga. With Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben likely to leave the club in the summer, German fans can expect to see a lot more from the Canadian winger in the 2019-20 campaign.

JOSH JONES, MLS ANALYST - @FRCALCIOJOSHUA

SARPEET SINGH

WELLINGTON PHOENIX (19)

The 19-year old broke into the Wellington Phoenix first team towards the end of last season in what was a disappointing season for the Nix, which proved a good chance to unearth some of their younger talent. This season, however, Singh has found himself at the heart of the team and is one of their most influential players in their push for a top 6 position. The exciting young attacking midfielder has excellent speed, dribbling ability and superb awareness which allows him to pick out a killer pass. Singh is a very bright young prospect and Nix fans should enjoy him while he is at the club, as I think some European clubs may come knocking in the near future.

MATT RIGGS, AUSTRALIAN A-LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLMATTR

JIMMY MARTINEZ

UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE (22)

Martinez had a breakout season at Huachipato last year as he moved from a tricky winger to a more creative, box to box midfielder. He is capable of mazy dribbles, threaded through balls and will always threaten the goal from outside the box when given a chance. Having recently moved to Chilean giants Universidad de Chile, he will look to build on the successes of the last year and make a claim for a spot in the national side.

TOBY MASON, CHILEAN PRIMERA DIVISION ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLTBY

ANDREAS SKOV OLSEN

NORDSJÆLLAND (19)

Typically starting on the right wing with a preference to cut inside onto his favoured left foot, this season Skov Olsen became the youngest player to hit double figures for goals in the Superliga. His direct running has caused trouble throughout the campaign whilst, despite his relative inexperience, he has already developed a good knack of being in the right place at the right time in the box.

TOM SANDERS, DANISH SUPERLIGA ANALYST - @FRFODBOLDTOM

MATTEO GUENDOUZI

ARSENAL (19)

Mattéo Guendouzi, 19, has made a massive impression for Arsenal this season following his £7m summer switch from French Ligue 2 club Lorient. Despite initially being earmarked as a player for the future upon his arrival, Guendouzi has made more than 30 appearances in all competitions this season by the start of February, indirectly keeping out more illustrious names such as Aaron Ramsey and Mesut Ozil in the process. He undoubtedly has star potential but his positioning is loose at times which can be exploited while his maverick style can get him into trouble. However, his ability to relieve pressure and evade tackles in the centre of midfield is as exceptional as his passing range. He manages to fuse together a rare combination of skill and character on the pitch which belies his age and places him as one of the most interesting prospects in the Premier League. Despite his age, Guendouzi has the potential to emerge as the key component in Arsenal's post Arsene Wenger era under Unai Emery.

ZAHIR PIRANDITTA, ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLZAHIR

EDSON ALVAREZ

CLUB AMERICA (21)

Tipped to be the next Mexico captain, the versatile centre back (who can also play at DMID) was used as a right back during the World Cup. Alvarez is very tall, which makes him great in the air, while he can also put in a tackle. He is technically good too which makes him effective in a more advanced holding midfield role.

SAMIR SMAIL, MEXICAN LIGA MX ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLSAMIR

KIERAN TIERNEY

CELTIC (21)

There are plenty of players to choose from in Scotland with Ryan Porteous, David Turnbull and Callumn Morrison to name a few, but the obvious choice has to be Celtic left back Kieran Tierney. The 21 year old has already become an integral part of Brendan Rodgers' Celtic team and he remains linked with big money moves to clubs across Europe. He is already currently one of the best Scottish players and things are only looking up for the youngster.

BEN GRAY, SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLBENG

LEE JIN-HYUN

POHANG STEELERS (21)

The young playmaker Lee Jin-hyun signed for Pohang Steelers in the summer of 2018 after a disappointing spell at Austria Vienna. Previously labelled as a 'wonderkid' by the Korean media, Lee's return to the K-League was reported as a failure to live up to expectations. Despite his downfall, he managed to turnaround his career in just half a season playing for Pohang. With 5 goals and 3 assists in 13 starts, Lee helped Pohang climb from 9th to 4th, narrowly missing out on an Asian Champions League spot. At the same time, he was involved in Korea's Asian Games campaign where the U23 team won gold. Lee's performances for his club and the U23 national team granted him a call-up to Korea's senior team, making his debut for his country in November. As a standby player, he travelled with Korea's squad for the 2019 Asian Cup in the UAE but failed to make the final cut. However, with midfielders Ki Sung-yueng and Koo Ja-cheol retiring from international duty, Lee will play a big part in the future of Korean football.

ALEX LEE, KOREAN K-LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLALEE

GEDSON FERNANDES

BENFICA (20)

2018 was quite the year for Benfica youngster Gedson Fernandes. He may well still be a relatively unfamiliar name to football fans at present but, based on his rapid progress, it won't be long before this changes. After flourishing for their B team in Portugal's second tier during the 2017/18 campaign, managing 5 goals in 31 appearances, he made the step up to the senior side during the summer and played a big part during pre-season. Having only just turned 20, he's still a very raw talent but what a talent! Tall, athletic, confident on the ball and a real driving force from central midfield while also not being one to shy away from his defensive responsibilities. Gedson already looks like the complete midfielder, drawing obvious comparisons to World Cup winner Paul Pogba.

ALEX BROWN, PORTUGUESE LIGA NOS ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLALEX

LUKE THOMAS

COVENTRY CITY (19)

The pacy winger is slowly making a name for himself in the midlands, having joined Coventry on loan from Derby County this summer. His direct style has given the Coventry attack some much needed impetus this season, with the newly promoted side sitting comfortably in mid-table. The loanee had offers to move on this January but Coventry's track record of developing local talent and the promise of regular minutes has kept Thomas at the Ricoh.

JAMIE STRONACH, ENGLISH LEAGUE ONE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLJS

SANDRO TONALI

BRESCIA (18)

Tonali broke into the Brescia starting eleven in January 2018 and is already a key player for the team, being linked to the likes of Juventus, Liverpool and Chelsea and earning a call-up to the Italy squad. He's a modern, aggressive 'regista' who is as good at tackling and breaking up play as he is at passing and dribbling. Often compared to Andrea Pirlo, his manager and the player himself believe Tonali to be more in the De Rossi/Gattuso mould with big things expected from him in the future.

ALESSANDRO PIRODDI, ITALIAN SERIE B ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLALEX

PATRICK CUTRONE

AC MILAN (21)

Cutrone has started his career impressively but still has a long way to go if he is to match or even surpass those that have gone before him. During the 2000s, Andriy Shevchenko and Filippo Inzaghi formed a formidable partnership to lead Milan to two Champions League wins and a Scudetto. In a similarly dominant period back in the early 1990s, Marco van Basten firmly stamped his mark on Serie A. A daunting task for many, yet Cutrone has shown over the past 18 months that he is unfazed despite his lack of experience. He played a key role in Milan's run to the Coppa Italia final last season, including scoring an extra time winner against local rivals, Inter Milan, in the quarter-finals. His ability to produce in the key moments did not go unnoticed by a wider audience either, as he finished seventh in the voting for the Kopa Trophy.

SAM BROOKES, ITALIAN SERIE A ANALYST - @FRCALCIOSAM

HIROKI ABE

KASHIMA ANTLERS (20)

Abe first came to attention as a 62nd minute substitute for Kashima Antlers as they welcomed Spanish La Liga side Sevilla for a mid-season friendly. Abe instantly impressed as he continually weaved his way past Sevilla defender after Sevilla defender, with his close control, agility, and acceleration causing significant issues. For the remainder of the 2017 season, the 18-year-old Abe became a permanent fixture in the Kashima matchday squad. In 2018 though he was a revelation. In a very strong Kashima Antlers side, he became a regular starter putting in countless superb performances, especially in the second half of the season as Kashima fought on multiple fronts and lifted the Asian Champions League.

SAM ROBSON, JAPANESE J.1 ANALYST - @FRSOCCERSAM

MIKEL OYARZABAL

REAL SOCIEDAD (21)

Although the flash and verve of Real Madrid's superstar-to-be Vinícius Júnior makes him the hottest young property in La Liga right now, I'll admit to having a soft spot to another fleet-footed left winger - Real Sociedad's Mikel Oyarzabal. The Basque team's next big thing had already made over one hundred appearances for his club when local rivals Athletic made an approach for the player last summer. Oyarzabal rejected the offer, instead opting to sign a long-term deal with La Real, taking on the mantle of retiring club legend Xabi Prieto in the process. He is ever a joy to watch and manages to be deft and dynamic with the ball at his feet while carrying an entire club's hopes and dreams on his shoulders. Watch out too for Sevilla's coconut-headed whizz-kid Bryan Gil, who has only just broken through into the first team, but already looks like a major talent.

BEN STEBBINGS, SPANISH LA LIGA ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLBEN

AARON WAN-BISSAKA

CRYSTAL PALACE (21)

Already one of the best right backs in the league and has only been a guaranteed starter since the beginning of the season. Wan-Bissaka is a converted winger who initially started playing deeper for the U23s. As he was previously a winger, his obvious strengths lie in attacking areas; always a threat going forward, he has excellent crossing ability. However, his defensive work has also come on leaps and bounds, barely ever losing a tackle he goes in for and stops so much service coming in on his side.

NATHAN FENNER, ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLNF

FEDOR CHALOV

CSKA MOSCOW (20)

A striker with great movement and an eye for a poacher's finish. Russian Young Player of the Year back in 2017, the 20 year old was the Russian Premier League's top scorer after the first half of this season.

BILLY WOOD, POLISH AND RUSSIAN LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLBILLY

SZYMON ZURKOWSKI

GORNIK ZABRZE (21)

Zurkowski was the club's record sale after Fiorentina bought him in January for just under £4m before being loaned back. The central midfield engine has been one of the stars of the Ekstraklasa for a couple of years and won Poland Young Player of the Year in 2018.

BILLY WOOD, POLISH AND RUSSIAN LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLBILLY

DANIEL KELLY

DUNDALK (21)

The dynamic winger was playing amateur football this time last year, which makes his rise to prominence all the more impressive. Having moved to Bohemians last July, he went on to score 5 goals in his 10 league appearances for them, becoming one of the most feared wingers in the league. A rare player who possesses pace and a final product, which has seen him secure a move to league and cup holders Dundalk FC.

AIDEN GAULE, LEAGUE OF IRELAND ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLAIDAN

SANDER BERGE

GENK (20)

Berge may be only 20 years of age, but on the pitch he towers above most other players. Standing at almost 2 metres tall, he's an instantly recognisable figure; a ruddy-cheeked, floppy-haired man mountain. He's now 2 years into his time at Genk and has established himself as a key part of the midfield in a side currently looking to be favourites to lift the 18/19 Pro League title in Belgium. Manchester United in particular have been keeping a close eye on the youngster who already boasts 12 caps at senior level for Norway. Should he move on to a bigger league, what will prove most interesting to see is how he copes defensively. In Genk, he plays for a side who dominate the ball and, though nominally a defensive midfielder, it's on the ball and driving forward where he's at his best, a rifling long-range strike a key component of his game. He can sometimes be caught out defensively but, at just 20, he'll learn. Most importantly, he possesses the raw talent and physicality to cut it with the best.

GEORGE NOTT, BELGIAN PRO LEAGUE ANALYST - @FRVOETBALGEORGE

MATTHEW SMITH

TWENTE (19)

Matthew Smith is the 19 year old engine of FC Twente's midfield who combines enormous work ethic and stamina with a great passing range across the pitch. He's invaluable to the league leaders and earlier this season he made his debut for the Welsh national team. He's currently on loan from Man City and while that level might prove too high for him, I still expect big things from him in the future.

MAARTEN VERMEULEN, DUTCH EERSTEDIVISIE ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLMV

MATTHIJS DE LIGT

AJAX (19)

Youngest ever Ajax captain, youngest player to start for the Netherlands since 1931, youngest player in a European final (2017 UEL v Manchester United) and first defender to win the Golden Boy Award - already an impressive CV for this immensely talented teenager who is rapidly becoming one of the world's elite defenders and has the potential to be one of the best of his generation. He is the epitome of a modern centre-back; commanding, strong in the challenge, (deceptively) quick, reads the game superbly and can't half play himself, but perhaps his greatest asset is his maturity which has been the backbone of his early success. Some of Europe's biggest clubs are chasing his signature and it's not hard to see why.

ADAM BOSWORTH, DUTCH EREDIVISIE ANALYST - @FRVOETBALADAM

KOKI SAITO

YOKOHAMA FC (17)

It can be difficult when you are a young player trying to break into the first team with risk averse managers often selecting more experienced and less talented players ahead of you. Well Koki Saito currently does suffer with that issue to the extreme as he often doesn't get much of a look in at his club. He is perhaps still a little wet behind the ears to start, and the bench at Yokohama is still owned by J2's most famous novelty act, King Kazu Miura, aged 51. However, this should not be counted against Saito. Koki is a quick and lively striker, the type who gets the crowd going with dazzling feet that stupefy and petrify defenders. Like King Kazu, Saito has also been breaking age records, by coming on last season he became youngest player to ever play for Yokohama FC. He has also been progressing through the age groups with the national team, lighting up the Japan U19s in the AFC Championship in Indonesia, scoring 3 goals in the group stage. His progress did not stop there as he was recently called up for a training camp with Japan U20s, not bad for a 17 year old.

CHARLIE HOUGHTON, JAPANESE J2 ANALYST - @FRSOCCERCHARLIE

ELLIS CHAPMAN

LINCOLN CITY (18)

Having signed a long term contract with Lincoln, manager Danny Cowley has called Chapman his 'precious' and he has really high hopes for him. Chapman has started 5 games this season, one being a league fixture, and the way he carries himself at such a young age is eye catching. He has a wand of a left foot and vision aplenty. I would describe him as a lower league Ozil and is unlucky that this Lincoln team is so strong and doing so well this season.

BRADLEY BARRACLOUGH, ENGLISH LEAGUE TWO ANALYST - @FRFOTBALLBRAD

ISMAILA SARR

RENNES (20)

Like a number of players on this list, it's tough to grasp the fact that Sarr remains so young, given his level reached and responsibility assumed. Sarr joined then Ligue 1 Metz for the start of the 16/17 campaign from their Senegalese feeder club Generation Foot but despite flashes of his loping brilliance it took until the final third of the campaign for him to establish himself - a devastating cameo off the bench in a 3-2 loss to PSG proved a highlight. Tricky, direct and imposing physicality, the Senegalese International has developed a knack for the spectacular at Rennes, moving after a sole season with Metz. A host of thunderous strikes have characterised his upward curve to becoming arguably Rennes' premier player after a trip to the World Cup in the summer. Whether a mooted shift towards a more central role would be beneficial remains uncertain. His talent, however, is in no doubt.

ADAM WHITE, FRENCH LIGUE 1 ANALYST - @_ADAM_WHITE_

LISANDRO MARTINEZ

DEFENSA Y JUSTICIA (21)

One to watch for the future is 21 year old Argentine centre back Lisandro Martinez. Having made his loan deal to minnows Defensa y Justicia permanent in the summer of 2018, he's played a huge role in launching their unlikely title bid this season. Short in stature and left footed, his maturity and range of passing is quite staggering for someone so young. He's the first link in bringing the ball out from the back and launching attacks, which has seen his side devastate teams on the counter. With Martinez at the back Defensa currently boast the best defensive record in the league and are the only team still undefeated. Having already been linked with the big clubs in Argentina it won't be long before European teams start to take notice too.

GREG CLARKE, ARGENTINIAN PRIMERA DIVISION ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLGREG

JEAN-CLAIR TOBIDO

BARCELONA (19)

Rangy ball playing centre back Tobido, who draws parallels with Rio Ferdinand, has endured a tumultuous season so far. Barely more than a Toulouse youth teamer during preseason, Tobido ended 2018 as a Barcelona player despite just 10 senior outings for Les Violet. Having initially been thrown in by Alain Casanova with defensive options limited back in August for the visit of Bordeaux, that short spell included last minute goals, a sending off and a controversial refusal to sign a pro deal. His youth contract expiring in the summer, interest was already rife in Tobido and, in a bid to unobstruct a summer move to a bigger club, Tobido rejected club president Olivier Serdan's advances. With the club facing the prospect of getting nothing for an extremely talented player, nurtured through the youth ranks at the Stade Municipal, an infuriated Serdan banished Tobido to the reserves. Having secured a deal from the summer, Barcelona eventually negotiated an early transfer for 2m this January. While his short career to date may have been unpredictable, his ability remains unquestionable. Skillful with an eye for a pass and a proclivity to gracefully, although sometimes riskily, play his way out of trouble, coupled with a burgeoning defensive intelligence make Tobido one of the most exciting players to emerge from Ligue 1 in the last decade. Barcelona seems the right fit.

ADAM WHITE, FRENCH LIGUE 1 ANALYST - @_ADAM_WHITE_

WILLUM ÞÓR WILLUMSON

BATE BORISOV (20)

Willumson is something of a late bloomer but has just earned a move to Belorussian champions BATE Borisov from 2018 Pepsi-deild karla runners up Breidablik after a brilliant breakthrough season. Great at transitioning with the ball, Willumson is usually deployed as a left winger but can also be used on the other flank or in midfield.

LUCAS ARNOLD, ICELANDIC PEPSI-DEILD KARLA ANALYST - @FOTBOLTILUCAS

GUGA

ATLETICO MINEIRO (20)

The Rio native made the move to Avaí at the age of 15 and just four years later went on to make 36 appearances for the Florianópolis based team in their promotion winning campaign of 2018. The young right back made an instant impression on me, not just for his marauding runs down the wing and steady defending, but the responsibility he was given and composure he showed when it came to taking the teams set pieces. Guga can act as the fullback in a 4-3-3 but also proved to be a strong option as a wing back in 3-4-3. His impressive season earned him a lot of interest from European clubs last summer, but he's since made a move to Série A side Atlético Mineiro.

ANDREW HOOPER, BRAZILIAN SERIE A ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLANDY

LUCIEN AGOUME

SOCHAUX (17)

Lucien Agoume made his debut for Sochaux in October at the age of just 16 and got his first start in the last game before Christmas. He has been playing 4 years above his age group for the last season, and came to Sochaux manager Omar Daf's attention this campaign when he began to excel for the France U17 squad, captaining the side in their most recent internationals. His main attribute appears to be his outstanding technical quality despite such a tender age, looking so confident and comfortable on the ball in Ligue 2 matches despite playing against far physically stronger opponents. He can play box-to-box and has been used just behind the number 9. At 6'1, with more growing to do, I can see him being used more in this supporting striker role in the future. He's yet to score for Sochaux but his game is more about progressing play in midfield rather than arriving in the box and, after just a handful of starts, this is hardly a concern at the moment. Since the summer he has been followed by La Masia and the Inter Milan academy, prompting Sochaux to offer him a 3 year contract to ensure they didn't lose out financially. Agoume however has held off signing a pro deal and reports this month suggest that he has agreed a deal with Leipzig; potentially a good move given the German club spotted and signed Sochaux graduate Ibrahima Konate in 2017. It's hard to say exactly how Agoume will develop from here as he is still so young but a move to Germany has certainly been a good one for other French prospects in recent years.

WILL GANE, FRENCH LIGUE 2 ANALYST - @FRFOOTBALLWILLG

HIROYA FUJIMOTO

TOKYO VERDY (19)

Fujimoto made his break through last season into the Tokyo Verdy first team rising from an unknown talented youngster to an important first team player by the end of the campaign. He was added to the squad to replace Tokyo Verdy's best player who was injured and he made the transition look easy. Deceivingly fast, Fujimoto has a low centre of gravity and a wand of a left foot that allowed him to establish himself as a first team player. He impressed fans and coaches throughout last season and has equally impressed the new manager (Gary White) so far this pre-season, with the manager outlining him as an important player going forward. He looks set to continue his progress and will no doubt be playing in J1 in the near future, with potential for a move to a European club in a couple of years time.

HARRY LUCK, JAPANESE J.2 ANALYST - @FRSOCCERHARRY

REECE JAMES

WIGAN ATHLETIC (19)

Wigan's Boy wonder, Reece James has been a revelation in his first season in professional football, the Chelsea youth prospect (and loanee) is used to success having been a part of the Chelsea U-18 team that won the FA youth Cup in 2013 and was a regular for the U-23 side despite turning 19 at the back end of last year. James Joined Wigan at the beginning of the season to add some competition and cover to last season's POTY & Supporters POTY Nathan Byrne, but after a couple of training sessions it was very clear to manager Paul Cook that he wasn't there to make up numbers and that he is a very special talent destined for the top. Renowned for his technique and exquisite delivery both from crosses and set-pieces, the 19-year-old is also never out muscled whilst on the ball and can pick a pass too. James is undoubtedly the front-runner for Latics POTY this season. The Latics' manager has run out of superlatives for the boy wonder and even went as far as saying; "I'm not speaking about Reece James. I don't need to. He's Player of the Month every month, and he's man of the match almost every week. There's nothing else I can say about him. Please don't ask me any more questions about Reece James. Apart from adopting him, I can't physically do anything more!" Despite Chelsea having a reputation for over-indulging in their loan system, if Reece James doesn't make it into their senior squad in a couple of seasons time I'd be amazed.

MICHAEL TURNER, ENGLISH CHAMPIONSHIP ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLMICHAEL

ÉDER MILITÃO

PORTO (21)

Viewed as potentially the best Brazilian defender of his generation, Éder Militão has enjoyed an astonishing rise in the game over the last year or so. Transferring from São Paulo to Porto last summer, the 21-year-old has become a fixture in Sérgio Conceição's eleven, showing a particularly high aptitude at both centre-back and right-back positions. Also capable of playing in defensive midfield, the quick and technically gifted Brazil international is rumoured to be high on Real Madrid's shopping list, an indicator that the sky's the limit for his potential. His combination of talent and a mature mentality suggests he could be considered one of the world's best in the not too distant future.

JAMIE FARR, PORTUGUESE LIGA NOS ANALYST - @FRFUTEBOLJAMIE

LASSI LAPPALAINEN

HJK HELSINKI (20)

After the 2018 season in Finland, Lassi Lappalainen returned to HJK after an 18-month loan at RoPS. He left the Helsinki club as a youth prospect, looking for more game time in the Arctic Circle, but has come back to the capital as one of the most talented young Finnish players. His spell in Rovaniemi was so impressive that it's surprising he hasn't moved abroad already. Lappalainen is mostly used out wide but he can also play centrally, either as a striker or just of the target man. Confident with both feet, he's at his best on the wings, running at defenders before cutting in to take a shot or forcing himself into the box before looking to put in a dangerous ball across the area. A shoulder injury in the summer of 2018 slowed him down slightly but he still managed to score 8 goals and record a further 5 assists in his 25 starts for RoPS. The 20 year old is now looking to have a breakthrough season at his home club and pre-season suggests manager Mika Lehtusuo is going to rely heavily on Lappalainen's talent. If he continues to improve, he might not be in the Veikkausliiga come summer 2019.

MIROSLAV TRAMITA, FINNISH VEIKKAUSLIIGA ANALYST - @FRJALKAPALLOMT

MANU VALLEJO

CADIZ (22)

Cádiz forward Vallejo, born in February 1997, has been signed recently by Valencia for a minimum of €6m and will join them in the summer. A versatile attacker who can play up front or on either wing, but it's playing as a striker that suits him best and where he is most dangerous. Vallejo can dribble using both feet and has a nose for finding good positions to round off moves while his finishing ability has impressed everybody following the Segunda this season. He is pacey too and can kill games if he finds spaces. In just six months as a pro footballer he became one of the young sensations in Spain and his next step, at Valencia, will determine if he is ready to play at a European level.

JUAN MANUEL SERRANO GARRIDO, SPANISH SEGUNDA ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLJUANMA

IGNACIO SAAVEDRA

UNIVERSIDAD CATOLICA (20)

Mature beyond his years, this unassuming 20 year old midfielder is already a key player for Chilean champions Universidad Catolica. It was his introduction into Catolica's starting eleven in August 2018 that revitalised their title charge before surging to a 13th league title. His intensity off the ball and assuredness with it rejuvenated a dormant team. He is supremely reliable in possession, able to progress the play with confidence and, like lots of Chilean midfielders, he is a dogged presser and intuitive in tackling attackers. Most impressive is his maturity, despite his tender years he has been widely praised for his decision making and perceptive positioning, fitting into the team like a seasoned pro. He has thus far brushed away talk of a move abroad and a national team call up, choosing to focus on progressing at his boyhood club, a promising sign that he'll be patient as he continues to develop into a top midfield player.

JUNAID RAHMAN, CHILEAN PRIMERA DIVISION ANALYST - @FRFUTBOLJUNAID

HUGO VETLESEN

STABÆK (18)

Now 18 years of age and a Norwegian U21 international, Vetlesen came from nowhere to immediately take his place in the Stabæk midfield just a month after his 17th birthday. The midfielder went on to make more than 50 league appearances before his 19th birthday and has attracted interest from clubs across the globe. Vetlesen is a very un-Norwegian footballer, underlined by the fact that he likes to have the ball at his feet and progress play forward quickly in what is likened by many to a fluid Spanish style of play rather than a notoriously rigid Norwegian one.

BEN WELLS, NORWEGIAN ELITESERIEN ANALYST - @FRFOTBALLBEN

ERLING HÅLAND

RED BULL SALZBURG (18)

Debut at 15. First Eliteserien appearance at 16. 6 goals in 2 games against Brann & Valerenga at 17. If 2017 was Haland's break out season, then 2018 was the year when Haland, now 18, really announced himself as one of the most promising teenage talents in world football. Gone was the lanky left winger of the past and instead before us stood a powerful 17 year old striker with the composure to match. Haland's turn of pace in behind defences was a feature of his play in the 2018 season and this became even more evident against Brann in July. The 17 year old tore Brann to shreds. Within 21 minutes of the match kicking off he had registered 4 goals. Every goal showcased Haland's unique talent as a forward, his style of play is reminiscent of current Manchester United striker Romelu Lukaku, in that both players have a similar frame yet are extremely mobile on the pitch. Having ended the Eliteserien season with 16 goals in 30 games, including 4 in 5 European outings, Haland joined Red Bull Salzburg in January. Given his progress so far, it is not out of the question that he could be playing regular football at a top European club by the age of 20.

BEN WELLS, NORWEGIAN ELITESERIEN ANALYST - @FRFOTBALLBEN

NICOLO BARELLA

CAGLIARI (22)

Barella is one of the more advanced prospects in Serie A. Having broken into the Italian national side already, his technical ability is matched by his desire and commitment to the cause, making him almost certain to move to a big European club in the summer. In October Barella made his first start for Italy in a friendly at home to Ukraine. He has since been an ever-present, playing ninety minutes against Poland and Portugal in the UEFA Nations League. The fact that he is keeping the likes of Roberto Gagliardini, Lorenzo Pellegrini and Bryan Cristante out of the side, all of whom ply their trade at the top end of the division with Inter Milan and Roma, highlights how well Barella is performing at Cagliari. With each game, Barella continues to develop into the complete midfielder. He is still in the infancy of his career though, so improvements can be made. One of his strengths can also be a weakness for him at present, and that is controlling his emotions. Supporters will accept that quality on the pitch can wane on occasion but demand that full commitment must be exhibited at all times. Barella never fails to deliver on this front but there is a fine line between passion and recklessness though, and this is something Barella must learn if he is to become the outstanding player that he promises to be.

SAM BROOKES, ITALIAN SERIE A ANALYST - @FRCALCIOSAM

S T A
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THE NORWEGIAN Eliteserien (formerly known as the Tippeligaen) has long been associated with 'value for money' by a number of clubs from 'larger' European leagues. In times where extortionate transfer fees dictate the transfer market, clubs from the Belgian, Turkish, German and French leagues in particular have scouted Norway and Scandinavia extensively in the hope of finding talent that has flown under the radar of larger clubs.

In recent seasons, Norwegian internationals such as Sander Berge (KRC Genk, £1.5m), Iver Fossum (Hannover 96, £1.8m), Ole Kristian Selnaes (St. Etienne, £3m) and more recently U'21 international Tobias Heintz (Kasimpasa SK, £720k) have all left clubs in Norway where they were excelling to make the step up to a league better known for the development and sale of young players. According to Transfermarkt, all of these players bar Heintz have improved on their 'value' as a footballer since leaving Norway. Given that Norwegian clubs are feeling the financial strain more than ever right now, this makes selling their most valuable assets key business for clubs in the top flight. One club in particular, despite struggling domestically for the past few seasons, has made it their top priority to bring as much young talent through their academy and into their first team as possible.

Stabæk are a club based in the Oslo suburb of Bærum and their proximity to Norway's capital makes sourcing the best young talent in the country that little bit easier. In recent seasons, the side have brought through a number of youth team prospects into the first team and currently Stabæk have 13 current or former Norwegian youth team internationals in their first team squad. Previously, Stabæk's strategy was to sign young players from outside of their local radius and look to develop these talents before selling on to the highest bidder. Birger Meling, now of Rosenborg BK, is a great example of this having been born in Stavanger and played with the Viking academy for 13 years until the age of 18 when he made a move to Middlesbrough in England. The move never worked out and Stabæk jumped at the opportunity to sign one of the country's biggest emerging talents in 2014. 5 years later and



HUGO
VETLESEN

BEN WELLS - STABÆK'S GOLDEN GENERATION

Meling is now a key player for league champions Rosenborg and all but set to make a big move abroad in the coming months with links to large European teams consistently popping up in the press.

However, Stabæk have since had a clear change of strategy to utilise the 'Golden Generation' of young talent they currently have at their disposal. This change was signalled by the emergence of Hugo Vetlesen in the 2017 season. Now 18 years of age and a Norwegian U'21 international, Vetlesen came from nowhere to immediately take his place in the Stabæk midfield just a month after his 17th birthday. The midfielder has since gone on to make 50 league appearances for his side before his 19th birthday and has attracted interest from clubs across the globe.

To see a player of such inexperience take Eliteserien matches by the scruff of the neck and dictate the tempo of games throughout 90 minutes was a joy to watch at the start of his Stabæk career. Vetlesen is a very un-Norwegian footballer underlined by the fact that he likes to have the ball at his feet and progress play quickly forward in what is likened by many to a fluid Spanish style of play rather than a notoriously rigid Norwegian one.

First team goalkeeper Simen Lillevik has seen first hand the benefits of the Stabæk academy; "There are a lot of good coaches in the academy and they plan for all the ages right up to the first team squad. They also travel a lot to play top European academy sides such as Barcelona, Chelsea and so on."

"A lot of the young players are given opportunities to train with the first team to get a feel of the level and what it takes to make it. Due to the financial situation of the club, Stabæk have to give young players a chance because they cannot afford to purchase the finished product in every position, this is a motivating factor for the youngsters."

A huge influence on all Stabæk youngsters progressing through the academy was former manager Toni Ordinas. The Spaniard led the side as manager from 2016 to 2018 having previously managed the club's junior team from 2013 to 2016. It is Ordinas who can be credited with bringing through Stabæk's 'Golden Generation' having managed most of the players currently in

the first team, during their stints with the junior teams as youngsters. Ordinas' fluid style of play and great man management skills have clearly influenced many of the Stabæk players now in the first team, with most youngsters mirroring Vetlesen as quick, composed and expressive modern footballers.

Ordinas garnered praise from around Norway for how he improved the club throughout his tenure there and his legacy remains in that many U'23 players currently make up the spine of the club's first team. He has since, sadly, left his position as manager of Stabæk and despite originally being offered another role within the club's set up, his current position is for now unknown. However, the legacy of his reign remains with one player in particular who is now taking up the mantle of Stabæk's hottest property.

Tobias Borchgrevink Børkeeiet is a 19 year old midfielder who made tremendous strides into the first team in the 2018 season, appearing in 27 Eliteserien games as well as the two relegation play off matches at the end of the season, helping his side maintain their place in the league for next year. His immense maturity at the base of the Stabæk midfield is the main reason as to why his two managers this season, Ordinas and new boss Henning Berg, both trusted the 19 year old over more experienced options.

Standing at 6'2, Børkeeiet's height is an obvious asset to his defensive play which has even seen him slot in at centre back on occasion for his team. A bustling ball winning midfielder who also has the abilities to play box to box, he showed his adaptability later in the season taking on a slightly more offensive role against Aalesund FK in the Eliteserien relegation play off match. His performance yielded a first Stabæk goal and even more praise to add to that already built up recently by the Norwegian media.

It is a testament to Børkeeiet's ability that he has forced previous Stabæk golden boy Hugo Vetlesen out of his natural central midfield position into a wider position as part of Henning Berg's stiff 4-4-2 formation. With bids already coming in for Børkeeiet in this recent January transfer window, there is no doubt that the player will not be with Stabæk for that much longer. Stabæk do seem reluctant to

sell at this point, as they know that another top season will yield a larger fee from a larger club, however it is all but a certainty now that by this time next season Børkeeiet will be plying his trade with another club and potentially even knocking on the door to the Norwegian national team.

So, should Vetlesen & Børkeeiet leave the side in upcoming transfer windows, who is next in line for the Stabæk 'Golden Boy' throne? In truth, there are a number of players who clearly have the potential to make strides into the sides' first team in 2019.

Herman Geelmuyden is the final youngster ready to make an impression on the Stabæk first team this season. Despite only recently turning 17, the forward already has a sizeable reputation in Norway as one of the country's biggest emerging talents. Geelmuyden has mainly played for the Stabæk youth side in recent seasons, though did make nine second team appearances alongside Oscar Aga last season, scoring twice. His international record is also exceptional, with 12 goals in 19 games from U'15 to U'16 level. An U'18 cap is not far off for the player who has one of the highest potential ceilings in Norway.

'THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE IS THAT NEW MANAGER HENNING BERG CONTINUES TONI ORDINAS' GREAT WORK OF BRINGING THROUGH THE BRILLIANT EMERGING TALENT THAT STABÆK HAVE BEEN BLESSED WITH IN RECENT SEASONS.'

Nicolas Pignatelli Jenssen is a 17 year old defender who has already had a recent trial with Internazionale in Italy. He is extremely inexperienced at first team level having not made a competitive first team appearance just yet, however, his heavy involvement in the 2019 pre-season as well as his form for the youth sides means he cannot now be too far from a regular first team spot.

Stabæk also have two young forwards both capable of going onto big things too. The first, Oscar Aga, is just 18 years old but broke into the first team picture at the end of last season and made an impression in his few appearances from the bench. It was his form for the second team that garnered the interest of first team managers Odinas and Berg. Aga scored an exceptional 14 goals in 21 games in the third tier of Norwegian football. His international youth team record is also good, with 18 goals in 32 games from U'15 to U'17 level.

Goalkeeper Simen Lillevik speaks highly of the academy and suggests; "The players are aware they are in one of the best academies in Norway, so they work harder because they know the competition is tough."

"If they do well, then they know that Stabæk are a club who will reward them with a professional contract and the opportunity to play for the first team full time."

The hope for the future is that new manager Henning Berg continues Toni Ordinas' great work of bringing through the brilliant emerging talent that Stabæk have been blessed with in recent seasons. It may mean that league form suffers temporarily, as it has in recent seasons with multiple youngsters in the starting eleven, but in the long run it is a strategy that will push Stabæk to the forefront of Norwegian football should they continue to develop talents such as Vetlesen and Børkeeiet who will be destined for bigger things.

Ben Wells, Norwegian Eliteserien Analyst

J . L E A G U E

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THE 2018 J.LEAGUE SEASON was just as wildly unpredictable as ever. Kawasaki Frontale retained their league title, and their 12 point advantage over 2nd place Sanfrecce Hiroshima may suggest that this was a procession, but this is far from the full story. At one point in the season, Hiroshima were 9 points clear at the top of the league, which in itself was incredible for a team which fought relegation in 2017. Hiroshima, however, suffered an incredible collapse, failing to win any of their final 9 league games.

2018 Asian Champions League winners Kashima Antlers, fought valiantly across multiple fronts for much of the season and surged into the final Asian Champions League spot after a late-season push. Consadole Sapporo narrowly missed out after a final day draw to Sanfrecce Hiroshima, from 2-0 up, but can take great pride in the strides they made this year under the stewardship of former Urawa manager Mihailo Petrovic.

At the bottom, V-Varen Nagasaki battled bravely, eventually succumbing to a fairly inevitable relegation, but with a very respectable 30 points from their 34 games. The huge surprise though was in 17th place, as a star-studded Kashiwa Reysol were relegated on 39 points - the joint highest points total that any team has ever been relegated from the J.League on. As always, there was final day drama, and a 94th-minute own goal saw Jubilo Iwata drop from 12th to 16th and into the relegation play-off place, as they finished the lowest of five teams locked on 41 points. In any other year this would have been the highest tally by which a team had been relegated, but this year they had a reprieve in the form of the newly created relegation play-off, and a comfortable win over J2 play-off winners Tokyo Verdy ensured that Iwata survived in J1.

It is now time to reveal my choices for the 2018 team of the season; conspicuous by their

absences will be Vissel Kobe duo Andres Iniesta and Lukas Podolski, as well as Sagan Tosu's Fernando Torres. Iniesta's mid-season arrival was perhaps the biggest talking point of the season, and he has shown plenty of glimpses of his quality, including a real contender for goal of the season as he turned Iwata's Kentaro Oi inside out, before sitting down Krzysztof Kaminski and rolling home. He, however, has not been helped by a hopelessly imbalanced Kobe side who while ambitious, have a long way to go before forming a side which can genuinely contend at the top of the table.

Lukas Podolski's time in Japan has not been particularly positive. He has scored a handful of superb goals, along with a handful of fine performances, but these are too infrequent, unlike his near constant berating of his teammates for any misplaced pass, while his part in a series of brawls in November's game with Shimizu S-Pulse garnered unwanted global coverage.

Fernando Torres though has probably had the worst of it since his summer move. Firstly he played up front for a team set-up without any creativity behind him, causing both Torres and strike partner Kanazaki to simply make runs without ever being rewarded. This tactical mess caused Torres and coach Ficcadenti to fall out and lead to Torres being dropped. Once Ficcadenti was fired, Torres returned to the side and did bag a couple of goals. However, with Sagan Tosu in disarray after losing a key sponsor, and looking set to lose key players, it looks likely to be a tough few months for Torres at the start of the 2019 season.

For the team of the season I have chosen a 4-4-2 diamond formation, and unlike the J.League's own full-back heavy team, I have looked for a balanced XI.

Sam Robson, J.League 1 Analyst

'Podolski's time in Japan has not been particularly positive. He has scored a handful of superb goals, along with a handful of fine performances, but these are too infrequent, unlike his near constant berating of his teammates.'

GK SHUICHI GONDA

Sagan Tosu

Shuichi Gonda has enjoyed a well-received renaissance to his career in 2018, recovering supremely well after his career had seemingly been derailed in 2015 after being diagnosed with overtraining syndrome, causing a tough spell both professionally and personally. He then moved to Europe, to Keisuke Honda's SV Horn in the Austrian Second Tier, where he played fairly regularly, but rarely to the heights he'd previously reached. Sagan Tosu handed him a lifeline in 2017 and gave him a starting berth. Last season he gradually improved but did show signs of fragility, none more so than after a mistake against former club FC Tokyo. Japanese news outlets plastered pictures of a tearful Gonda across their match coverage, and this looked like another major setback for the goalkeeper. However, this season he has grown in stature and confidence and is the main reason why Tosu survived. His performances have earned him a recall to the Japanese national team, and for the last 3 months of the season especially, he has made countless vital saves to keep Tosu in games, ultimately keeping them in the division. He is now being heavily linked with a move to Portimonense in Portugal's 'Liga Nos' and he very much deserves a second run at football in Europe.



RB

ELSINHO**Kawasaki Frontale**

Elsinho is as consistent a performer as you will see, one of the best foreign imports the J.League has seen in recent years. He is solid enough defensively when called upon, but his main asset is in attack as he regularly adds further firepower to the Kawasaki Frontale attack, scoring twice and providing three assists in 2018. To the surprise of many, Elsinho is to leave Kawasaki Frontale after four superb seasons in which he has made the official J.League team of the year twice. He is a reported target of Shimizu S-Pulse and would be a fantastic coup for the Shizuoka side.

CB

**SHOGO
TANIGUCHI****Kawasaki Frontale**

Taniguchi was an ever-present in the league for Japan's best defensive outfit, which conceded just 27 goals in 34 games. He is by no means a flashy player, bringing the ball out from the back with a mazy run or looking to spread 50-yard Hollywood passes, but he is vital to Kawasaki Frontale. His calming leadership at the back keeps everything simple to facilitate the expressive players around him, and he remains rock-solid defensively, with his exceptional positioning his key attribute. Very rarely is he caught out, and more often than not he finds himself in the right place at the right time.

LB

**RYOSUKE
YAMANAKA****Yokohama F. Marinos**

Ryosuke Yamanaka is perhaps the player in Japan whose stock has risen the most over the past 12 months. In 2017, he was a very solid left back, but rarely outstanding. However, in 2018, he flourished under the guidance of Ange Postecoglou. Postecoglou's fluid, attacking style has suited Yamanaka perfectly, giving him plenty of encouragement to move forwards to join attacks, as well as tucking in from his full back role to influence the play from a central area. He has made a name for himself by scoring a number of crackers from long distance, and earned a first Japan call-up in November, scoring on his debut.

CB

TOMOAKI MAKINO

Urawa Reds

Tomoaki Makino is perhaps a polar opposite defender to Taniguchi and enjoys the freedom that he has at Urawa on the left of a back three. Makino is a divisive yet undoubtedly entertaining character within the Japanese game, as is demonstrated by his pre-match ritual in which he stares dramatically at the palm of an outstretched arm. Makino is perhaps the most athletic defender in the J.League, allowing him to maraud forwards to join attacks, but also to recover well and perform his defensive duties. His performances this season look earned him starts for Japan at the 2019 Asian Cup, just rewards for a stellar year for Urawa

CM

KENGO NAKAMURA

Kawasaki Frontale

The evergreen Kengo Nakamura is once again a no-brainer for this J.League team of the year. He is simply a remarkable specimen, who seems to keep getting better despite now reaching 38 years of age. Nakamura is a classy talisman for this Frontale side, technically gifted with a wonderful football brain. From the number 10 role, he picks out exquisite passes, contributing 6 goals and 6 assists this season. Given his performances last season, there is no reason he cannot continue for at least one more season at this level, and should maintain his status as one of the best players in the J.League next season.

DM

KENTO MISAO

Kashima Antlers

Fellow Kashima midfielder Leo Silva can feel a little hard done by that he is not selected in this position, but I have narrowly favoured Kento Misao, who enjoyed another fine season for Kashima Antlers, and is still only 22 years of age. He patrols the midfield expertly and with seemingly minimal fuss, regaining possession regularly before turning playmaker and starting attacks. Misao's best performances this year came in the Asian Champions League, especially in the two legs of the final where he put in two mature displays, as he stifled out any real attacking influence from his Persepolis opponents. These displays contributed greatly to his 3rd place finish in the Asian Footballer of the Year awards.



KENGO NAKAMURA



CM

CHANATHIP SONGKRASIN

Consadole Sapporo

Since the J.League and Thai Premier League signed a cooperation agreement in 2012, the emergence of a Thai star to light up the J.League has been eagerly anticipated. Mid-way through last season, Chanathip arrived at Consadole Sapporo and gave everyone a glimpse of the quality which led to his 'Thai Messi' moniker. His dynamic driving runs, dribbling ability, and all-around direct approach certainly caught the eye for the final few months of that season, but he was still lacking the cutting edge, goals, and assists needed to be a truly top player in Japan. This season he took on that challenge and passed with flying colours. Together with Koji Miyoshi, Jay Bothroyd and Ken Tokura, he helped Sapporo assemble a free-flowing attacking unit which saw the side rise from relegation-battlers to Asian Champions League contenders. Chanathip scored 8 goals from midfield including several top class efforts. At 25, there is still room for the diminutive Thai international to improve and kick on before potentially rolling the dice in Europe.

AM
**AKIHIRO
IENAGA**
Kawasaki Frontale

It takes a lot to stand-out among the quality that permeates through Kawasaki Frontale's squad. Last season, Ienaga was a good player in a team filled with very good players; this year he has been a great player and in the eyes of most, the best player, not only at Frontale but in the league as a whole. Ienaga has been forced to adapt to a wider starting point at Frontale given Kengo Nakamura has the number 10 role sewn up, but Ienaga has embraced his new role. He acts as a wide playmaker, who drifts inside and links play very intelligently. Everything he does oozes class, making him a very worthy winner of the J.League's MVP Award.

ST
**HWANG
UI-JO**
Gamba Osaka

2018 was a stellar year for South Korean striker Hwang Ui-Jo. He had been decent enough for Gamba since joining from Seongnam in 2017, but really took his game to the next level this season, both for club and country. He finished with 16 goals to his name and for long periods was carrying the Gamba team on his shoulders. His big breakthrough came in September when he represented South Korea at the Asian games. There he topped the scoring charts with 9 goals, four clear of his nearest competitor, as Korea clinched the title. From then on his form was sensational, as Gamba ended the season with 9 wins from the final 10 games. His performances during the season meant that he started each of South Korea's games at the 2019 Asian Cup, leaving Gamba worried that he might have caught the eye of European scouts.

ST
JO
Nagoya Grampus

Jo was perhaps the biggest signing of the winter transfer window ahead of the start of the 2018 season, and he enjoyed a rollercoaster of a campaign. The 2017 Brazilian Serie A top scorer, was expected to hit the ground running, and did so in the opening game of the season against Gamba Osaka, scoring in a 3-2 Nagoya win. Seemingly lacking in sharpness and perhaps fitness, goals then became harder to come by as Nagoya struggled at the foot of the table. It wasn't really until August that he really found his groove. He scored an incredible 14 goals in 7 games between August 1st and September 18th, to propel Nagoya up the table and out of the relegation positions. Another drought followed, as he netted only four more times in the remainder of the season, though three of those were in the final two games of the season as Nagoya clinched survival on the final day. Jo ended the season as J.League top scorer on 24 goals, and it is frightening to think about how many goals he could score if he can hit the ground running following a season of adaptation.



Manager

MIHAILO PETROVIC

Consadole Sapporo

But for a final day 2-2 draw, this selection would have been a foregone conclusion. Even so, despite eventually falling short in their quest for an Asian Champions League spot, Consadole Sapporo's manager Mihailo 'Mischa' Petrovic, is a worthy winner of Manager of the Year. Petrovic has always fought at the business end of the J.League in his spells at Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Urawa Reds, and was seen as a major coup when he was announced as the Consadole Sapporo manager. He did not disappoint, transforming what were relegation candidates into a fluid, dynamic, exciting attacking outfit which competed until the final day for a remarkable ACL position. A 4th placed finish in itself was a superb achievement for Sapporo. Petrovic developed a fine blend of youth and experience as the likes of Gu Sung-Yu, Ryosuke Shindo, Koji Miyoshi, and Chanathip Songkrasin rose to prominence while being guided by more experienced heads in Hiroki Miyazawa, Jay Bothroyd, and Ken Tokura. Petrovic has a tough job on his hands to help Sapporo push on to greater heights next season, especially after losing Miyoshi and Tokura, but the club and its supporters have really bought into his philosophy, ensuring the future looks bright in Hokkaido.

Young Player

HIROKI

ABE

Kashima Antlers



When young talent residing in the J.League is discussed, the name which often springs to mind is FC Tokyo's Takefusa Kubo. As a graduate of Barcelona's 'La Masia' academy who made his senior team debut at the age of 15, that is probably fair enough. However, another teenager has been making waves in the last 18 months, soaring into prominence with scintillating displays both domestically and on the continent, even catching the eye on the global stage in December's Club World Cup.

Hiroki Abe first came to attention as a 62nd-minute substitute for Kashima Antlers as they welcomed Spanish La Liga side Sevilla for a mid-season friendly. Abe instantly impressed as he continually weaved his way past Sevilla defender after Sevilla defender, with his close control, agility, and acceleration causing significant issues. For the remainder of the 2017 season, the 18-year-old Abe became a permanent fixture in the Kashima matchday squad.

In 2018 though he was a revelation. In a very strong Kashima Antlers side, he became a regular starter putting in countless superb performances, especially in the second half of the season as Kashima fought on multiple fronts and lifted the Asian Champions League. Such is Abe's importance to the side, he was recalled early from the 2018 AFC U19 Championships so that he could start in the Asian Champions League Final first leg against Persepolis. This proved an inspired choice as Abe stole the show from the left-hand side, giving the Persepolis right back a torrid afternoon. Abe deservedly picked up the J.League Young Player of the Year Award, before an eye-catching display in the Club World Cup against Chivas Guadalajara. Coming on as a substitute at halftime, he helped turn the game for Kashima, adding a third goal after cutting inside and firing a fantastic 25 yarder beyond the Chivas keeper.

2019 looks set to be a key season in Abe's development. Should he hit the ground running, as I expect him to do so, then a move to Europe, as well as a coveted spot in Japan's Olympic squad for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, cannot be too far away.

**KONCEPT
KOMPETENZ
AND
KAPITAL**

**RALE
RANGNICK**



"**THE TICKING** can be irritating for them at first, but we've noticed that this kind of training can affect players in just a few weeks. They adjust their style of play and it becomes an instinct." For such a pioneering coach, Ralf Rangnick is not all that keen on coaching. Nevertheless, the custom made clock designed to train Leipzig players to win the ball back within a prescribed time limit is again being manned this season, somewhat reluctantly, by the enigmatic German.

With previous manager Ralph Hasenhuttl not willing to play placeholder for Hoffenheim's coveted coach Julian Nagelsmann, who will be parachuted in as RB Leipzig manager next summer, for the second time during his 6 years as the Red Bull footballing empire's ideological spearhead, Rangnick found himself in the Leipzig dugout at the start of the season. "It's not like I wanted it, but when several coaches with whom we could imagine cooperating could not join us for different reasons we came to this decision," explained Rangnick to *Abendzeitung* before his previous stint as Leipzig head coach in 2015. "The job is exhausting... I was sporting director for three years at two different clubs in two different countries and in two different leagues. That went very well, no problem! But if you're a coach, all your thoughts are really only about the daily business and the next game." A year later, upon giving way to Hasenhuttl, having led RBL to promotion, an exhausted Rangnick reflected: "I'm looking forward to having more time for my family, friends, and especially my parents, whom I've rarely seen in the last 10 months. It has not been possible to be [back home] in Backnang for several days at a time." The German's begrudging attitude towards coaching has since resulted in the nickname 'Reluctant Ralf'.

However, Rangnick has his reasons for avoiding the stresses of full time coaching. In September 2011 Rangnick left Schalke citing Chronic Fatigue Syndrome after just 23 games in charge. "After long and careful consideration, I've come to the conclusion that I need a break," Rangnick told Schalke's club website. "This decision was terribly difficult to make but my current energy levels are not sufficient to be successful nor enough to advance the team or the club," he admitted.

Nevertheless, while Rangnick may not be suited to the rigors of full time modern management, his aptitude for footballing theory remains vibrant and nuanced.

Rangnick's reputation was first established in December 1998. In the process of guiding then second tier Ulm to a second successive promotion, Rangnick appeared on ZDF's weekly sports show 'Das Aktuelle Sport Studio'. Years ahead of time, in what is now considered something of a legendary tour-de-force complete with oversized suit and spectacles, Rangnick explained in typically brusque and self-assured fashion how his Ulm side pressed their opponents and won the ball back so quickly. Although a little routine by today's standards, his style would evolve into the now typical German mode of pressing. Rangnick's intelligent performance, and fashion sense, led to him being referred to as 'The Professor'.

Rangnick's keen focus on konzept (concept) both of playing style and of a more overarching footballing ideology has since come to define both his career and Red Bull Leipzig's model following his arrival as sporting director back in 2012. Rangnick cites former Bayer Leverkusen director, current German TV personality and businessman, Reiner Calmund's 'Three Cs' as key inspiration in driving the Red Bull project. "I learned that capital, labor and land are the three factors in production," explained Calmund to *Finanzen.net* in 2014. "It's a bit different in football, that's the '3 Cs' principle; capital, competence and concept."

"If those three things come together, then you can be successful," Rangnick told *Deutsche Welle*, "if you only have one or two of them, it's more difficult." Capital is something Red Bull Leipzig have in abundance but Rangnick has been quick to defend the considerable backing of the Austrian drinks company and play down their importance in the Leipzig project. "I'm not saying that without Mr Mateschitz's [Red Bull founder, Dietrich] money we'd be where we are now. Of course, money is necessary and important to implement certain things." Rangnick told *Der Tagesspiegel* in 2016, "But take the two clubs relegated last season; Hannover had the highest budget in the club's

history [and] Stuttgart were probably, in the salary table, among the first seven or eight teams. Without competence and concept, a lot of money does not automatically guarantee you success."

However, Red Bull have long been criticized for what some see as the flagrant use of their deep pockets and circumventing the Bundesliga's famous 50+1 rule designed to keep the ownership and running of clubs largely in the hands of supporters and members. In an interview for DW.com, former German international Thomas Berthold was even bold enough to ask, on behalf of a reader: "How does it feel to be nothing but a marketing tool for a soda company and the most hated club in Germany?" To which Rangnick responded: "I think there are fewer RB haters than there were during our time in the second division. We are very happy with our sponsor, but we never think for one minute about how we can sell more cans [of Red Bull]. What drives and motivates us is developing players. We aren't a marketing tool."

emotional business of football," explained Rangnick. "In Germany we have a hard time with innovations. There is no nation in which people are as over-insured as Germany. The German tries to hedge against everything possible. I imagine that we polarize with our innovations."

Rangnick's ideas on capital extend into concept too and are, some Bundesliga fans would argue, oddly contradictory with the bullish nature by which the club has been run under Red Bull ownership. Regardless of their wages, players have limits on the type of car they can drive while more established players and those with families are given a little more scope. "It's all about a certain modesty," Rangnick explained, "you don't have to purchase a big car as a status symbol right after you have signed your first big contract." Cars aside, attitude both personal and professional is crucial to Rangnick's wider ideology with "particular attention to [players] mentality and character traits". Those recruited

"I am convinced that there is room for improvement in the training of cognitive abilities. It will be about finding the right solutions when under high pressure and in confined spaces."

Often regarded as the basis for the Bundesliga's fan driven success, Rangnick controversially goes as far to reject the importance of 50+1, taking a typically business-centric approach. "I think the number of members of the club is obsolete and irrelevant. For me, that concept is old fashioned," Rangnick affirmed back in 2016. "Borussia Dortmund has 150,000 members but for the strategic decisions the club makes, they have no influence. Do you think Porsche, Mercedes or DHL would ask their stakeholders what they should do next ahead of every decision they make? The same holds true in football - it's about the right people on the board making the right decisions for the club."

The German coach later claimed that the rejection of Leipzig's philosophy and German football's continued preoccupation with the 50+1 rule are a product of the national psyche rather than anything rational. "When old values come to be developed, it takes a bit of time, especially in the

"are willing to learn our style of play. We asked ourselves; 'What style do we want to play?' After that we scouted and signed the players who fulfilled our requirements... they all came here with the idea of wanting to develop." During pre-season Rangnick publicly criticized Nordi Mukiele, Jean-Kevin Augustin and Dayot Upamecano for a lack of professionalism in returning from their holidays unfit, complaining that Upamecano was overweight and "everyone can see it" while worrying that Augustin might "fall back into old patterns". Rangnick insists "most of all [younger players] need clear messages and consistency."

Leipzig's footballing ideas have evolved from those Rangnick described on Das Aktuelle Sport Studio in the late 90s but the aggressive press remains, the merits of which Rangnick was able to convince Mateschitz during a five hour conversation back in 2012 before taking the director of football role at both RB Leipzig and RB Salzburg. Rangnick prioritises "aggressive

forward defending and pressing, playing directly to the front."

"Sideways and backward passes are not so much in demand. The aim is to develop teams with no individuals." The system, Rangnick remarks, is in direct opposition to the possession based play which had become increasingly prevalent at the start of the decade. "The World Cup has shown you can forget about ball ownership as an end in itself," Rangnick told *Süddeutsche* in August, "This is my old theme, you need speed, depth and wit and you have to move into sixth and seventh gear otherwise you will not score goals."

This attitude is now ingrained at Leipzig, in the senior side and beyond, "We have consistently followed a path with a clear, consistent style of play, starting from the youngest, the under 8s up to the pros." Rangnick explained in the same interview. "We have coaches who can convey this idea, and we only hire young players aged between 17 and 24." Youth is a strong theme in Rangnick's running of the club.

Of the current Leipzig squad, midfielder Stefan Ilsanker is the oldest senior player at just 29 while the team that lined up against Dortmund on the opening day of this season averaged just 23.2 years old. Meanwhile his thirst for innovation within his concept continues, telling *Tagespiegel*: "I am convinced that there is room for improvement in the training of cognitive abilities. It will be about finding the right solutions when under high pressure and in confined spaces."

Despite their wealth, RB Leipzig's rise has been spectacular and unquestionably proves that Rangnick fulfills the third of his criteria for success; competence. When Rangnick joined the club in 2012 Leipzig were a fourth tier club, coaching the club to promotion from the second division in his first spell as manager. "He's the sporting motor of our club and is fundamental to our future development," explained RBL's CEO Oliver Mintzlaff who isn't the only one to appreciate Rangnick's talents. "When we won [back in 2008] 4-1 at Dortmund with Hoffenheim." Rangnick told *Abendzeitung*, "[Jurgen] Klopp said to me after the game; 'The way Hoffenheim plays, we also want to play that way at some point'."

On top of his success with Ulm, Leipzig and in winning the DFB Pokal at Schalke in 2011, Rangnick's four and a half years in charge of the similarly upwardly mobile Hoffenheim between 2006 and 2010 may be his outstanding achievement, whose story draws parallels with RBL. Although admittedly also enjoying financial support from software giant SAP co-founder Dietmar Hopp, Hoffenheim were playing in the Regionalliga upon Rangnick's arrival at the Rhein-Neckar Arena but back to back promotions (the national third division '3. Liga' wasn't established until 2008) had the club in the Bundesliga by the start of the 08/09 campaign. Incredibly, having been a ninth tier side less than two decades previously, Hoffenheim were top of the Bundesliga that Christmas. Eventually finishing seventh, Rangnick resigned a year later, perhaps unsurprisingly, over what he saw as a lack of competence as midfield general Luiz Gustavo was sold to Bayern Munich without his knowledge.

This season is proving to be another Rangnick success story. Favourites for a return to the Champions League, Leipzig sat fourth and were leading the chasing pack by 5 points in early February. Despite a disappointing Europa League exit (and defeats to RB Salzburg perhaps perversely a further sign of Rangnick's success) their Bundesliga form has been unerringly consistent, especially at home while Rangnick has remained characteristically strict and enigmatic. After Augustin and Mukiele were publicly admonished in *Bild* by their furious coach for using their phones before the Salzburg game, a spinning "wheel of misfortune" was used to determine their punishments; forfeits ranging from a spell as a stadium tour guide to having to buy small gifts for all 60 members of staff.

At Leipzig however, themes of Kapital, Konzept and Kompetenz will all remain thoroughly ensconced for the foreseeable future but the club, assures Rangnick, "still has a long way to go." Fortunately for Reluctant Ralf, irritating as it may be, the ticking will come to an end sooner rather than later on his spell in the Red Bull Arena dugout. But with natural successor Julien Nagelsmann incoming and The Professor's concepts ever-evolving RB Leipzig's rise may have only just begun.

Adam White, French Ligue 1 Analyst

robert

SKOV

the danish sniper



21 GOALS AND 5 ASSISTS in the Danish Superligaen this season, not bad stats for a winger who hasn't made an appearance for the national team and seems to hover under the radar outside Denmark. But who is Robert Skov, scorer of unbelievable goals?

Skov, a 22-year-old right winger and product of the Silkeborg IF youth system, joined Copenhagen in January 2018 for a fee of 1m Euros. Despite being just 22, he is approaching his 150th Superligaen appearance and is close to the 50 goal mark. Skov is deadly from free kicks, seven have been directly converted in the last six months from various distances. Equipped with a fine shooting technique and remarkable precision, Skov's 21 goals have come from an average of just over three shots per game. Unlike many of his counterparts, his skill set isn't tailored to winning one on one duels, rather it outlines an innovative type of player, uncommon in modern football.

In Possession

Nominally a right winger, Skov's unusual interpretation of his role means he frequently positions himself near to the corner of the penalty area, which means he is regularly found in promising shooting positions. Especially helpful for him is the remarkably high positioning of Copenhagen right back Peter Ankensen, who works in tandem with Skov to create additional space to the benefit of Skov's phenomenal shooting ability. Shooting isn't his only attribute, however, an intelligence in possession is also evident, playing quick one-twos or first time balls while often also taking up much deeper positions.

As a result, he remains hard to pick up and creates space for teammates, greatly helping Copenhagen's attacking play which has evolved to fit Skov's skill set since his arrival last year. One way to achieve this goal is the so-called 'isolation play', which was adapted from basketball and allows the star player a clear throw. Through rehearsed passing scenarios and simple combinations, his fellow forwards try to ensure Skov has as much time and space to shoot as possible. The statistics underline this as Skov's 3.41 shots per game average exceeds Dortmund youngster Jadon Sancho, one of the greatest talents in this position at the moment, who averages 1.82 shots per game.

Skov prefers a well placed and powerful shot into the near corner, as a result the keeper is often caught on the wrong foot. Even if Skov isn't in a promising position, he tends to try his luck from almost anywhere; 21 goals may sound great, but this tally is enhanced by the number of goals from near-impossible positions.

Although 1v1 situations aren't as prominent with Skov, this doesn't mean that this ability is underdeveloped either however, as exemplified by his dribbling statistics. Although Sancho makes 11.12 dribbles per game, 73.3% of the duels going in his favour, Skov, not a '1v1 player' per se, still manages 6.99 dribbles per game which have a positive outcome 65.2% of the time.

Without the Ball

Bucking the traditional winger stereotypes, Skov is, especially in offensive pressing, just as useful without the ball due to his strong sense of anticipation and his high footballing IQ. Paired with well-timed movement and awareness, these components allow him to pounce on weak passes between defenders and win the ball back high up the pitch to pose a threat on the counter. This often results in a chance or allows Copenhagen's defence time to re-organise. This benefits Ankerson in particular as Skov is always interested in producing defensive 2 on 1 situations as well as blocking off passing options and space between full back and centre back.

Skov's intelligence also comes into play as soon as the first pressing line is overcome, the Dane is astute when pressing the ball in relation to his central midfielder, entering at the right moment to exert pressure and securing the centre of the pitch. There is a sense that Skov is often mentally one step ahead which has aided a new found ability to perfectly time runs in behind an opponent's defensive line, something not evident when he joined Copenhagen.

Transitions

As with his positional play in possession, Skov also benefits in transitions, sensing instinctively in which areas he offers the most value for the team. Perhaps unexpectedly, Skov rarely finishes counterattacks, rather he acts as the 'connecting player', whose task is to initiate the transition from defence to attack with precise passing, a skill not

immediately associated with a classic winger. Perhaps this is due to weaker opposition in the Danish Superligaen, in which Skov's class stands out but his excellent positioning, persistence and an obvious intelligence are also clear when the ball is lost. Skov aims for rapid ball recovery or to quickly re-positioning himself defensively to aid the transformation of an opponent's attack into a counter-attack for Copenhagen.

Technical ability

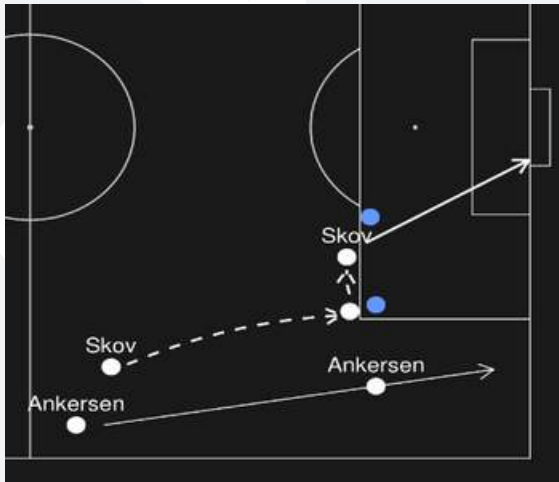
Unquestionably, however, Skov's greatest strength is his phenomenal free-kick technique, precision and diversity. Depending on the position of the ball, Skov will choose between three and a half and four and a half steps, his body shape resembling that of David Beckham's, as do his rituals in the build up to shooting. However, unlike Beckham, Skov prefers a straighter route to the ball. What follows is a real missile of incredible

power and precision; the flight of the ball getting a perfect kink halfway to the goal and avoiding opponent walls. The consistency Skov achieves in all aspects of free kicks, underlined by his success rate, is extremely impressive.

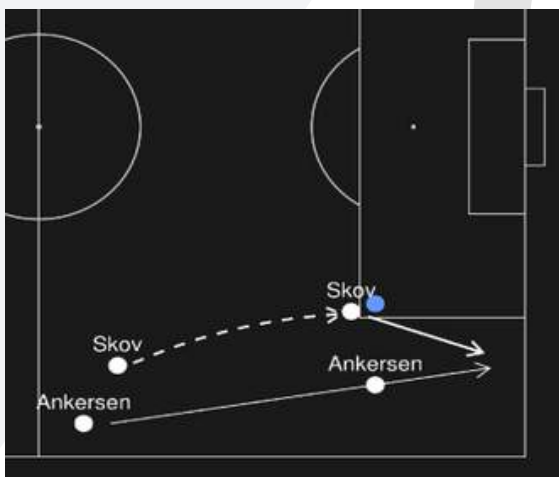
Such prodigious free kick ability is, of course, born out of an impressive shooting ability. Preferring a still ball when shooting in open play, Skov seldom chooses to shoot on the run, but rather prefers to shoot with his second touch to generate the more control while his awareness of space, also evident in his pressing, usually creates a small time advantage. This is evident in all aspects of Skov's game due to a superior first touch. Combined with an astute distribution of the ball, he is able to use the space created by his understanding of the game to dictate play. Difficult to dispossess, this allows him to quickly escape from the shadow of an opponent and recognise potentially dangerous situations early.

Attacking Game

The following four situations arise again and again in the attacking game of FC Copenhagen, much to the benefit of Skov's shooting.



'Signature Move': This first variant, also the most common in Skov's repertoire, relies on the indecision of the opponent full-back. Skov dribbles the ball towards him and is passively supported by Ankersen, whose job is to give the opponent's left back a choice. In this example, Skov waits for the brief moment in which the opposing left back has that choice, to either follow Skov or close the gap to Andersen. In a flash, Skov cuts into the middle and finishes with his strong left foot shot into his favourite near post corner.



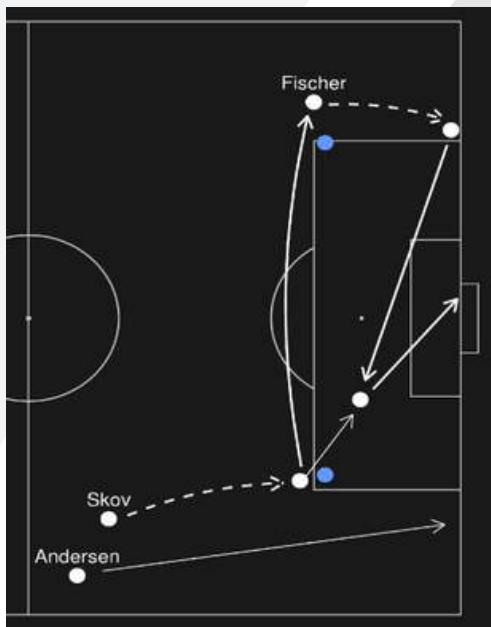
Pass to Ankersen: The second option is similar. However, in this example Skov passes to Ankersen. The opponent defender has little time to react, while Ankersen can choose between a possible cross or a surprise return ball to Skov, who has moved into a shooting position near to the penalty area.

Weaknesses

Despite a host of valuable strengths, the previously mentioned strong willingness to defend doesn't hide serious deficiencies in Skov's defensive play. An effort to help Andersson is obvious but he lacks defensive basics. Strangely, Skov lacks understanding of defensive space, which stands in contrast to his excellent use of offensive open spaces. This results in dangerous situations which could be avoided, while a tendency to charge in when pressing and over-commit means the Dane can be easily bypassed. A proclivity for sliding tackles shouldn't be overlooked either. Although his timing is good, Skov over-indulges which can leave him out of position.

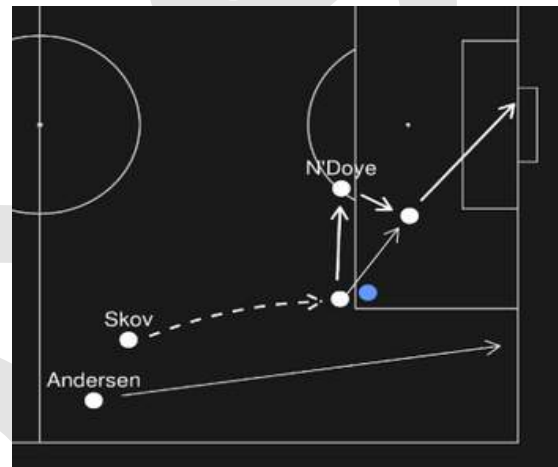
Skov isn't an overtly physical player, he can shy away from the more combative aspects of the game while he rarely shields the ball and is often keen to get rid of it quickly, shooting or passing before contact comes. He's not a 'fighter' in the traditional footballing sense. Thus, it is hardly surprising that two against one situations almost always result in a loss of possession because he lacks the robustness to shield the ball. However, since his arrival at Copenhagen a year ago, Skov has already been able to make some progress in these areas, increasing in self-confidence.

Double pass with the striker: Unlike the previous options, this example adds a third player who distracts one of the opponent centre backs and stands ready as a short passing option. In this example, a simple pass combination with N'Doye offers an additional facet to Copenhagen's attacking game and thus provides even more confusion in the opposing defence.



The well-known adage 'his weaker foot is just for standing on' applies to Skov. He uses his right foot only if it's unavoidable, including when dribbling. Given his focus on shooting, perhaps a little selfishly, it isn't a surprise that he produces only 1.91 crosses per game, while only 27.7% of those are completed, as Skov often seems to hit a cross without looking into the area. Bayern Munich winger Kingsley Coman, for example, makes 5.63 crosses per game with a success rate of 36.6%. Interestingly, however, when the opponent left back blocks the inner channel, which makes his 'Signature Move' impossible, Skov heads for the bye-line. Once there, he decides between a well-timed chip into the penalty area or for a sharp flat cross to the back post on his weaker foot which can be more productive than the statistics suggest.

Despite his size of 1.85m, tall for a right-winger, Skov's heading ability is far from a strength, as even in aerial duels his aversion to roughness is noticeable. Due to his understanding of the game, he repeatedly anticipates the ball well but lacks the heading technique in order to profit. Although, here too he has progressed since moving clubs.



Switching play to the left: This last option is usually a last resort. In this case they switch play to the left winger, usually Viktor Fischer who is more adept at 1v1 duels. He advances to the bye-line and Skov gambles to position himself near the six yard area in order to finish a possible cross.

The Future

Robert Skov is equipped with a very interesting skill set which will inevitably lead him to a higher level. It will be interesting to see if Skov could use his qualities to the same effect in a stronger league, his ability to move and play at pace would suggest he can make the step up. Of course, there

It would be interesting to see how he would adapt to a central or attacking midfield position, as, theoretically, his strengths lend him to these roles. It is debatable whether these positives would win out in a stronger league or whether they would be trumped by his weaknesses but, overall, Robert Skov is an incredibly interesting player with

'It would be interesting to see how he would adapt to a central or attacking midfield position, as, theoretically, his strengths lend him to these roles. It is debatable whether these strengths would win out in a stronger league or whether they would be trumped by his weaknesses.'

are also areas in which Skov has clear weaknesses; his underdeveloped defensive acumen, an aversion to physicality and a weak right foot for example. However, Skov has already proven that he is willing to work on his weaknesses, as evidenced by progress made since joining Copenhagen.

distinctive skills that are valuable throughout modern football. With further development, we can look forward to seeing his fantastic free kicks in a top European top league very soon.

Tim Hilbert, German Bundesliga Analyst

BELGIUM



EUROPE'S

FINISHING

SCHOOL

WITH THE BELGIAN national team currently ranked number one in the FIFA rankings, it's little surprise that the country is a hotbed of young footballing talent. Naturally, the majority of the current first team at international level cut their teeth in their home country, be it Kevin De Bruyne and Thibaut Courtois at Genk, Vincent Kompany and Romelu Lukaku at Anderlecht, or Axel Witsel and Marouane Fellaini at Standard Liege.

And whilst you'd expect Belgian nationals to kick start their playing careers in their native country, Belgium has long proven itself to be an exemplary finishing school for global footballing talent; a fast, physical playground, where some of the world's brightest young players can hone their skills before moving on to Europe's biggest leagues and clubs.

The list of players who once called Belgium home is extensive and impressive, but a few top names

really stick out: Yaya Toure, Ivan Perisic, Kalidou Koulibaly, Dante, Lucas Biglia and Carlos Bacca all cut their teeth in the Jupiler Pro League, whilst the likes of Wilfred Ndidi, Leon Bailey and Henry Onyekuru have left within the past couple of seasons.

An inability to compete with the transfer fees and wages offered by top European clubs has led to Belgian clubs scouting far and wide for hot talent that they can then sell on for a profit and, although for every hit there are numerous misses, Belgium still proves itself fertile ground in this regard. There are currently a number of young players calling Belgium home, be they Belgian or otherwise, who look destined to make waves on the global footballing stage; of these, I've picked out 8 players, all aged 21 or below, who look set to play at world football's highest level.

George Nott - Belgian Pro League Analyst

Moussa DJENEPO

2018 ended well for Moussa Djenepe, having been long-listed for the European Golden Boy award before being awarded Mali's Player of the Year for 2018. Capable of playing on either wing, the youngster looks electric when he gets going and tallied 8 goals in the first half of the season. He's not a guaranteed starter at Standard Liege, with manager Michel Preud'homme sometimes not trusting his defensive capabilities, but going forward he is a menace. There's not really any question that he'll go on to play in one of Europe's big leagues - it's more just a question of the route he takes to get there.

20, MALI, STANDARD LIEGE, WINGER

Joachim MAEHLE

There's not really any dispute that Maehle has been the best right-back in Belgium this season. He'd already played 34 games for Genk prior to the winter break as part of their gruelling league and Europa League campaign but has shown no sign of letting up. Genk sit far out on top of the league in Belgium and Maehle has been a standout player. He can be caught out defensively but is a constant menace going forward, with 2 goals and 7 assists by January - an impressive feat for a full-back. It's only a matter of time before he breaks into the Danish squad, and until he plays at a higher level.

21, DENMARK, GENK, RIGHT BACK

Giorgi CHAKVETADZE



How many times have you heard a player labelled their country's Messi? And, broadly speaking, such a comparison does their reputation little good: an unwanted burden loaded on the shoulders of a young player. However, Chakvetadze's moniker of the 'Georgian Messi' is looking an increasingly fair title. He's got just 7 caps for Georgia, but this has to be put in context. He made his debut in March 2018, has scored 5 times in those 7 games, and ended 2018 being awarded Georgia's Player of the Year. At Gent, he's going from strength to strength too. He plays as an attacking midfielder, comfortable in the middle or out on the left, and it's his sublime close ball control in particular that draws comparison to Argentina's finest. In fact, it's widely believed that Barcelona are keeping a close eye on him and it does seem just a matter of time before he's playing at the highest level. Of all the players on this list, 'Chak' - as he's affectionately known by the Gent fans - has the highest potential ceiling; this kid will go places.

19, GEORGIA, GENT, ATTACKING MIDFIELDER

Takehiro TOMIYASU

There's no better club in Belgium, or perhaps even Europe, for a Japanese player than Sint-Truiden. Purchased in 2017 by Japanese firm Digital Media Mart, the club is beginning to establish itself as a hub for Japanese players in Europe, with the first team currently boasting 5 Japanese players amongst its ranks. Settling in to such a different culture can prove a tough experience for a young player but the club's notable Japanese contingent has meant that the players find their feet far quicker than they might have done otherwise. Takehiro Tomiyasu, however, was the first Japanese acquisition made by the new ownership, arriving on his own a year ago from Avispa Fukuoka, having previously never played outside of his native country. Last season he didn't get a look in but this season he's been a revelation. Playing on the right-hand side of a back 3, he possesses terrific pace for a centre half and, having played in defensive midfield in his time in Japan, looks adept on the ball too. He's now a full international for Japan, having played every single minute in the league up until Christmas for Sint-Truiden, a side who themselves have been the surprise package in the league this season.

20, JAPAN, SINT-TRUIDEN, CENTRE BACK

Zinho VANHEUSDEN

Zinho Vanheusden has been seen as a major talent for some time. In 2016, he was plucked from the Standard Liege academy by Inter Milan. Inter still own the player with him currently 12 months into an 18-month loan deal back at Standard. For most of the past 12 months Vanheusden has had to be content with a place on the bench, with the duo of Konstantinos Laifis and Christian Luyindama forming a good relationship at the heart of the Standard Liege defence. Vanheusden waited patiently for his chance though and, when he found himself in the starting line-up due to injury in mid-November, he showed the qualities that led Inter Milan to pick him up as a youngster. Vanheusden then played every minute until Christmas and, by December, was the first name on Standard's team sheet, playing a key part in their strong run of form that month. What lays in wait for him on his return to Inter remains to be seen, he'll only be turning 20 in the summer and, no matter how well he performs at Standard Liege, a berth at the heart of defence for such a big club will likely be deemed too soon for the time being. Standard Liege will no doubt be looking to keep him on a longer-term basis but, if they do so, it'll be only a matter of time before bigger clubs come sniffing again.

19, BELGIUM, STANDARD LIEGE, CENTRE BACK

Sander BERGE



Berge may be only 20 years of age, but on the pitch he towers above most other players. Standing at almost 2 metres tall, he's an instantly recognisable figure; a ruddy-cheeked, floppy-haired man mountain. He's now 2 years into his time at Genk and has established himself as a key part of the midfield in a side currently looking favourites to lift the 18/19 Pro League title in Belgium. Manchester United in particular have been keeping a close eye on the youngster, who already boasts 12 caps at senior level for Norway. Should he move on to a bigger league, what will prove most interesting to see is how he copes defensively. In Genk he plays for a side who dominate possession and, though nominally a defensive midfielder, it's on the ball and driving forward where he's at his best, with a rifling long-range strike a key component of his game. He can sometimes be caught out defensively but, at just 20, he'll learn. Most importantly, he possesses the raw talent and physicality to cut it with the best.

20, NORWAY, GENK, DEFENSIVE MIDFIELDER

Landry DIMATA

Dimata's 16/17 season at Oostende was nothing short of superb. Spearheading a side playing some exhilarating attacking football, he went from a nobody to one of European football's hot young prospects within 12 months. Since then, he's endured a tougher 18 months but with him still only 21 years of age, he has a long career ahead of him. A move to a struggling Wolfsburg side in the summer of 2017 proved too much too soon for the youngster and he never managed to have an impact at a side battling relegation. A move back to Belgium with Anderlecht at the beginning of this season looked the best way to get his career back on track. For reasons beyond his control, it hasn't worked out as he'd have liked. He joined a club soon to find themselves in turmoil, with 2018 being Anderlecht's worst calendar year since World War II and, though his form has been a little patchy, there's no denying Dimata has been a standout player. He bagged 5 goals in his first 4 league games to announce himself back in Belgium and starts 2019 with 13 goals in 18 league appearances, all the more impressive given the lack of support he's afforded at a side that has so often looked totally bereft of any creativity. Stylistically, there's more than a touch of his countryman Romelu Lukaku to his playing style; fast and powerful but with a first touch that can prove comically bad at times. Yet, like Lukaku, he can prove devastating on his day. With him ending 2018 with 80 career appearances to his name already, he's pretty experienced for his age and, with a little fine-tuning here and there, could well be playing up top alongside or indeed instead of Lukaku in a Belgian shirt in years to come.

21, BELGIUM, ANDERLECHT, STRIKER

Jonathan DAVID

Jonathan David may not have established himself as a league regular as much as some of the others on this list but that's no concern given he's the youngest player listed here too. Gent secured his signature in January 2018, plucking him from the obscurity of the Ottawa International Soccer Club in his native Canada and he spent his first 6 months at his new club playing for the youth teams. Pre-season offered him a chance to shine, and boy did he take his opportunity. When the season proper began he was rewarded with a place on the first-team bench. In his first 4 substitute appearances for Gent, totalling just 68 minutes, he scored a staggering 5 goals. Whilst he hasn't been scoring so freely since, he still has an impressive 7 goals this season already at club level. Unsurprisingly, the Canadian national side took notice too and he's continued his fine form for them with 3 goals in 3 appearances. He plays primarily as a striker, though is comfortable dropping in a little deeper too, and his pace is frightening. Over the next few years he'll be hoping he's given the chance to run at some of Europe's best defenders.

18, CANADA, GENT, STRIKER



JONATHAN DAVID



aaron wan-bissaka

THERE ARE FEW GREATER feelings as a football fan than watching a special talent emerge from the depths of your academy. For teams at the wrong end of the table they can be someone to champion, to cherish and can revive an ailing, despondent fan base. For Crystal Palace it was the icing on the cake for a season that started in turmoil and ended in triumph.

Perhaps even more surprising than surviving a Premier League campaign that started with seven straight defeats was the transformation of Aaron Wan-Bissaka. The shy, unassuming 20-year old had began life as a leggy striker before dropping further back down the flank into his now customary right-back role.

In 2017, former Eagles first-team coach Kevin Keen needed bodies for a training session, specifically a body capable of challenging fellow academy graduate turned star player Wilfried Zaha. Under-23 coach Richard Shaw offered the speed and work-rate of Wan-Bissaka as a potentially worthy opponent, who despite lacking defensive grounding or experience could at least match him for pace.

Zaha is well versed in skipping round opponents with grace and ease but on that occasion the wiry frame of Wan-Bissaka proved unbeatable. He matched Zaha stride for stride, offering no respite or easy pathway, which lead to an increasingly frustrated Zaha and an increasingly excited coaching staff.

Suddenly a player who wasn't viewed as the best prospect at the club had carved out a new role utilising his best attributes, propelling himself into senior squad consideration. A handful of bench appearances would soon follow before Wan-Bissaka was given his debut at home to Tottenham on February 25th 2018.

With senior defenders Mamadou Sakho, Scott Dann, Martin Kelly and first-choice right-back Joel Ward all sidelined through injury, Roy Hodgson was forced to call upon the verdant Wan-Bissaka. Title-chasing Tottenham, blessed with Harry Kane, Dele Alli and Christian Eriksen didn't so much represent a baptism of fire as an eternity in Satan's hot tub.

But Wan-Bissaka didn't so much as flinch, instead channelling his youthful exuberance into artfully subduing the threat of winger Erik Lamela. I was part of the crowd in the Arthur Wait Stand that day, who after one or two awkward moments developed an immediate rapport with a player gradually gaining confidence.

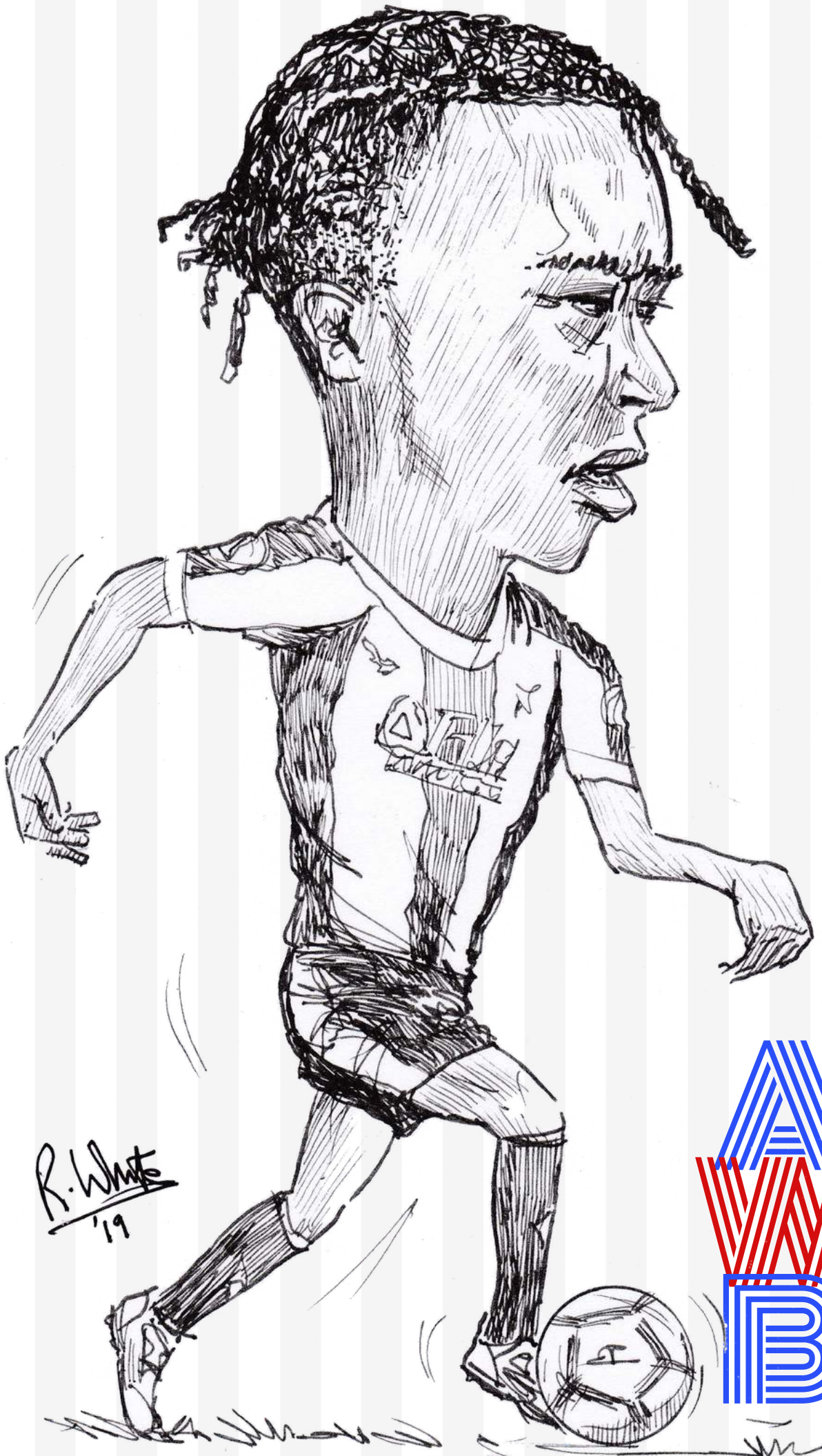
The game would ultimately end in heartbreak with Kane clinching an 88th-minute winner, a cruel blow for a team whose patched up defence had held firm for so long. Yet even in defeat there were plenty of positives, with supporters dreaming of a day where the club wasn't solely dependant on paying inflated fees in an all too competitive market.

The exquisite timing of his tackles stood out immediately. As referees continue to clampdown on 'robust' challenges, the sliding tackle is quickly becoming a forgotten art, but Wan-Bissaka's ability to probe and stalk attackers before swiping the ball away with clinical precision has made winning back possession a mere formality.

Each successful block, interception and pinpoint tackle elicits a roar from Selhurst Park and begrudging applause from the away end. There are clear similarities to a young Rio Ferdinand with a gangly pair of legs offering near perfect extraction of the ball every single time. In a team expected to be without the ball for long periods yet always looking to launch counter attacks, this is a skill that cannot be overvalued.

As if watching Wan-Bissaka wasn't ample indication of his ability he also sits atop numerous statistical measurements. Only Richard Pereira of Leicester City has completed more tackles this season (80) compared to Wan-Bissaka's (77) but even more telling is that in 21 appearances Wan-Bissaka has been successfully dribbled past just six times (as of Jan 17th). A remarkable feat given the abundance of tricky wingers and gung-ho full-backs in the Premier League.

Despite success at a rapid rate there have been inevitable bumps in the road. In his sixth appearance for the club, having excelled against the likes of Lamela, Marcus Rashford and Sadio Mane, a lack of concentration let Bournemouth's



Joshua King steal in at the back post and clinch a 2-2 draw. Palace would have pulled five points clear of the drop zone had they avoided that 89th minute equaliser and that error was enough to see former right-back Ward return to the side for a crucial relegation run-in.

There is an unmistakable reliance on pace to recover defensive position, though this is also a trait of fellow full-back Patrick Van Aanholt on the other side of the pitch. The reliable stewardship of James Tomkins and Sakho should help pull Wan-Bissaka into line while Hodgson's renowned repetitive training methods will only improve his positional awareness. His eagerness to get

Perhaps this focus on football epitomises why supporters have embraced Wan-Bissaka so easily. Perhaps it's because recent Premier League success has meant a blockade has been unceremoniously erected between the academy and first-team. Just this month, to the dismay of many, Welsh international and academy product Jonny Williams dropped down to Charlton in League One to revive a career hampered by injuries and a severe lack of opportunities.

Wan-Bissaka was clearly a beneficiary of opportunity, who without a stream of injuries may still be on the fringes of the squad. The pessimists will argue his rise has been sensationalised

"WHAT'S REMARKABLE IS THAT HIS RISE TO PROMINENCE DOESN'T APPEAR TO HAVE INFLATED HIS EGO OR MANIPULATED HIS CHARACTER."

forward is a valuable asset, but he has been guilty of attempting intricate passes at the wrong time that can punish a side who can overly-commit on the counter attack.

Nevertheless, the above is simply a product of inexperience for a player fast-tracked into the first-team. What is remarkable is that his rise to prominence doesn't appear to have inflated his ego or manipulated his character. He's still the shy, unassuming man who is incredibly calm and eager to learn. Richard Shaw admitted that he was once someone who was easily lead astray and there were times when he 'drove me mad' but fears have been allayed with Wan-Bissaka since moving Greenwich to be around a 'quiet environment free from distractions'.

because the club, that brands itself on the pride of South London, has been recently deprived of a conveyor belt of homegrown icons.

Yet there is something different about Wan-Bissaka, something enchanting about the way he approaches each game and seems unfazed by all opponents. In an era where fans are perhaps growing weary of the polished Premier League product, the emergence of rough diamond Wan-Bissaka may just help them fall in love with the game all over again.

Will Taylor, former Premier League Analyst, Crystal Palace fan and Football Radar veteran.



CUTRONE

Milan's next great striker?

AC MILAN ARE NOT the force that they once were. The European giants have only won the Italian title on two occasions since the turn of the millennium and that does not look likely to change in the near future. Yet fans have reason to be optimistic with the emergence of a young striker in the past year, Patrick Cutrone. Is he destined to become the next great Milan striker?

Cutrone's breakthrough year

Having been a part of the Milan youth squads since 2006, Cutrone was promoted to the senior ranks in the summer of 2017. With Milan bringing in Nikola Kalinic and Andre Silva, two established internationals, during that summer transfer window, it looked as though Cutrone's opportunities may be limited. Vincenzo Montella, Milan's manager at the time, did offer hope to the youngster though, announcing that Cutrone would not be loaned out, before adding "this summer he has impressed me and now we are seeing the results".

Montella would be replaced in November by Gennaro Gattuso but that did not halt Cutrone's progression. Indeed, within three months of taking charge, Gattuso was comparing Cutrone to a former Milan legend, Filippo Inzaghi, praising the forward's "great desire" and "lethal" instincts inside the box. Cutrone finished the season with more league goals than Kalinic and Silva netted between them. He had proved that he belonged at this level.

Following in the footsteps of greatness

Cutrone has started his career impressively, but still has a long way to go if he is to match or even surpass those that have gone before him. During the 2000s, Andriy Shevchenko and Filippo Inzaghi formed a formidable partnership to lead Milan to two Champions League wins and a Scudetto. In a similarly dominant period back in the early 1990s, Marco van Basten firmly stamped his mark on Serie A.

A daunting task for many, yet Cutrone has shown over the past 18 months that he is unfazed despite his lack of experience. He played a key role in Milan's run to the Coppa Italia final last season, including scoring an extra time winner against local rivals, Inter Milan, in the quarter-finals. His ability to produce in the key moments did not go unnoticed by the wider audience either, as he

finished seventh in the voting for the Kopa Trophy, which is awarded to the best player in the world under the age of 21. Shevchenko won a Ballon d'Or back in 2004, whilst Inzaghi and van Basten won major international tournaments during their glittering careers. Cutrone is some way from that standard at this point but his feats thus far indicate that he is moving in the right direction.

Becoming an all-round striker

In years gone by, simply being a penalty-box centre forward was sufficient. However, those days seem to largely be a thing of the past with many of the top strikers across Europe developing their all-round game to ensure that they become the complete striker.

Standout performers across the continent, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Suarez and Sergio Aguero all have outstanding goalscoring records, but they are also able to link up with their teammates effectively in the build-up. Cutrone has shown that he can be a huge threat in the box although Gattuso is keen to point out that "he can play better" when the ball is on the floor, alluding to how his combination play with teammates needs to improve. Advancing this aspect of his game would allow him to continue his rapid rise at Milan.

Looking ahead

Cutrone has had a battle on his hands this season to retain his place in Milan's starting line-up following the summer signing of Gonzalo Higuain from Juventus. He has managed to feature regularly once more though, either alongside the Argentine or when given chances as the lone striker during Higuain's absences through injury or suspension. His task for the second half of the season will be to keep his place and look to steer his side into the Champions League places.

Internationally, Cutrone remains some way down the pecking order at this stage. With Lorenzo Insigne and Ciro Immobile widely seen as the best strikers in the country, it will be a stiff task to displace these two senior figures. Nevertheless, Cutrone has come through every obstacle in his way so far with flying colours and, having only just turned 21, time is on his side. With his peak years ahead of him, the future looks very bright.

Sam Brookes, Italian Serie A Analyst

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Serie A: One to Watch

SINCE BREAKING into the Cagliari first team in 2016, Nicolo Barella has been a player to keep an eye on. Two years later, it seems that a move to a top European club is only a matter of time. Following his rapid progression, what could lie ahead for the young Italian midfielder?

Becoming Cagliari's key man

Having made his Serie A debut in the final month of the 2014/15 season, Barella was sent out on loan to Serie B outfit, Como. His statistics there were unspectacular, as he provided a solitary assist in 16 appearances. Yet Cagliari had seen enough and brought him back into the first team squad ahead of the 2016/17 campaign. It is at this stage that Barella began to establish himself.

He played 28 games in his breakthrough campaign, increasing that to 34 the following year, and is on course to better that number again this season. It is clear that he has become indispensable for the bottom half Serie A side. Statistics alone do not illustrate the impact that Barella has had. In his two full seasons of top-flight football, Barella has scored 6 goals and delivered one assist. Just like his time at Como, these numbers do not stand out. However, when watching Cagliari there can be no doubt that he is the heartbeat of the team. His work rate on and off the ball is unrivalled, as he is able to relieve the pressure on the defence both with his passing ability and his tenacity in winning the ball back.

Cagliari manager, Rolando Maran, lauded praise upon the youngster earlier in the season, labelling him as "extraordinary" and tipping him to become a "key figure in the Nazionale going forward." At just 21 years of age, Barella has already made a lasting impression at his hometown club.

International recognition

Maran's prediction proved accurate. In October 2018, Barella made his first start for Italy in a friendly at home to Ukraine. He has since been an ever-present, playing ninety minutes against Poland and Portugal in the UEFA Nations League. The fact that he is keeping the likes of Roberto Gagliardini, Lorenzo Pellegrini and Bryan Cristante out of the side, all of whom ply their trade at the top end of the division with Inter Milan and Roma, highlights how well Barella is performing at Cagliari.

Prior to his debut, Italy manager, Roberto Mancini, acknowledged that Barella is a player with "great prospects". Following his appointment in May 2018, Mancini has looked more towards youth than his predecessors. It appears that he sees Barella as an integral part of Italy's future.

How can Barella improve?

With each game, Barella continues to develop into the complete midfielder. He is still in the infancy of his career though, so improvements can be made. One of his strengths can also be a weakness for him at present, and that is controlling his emotions.

Supporters will accept that quality on the pitch can wane at times, but demand that full commitment must be exhibited at all times. Barella never fails to deliver on this front. There is a fine line between passion and recklessness though, and this is what Barella must learn if he is to become the outstanding player that he promises to be.

He was booked 9 and 13 times respectively in his first two seasons at the club, whilst receiving a red card in each of the campaigns as well. These moments of ill-discipline meant that he missed six matches across the two seasons due to suspensions. Cagliari failed to win any of those games, outlining how his indiscretions hurt both himself and his team.

Who's interested?

Clubs from England and Italy are said to be interested in acquiring the services of Barella. Chelsea, Tottenham and Liverpool have been linked with making a move, whilst Inter Milan are rumoured to be plotting their own bid in the coming months.

Cagliari president, Tommaso Giulini, realises that Barella seems destined to leave but is hopeful of hanging onto his star player for now. In a recent message, Giulini claimed that Barella is "very happy here", whilst seemingly appealing to the fans by saying "it's only right that we enjoy him for as long as he's here with us". Cagliari are maintaining a defiant mood for now, although a big move in the summer looks likely. Is Barella ready to move to the elite level of European football? We may well soon find out.

Sam Brookes, Italian Serie A Analyst

SERIE A: BREAK THROUGH 11

Emil AUDERO

In his first full season in Serie A, Audero has shown he belongs at this level.

Sampdoria were defensively weak last season and, whilst their flaws at the back have not been completely fixed, this goalkeeper has played a key role in making them harder to beat. He has also picked up nine caps for Italy under 21s so far.

SAMPDORIA - 22

SERIE A HAS OFTEN been associated with containing mostly experienced players, where defensive solidarity is the main focus for managers. However, this stereotype is no longer accurate, as a fresh crop of talent is breaking through and showing their worth on a regular basis. Here, in a 4-3-3 formation, are some of the young prospects to look out for over the coming years.

Sam Brookes, Serie A Analyst

SAM BROOKES - SERIE A: BREAKTHROUGH 11

Nikola MILENKOVIC

Milenkovic has been a mainstay in defence for Fiorentina and is equally capable of playing right back or in central defence, though has featured more regularly on the right hand side this year. His impressive displays have led to Manchester United reportedly keeping a close eye on him.

FIorentina - 21

Cristian ROMERO

Romero was some way off the Genoa first team at the start of the campaign. That is no longer the case though, as he has now established himself as a consistent starter under Cesare Prandelli. His performances have improved as the season has progressed and at the age of 20 he will only get better.

GENOA - 20

Luiz FELIPE

The Brazilian centre back has worked his way up the pecking order over the past 18 months. He is now battling with Wallace for a starting berth on a weekly basis but his composure in possession, bringing the ball out from the back with ease, has seen him shine for Lazio recently. He is developing into a fine player under Simone Inzaghi.

LAZIO - 21

ROGERIO

Continuing the Brazilian theme is Rogerio at left back. Sassuolo remain one of the most exciting teams to watch in Serie A, and whilst Rogerio is far from the finished article, his ability to get up and down the left flank, providing an attacking outlet whenever possible, has impressed observers this season.

SASSUOLO - 21

Nicolo ZANILOLO

Despite Roma enduring a tough season so far, Zaniolo has flourished. His creativity in the final third has made him one of Roma's shining lights, and he has caught the eye of national team manager, Roberto Mancini, who called him up to the senior side in late 2018.

ROMA - 19

Manuel LOCATELLI

Locatelli struggled to get game time at AC Milan last season yet has had no

such difficulties with Sassuolo. His energetic displays in the middle of the park, breaking up the play and starting attacks for Sassuolo, have been vital for the team this season.

SASSUOLO - 21

Nicolo BARELLA

Barella is one of the more advanced prospects in this team of youngsters, having

broken into the Italian national side in the latter stages of 2018. His technical ability is matched by his desire and commitment to the cause, making him almost certain to move to a big European club in the summer.

CAGLIARI - 22

Federico CHIESA

An exceptional talent, Chiesa scored 6 and produced 9 assists in the league last season. He is well on the way to eclipsing those figures this year and scored a hat-trick against Roma in January as Fiorentina stormed into the semi-finals of the Coppa Italia. With 11 international caps already to his name, this player has a big future ahead of him. Real Madrid are said to be tracking his progress.

FIORENTINA - 21

Patrick CUTRONE

Cutrone does not always start for Milan, but has consistently made the most of his opportunities since breaking into the side in 2017. He outscored the likes of Niko Kalinic and Andre Silva last year, and outperformed Gonzalo Higuain in the first part of this campaign. He now has a new strike partner with the arrival of Krzysztof Piatek from Genoa in January. Expect Cutrone to rise to the challenge once more.

AC MILAN - 21

Christian KOUAME

Kouame is a versatile operator who can play on either flank or up front. He has shone in his first season at Genoa, attracting interest from both Juventus and

Napoli during the January transfer window. Top scorer Krzysztof Piatek left in January, meaning that even more will be expected of Kouame in the latter half of the season.

GENOA - 21

BRUNO FERNANDES GEDSON

PORTUGUESE ANALYSTS JAMIE FARR AND ALEX
BROWN TAKE A LOOK AT TWO PLAYERS NAMED
FERNANDES MAKING WAVES IN LIGA NOS

2018 WAS QUITE the year for Benfica youngster Gedson Fernandes, who may well still be a relatively unfamiliar name to football fans at present but based on his rapid progress it won't be long before this changes.

After flourishing for the Benfica B team in Portugal's second tier, during the 2017/18 campaign, managing 5 goals in 31 appearances, Fernandes made the step up to the senior side during the summer, playing a big part during pre-season and he hasn't looked back.

Having only just turned 20, he's still a very raw

national team came calling. His international debut came in September 2018, and he now has a UEFA Nations League semi-final to look forward to later this year.

A 30-yard screamer in the Portuguese Cup highlighted just why some of Europe's biggest clubs, including Juventus and Manchester United, are reportedly showing strong interest in the Benfica star. His current employers have been quick to tie him down to a new long-term contract, a five-year deal including a release clause valued at 120 million euros; the biggest ever for a Liga Nos side.

'HAVING ONLY JUST TURNED 20, HE'S STILL A VERY RAW TALENT. BUT WHAT A TALENT; TALL, ATHLETIC, CONFIDENT ON THE BALL, AND A REAL DRIVING FORCE FROM CENTRAL MIDFIELD, HE'S ALSO NOT ONE TO SHY AWAY FROM HIS DEFENSIVE RESPONSIBILITIES.'

talent but what a talent! Tall, athletic, confident on the ball and a real driving force from central midfield, he's also not one to shy away from his defensive responsibilities. Gedson already looks like the complete midfielder, drawing obvious comparisons to World Cup winner Paul Pogba.

Former Benfica boss Rui Vitoria wasn't afraid of integrating him into the team early on this season, and his confidence in the young man was repaid almost instantly as he netted what proved to be a vital away goal in Istanbul, as Benfica defeated Turkish side Fenerbahce in the qualifying stages of the Champions League on their way to the group stages.

After establishing himself as a first-team regular, keeping a number of more experienced names sidelined as a result, it wasn't long before the

He ended the year ranked seventh in 2018's Golden Boy award that recognises the best young talents the game has to offer, a measure of just how far he has progressed in a matter of months.

With such a good platform to continue improving and developing as a player, there's no imminent danger of Benfica losing him, yet there will certainly come a point when they will be faced with the option of cashing in on one of their stars, as they have done so often in the past. And when they do so, whoever wins the race for his signature will have to fork out a lot of money to sign this exciting young midfielder.

Alex Brown, Portuguese Liga Nos Analyst



BRUNO
FERNANDES

THE PORTUGUESE Primeira Liga has been a hotbed of playing talent that Europe's elite have raided regularly for a number of years; a division in which some of the world's best players have cut their teeth in such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Angel Di Maria and Falcao. Looking to follow in the aforementioned footsteps is one of the country's outstanding talents of the moment, Sporting's Bruno Fernandes.

Fernandes began his footballing career with Boavista, representing their youth teams before moving to Italy with Novara. He remained in the country for five years, also featuring for Udinese and latterly Sampdoria, where he caught the eye with some good performances, albeit not quite being able to force his way into the eleven regularly.

Sporting came calling in the summer of 2017 and

Russia. He got a surprise start in the memorable 3-3 draw with Spain in the opening group phase match, although was unable to make much of an impact before his side were eliminated by Uruguay in the last 16.

It was no mean feat for Fernandes to make a very strong Portugal squad though, one that is particularly blessed in the midfield department with the likes of Bernardo Silva, Adrien Silva and João Mário to compete amongst.

Fernandes began this season rather more slowly, likely fatigued from a draining first season in Portugal and the aforementioned summer in Russia. However, his form has risen back to his best levels in the past few months, the player looking revitalised after his club hired Dutch manager Marcel Keizer, who has vastly improved Sporting's style of play.

'UNDER JORGE JESUS IN 17/18, FERNANDES PLAYED IN NUMEROUS POSITIONS, OCCASIONALLY DRIFTING WIDE, BUT IT WAS CENTRALLY, OFTEN IN TANDEM WITH WILLIAM CARVALHO, THAT HE PRODUCED HIS BEST FOOTBALL.'

a fee in the region of £8m was enough to bring him home to Portugal. In the 18 months since Fernandes has been arguably the club's best player and at such a fee has to be one of the biggest European bargains of recent years.

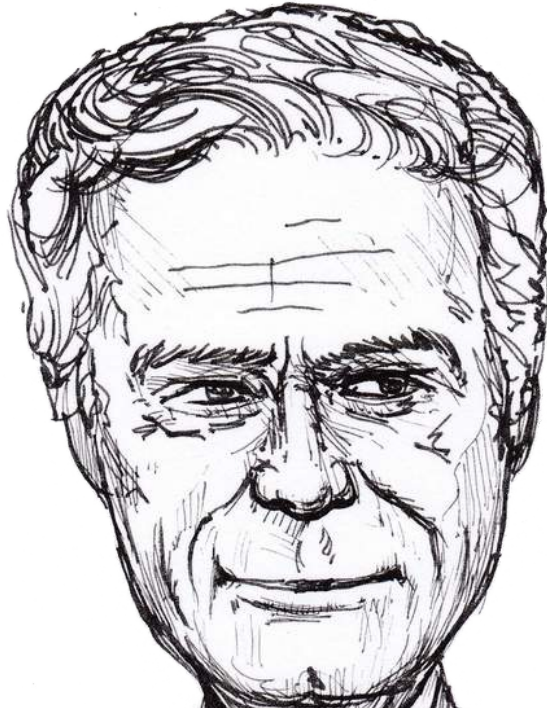
Under Jorge Jesus in 2017/18, Fernandes played in numerous positions, occasionally drifting wide, but it was centrally, often in tandem with William Carvalho, that he produced his best football. One of the first attributes to stand out about Fernandes was his exceptional long range shooting, as evidenced in a 5-0 drubbing of Vitória Guimarães early on in the campaign, a match in which he scored two sensational goals.

Fernandes would end the club season on a low note as Sporting missed out on Champions League qualification and also tasted defeat to Aves in the Taca de Portugal final. However, he was able to console himself with a well-earned call up to the Portugal squad for the World Cup in

Under Keizer Fernandes looks more focused and disciplined without compromising his propensity for long distance shooting. The latter trait has cemented his reputation as a proper goalscoring midfielder, as evidenced by a goal every other game in all competitions. He's not selfish by any means however, also chipping in with double figures in assists throughout the campaign so far.

Fernandes' form has reportedly not gone unnoticed with the likes of Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur supposedly keeping a close eye on a player that would require a substantially higher fee than that which Sporting paid to prise the 24 year old away from Lisbon. It's difficult to argue the possibility that he is the best player in the country at the moment and it seems more than probable he'll become a household name in Europe before too long.

Jamie Farr, Portuguese Liga Nos Analyst



The
Visionary Nice
of

R White
19

Jean-Paul Kivere

IT WAS A MEETING that the mayor of Nice did not enjoy. Having spoken with players and staff, Jean-Pierre Rivere entered Mayor Christian Estrosi's office with bad news. After nearly a decade of building, careful re-investment and glorious success, club president Rivere and his partner, general manager Julien Fournier, would be leaving the Allianz Riviera.

Such was their influence on the club, and by extension the city, that Rivere felt the need to warn Nice's mayor of their impending announcement. Having guided Les Aiglons from the precipice of relegation to the brink of Champions League football via a new stadium and training ground, largely without the help of cash-rich benefactors, Rivere and Fournier will be remembered by Estrosi and the rest of the Cote d'Azur as nothing short of visionaries.

As Eden Hazard's Lille won the 2011 Ligue 1 title, Nice languished in 17th after a final day battle against the drop which saw Monaco relegated to Ligue 2. Les Aiglons needed change. Having parted company with his real estate development company in 2008, former Nice youth player Jean-Pierre Rivere had been looking to invest in a new project. Rivere's 12m euros bought him 51% of OGC Nice and installed him as club president before Fournier was enlisted as CEO in July. "We share the same desire to build," said Rivere of his new partner, "It will take time, but this is a long project."

With the long term in mind, Rivere and Fournier's management would be based on a number of key principles. Chief among those would be re-investment; anything the club made through transfers or sponsorship would be used to develop the squad and club infrastructure. An extensive and carefully targeted scouting network would also be crucial. Before many of their competitors, Nice assigned a team of scouts to the top two divisions of more than 12 countries where value for money, mainly via younger players who meet stringent club criteria and values, might be forthcoming. Portugal and Ligue 2 became favourites while, understandably, England was largely ignored.

Rivere and Fournier would also look to develop the club's brand, as Fournier told L'equipe in 2016. "It is necessary to become an economically more important club, not because of the cheques of

shareholders but by developing our own wealth," Fournier explained. "On the national level, we remain a small brand compared to PSG or Marseille. On the other hand, the Côte d'Azur is world famous - if we manage to associate the image of the club, it gives a stronger international resonance." Finally, Rivere and Fournier would have 'strong nerves' in the transfer window, "a period of negotiation and bluffing" says Fournier, partly to minimise financial risk but also to eek the most out of the club's resources. At one stage, all signings exceeding 2m euros were rejected. "We are always uncomfortable with too much risk financially... Sports risks, yes."

*"We are always
uncomfortable with too
much risk financially...
Sports risks, yes."*

At the end of their first season, Nice has risen to thirteenth. A 2m euro deal for Bocas Junior's defender Fabian Monzon proved an early Rivere-Fournier coup as eight goals and 4 Aiglons de Mois awards convinced Lyon to part with 4.3m (and full back Jeremy Pied) a year later. Having won Ligue 1 with Monaco in 2000 before leading Lyon deep into the Champions League, Claude Puel was appointed as the coach to implement the progressive football and youth development Rivere wanted.

Puel had an immediate effect. An astonishing 4th place finish was achieved with Nice's now celebrated and replicated principles to the fore. Defender Romain Genevois as well as midfielders Valentin Eysseric and Eric Bautheac were signed from Ligue 2 for free or on loan and played a prominent role. Meanwhile Argentine forward Dario Cvitanich, a 400,000 euro addition from Ajax, proved to be the first real success of the club's overhauled scouting system as his 19 Ligue 1 goals were only bettered by Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

However, consistent development proved to be, as Rivere had suggested, a long term project. An ensuing European campaign was a struggle, as inexperienced French teams often find, and Nice dropped to 17th and then 11th place finishes. Supporters even chanted for "Rivière résission!",

'Rivere resignation', during the visit of Evian in April 2015. Rivere and Fournier left the game in disgust before the ultras released a statement claiming they were "promised wonders, but what have we done for three years? No heart, selling players, no purchases in return, all the power to an egocentric coach and no ambition except to play for survival."

Fortunately for all concerned, Rivere and Fournier did not resign and their philosophy began to coalesce. Summer 2015 saw economic deals for Jean-Michel Seri, who joined from Pacos de Ferreira for 1m euros, full back Ricardo Pereira on a loan from Porto, Valere Germain from Monaco, who's year on loan produced 14 league goals and 6 assists, while defender Maxime le Marchand joined from Ligue 2 Le Havre. Heading the list of recruits was Hatem Ben Arfa who signed for free on a one year deal. A cautious arrangement given his previous issues at Newcastle and Hull City but one that typically represented 'a sporting rather than financial gamble'. The 11m euros received for academy graduate Jordan Amavi from Aston Villa was re-invested to aid these acquisitions and to build a new training centre.

Somehow, despite losing Ben Arfa to PSG, Nampalys Mendy and Jeremy Pied to England, Valere Germain back to Monaco and Genevois to Caen, Rivere and Fournier had improved the team yet further. A 15m euro fee for Mendy was reinvested as the club added full back Dalbert and midfielder Wylan Cyprien, typically low cost deals from Liga Nos and Ligue 2 respectively, Brazilian defender Dante and Montpellier title winning midfielder Younes Belhanda, on loan from Dynamo Kiev. All proved crucial for Favre.

Shrewd to the last, Rivere and Fournier have recouped 100m euros from the sales of Seri, striker Alassane Plea to Borussia Monchengladbach, Dalbert, Mendy, Amavi and Le Marchand, players who joined the club for a total of less than 5m. Mario Balotelli meanwhile became the latest sporting but not financial gamble to pay off. Rivere and Fournier had completely revolutionised the club. However, an attempt to develop further lead to their exit.

In 2016 a group of Chinese-American investors bought 80% of Les Aiglons, acquiring more than half of the 51% owned by Rivère. "Their arrival

With the long term in mind, Rivere and Fournier's management would be based on a number of key principles. Chief among those would be re-investment - anything the club made through transfers or sponsorship would be used to develop the squad and club infrastructure.'

Ben Arfa and company were party to Puel's best season with Nice, 17 league goals for the temperamental Frenchman were the product of some enthralling attacking football. With Puel off to Southampton after a top four finish, Lucien Favre fit the Nice mould perfectly and took the club up to third the following year. A title challenge only extinguished in the final month having been crowned Winter Champions after dismantling eventual champions Monaco 4-0 in September's Cote d'Azur derby.

secures the future of the club and will provide additional resources for the continuation of our vision," Rivere explained. "While keeping its identity and guidance, OGC Nice will gradually reach new heights." Chien Lee, Chairman of the OGC Nice Supervisory Board affused "Between the passion of its fans, its world-class stadium and future training centre, the infrastructure is in place to achieve the management team's vision. As a long term investor, the future is bright for the club and its city."

But whether Nice's new investors, a group lead by Lee and Paul Conway who also own an 80% stake of League One Barnsley, truly shared the 'desire to build' Rivere saw in Fournier remains debatable. In a lengthy press conference to announce their departure in January, Rivere and Fournier pointed to "tensions with our shareholders" that were "accentuated over the transfer window. As time goes by, fluidity is no longer there. And differences of opinion are there."

has been particularly irked by the investors' slow decision making.

As a result of this parting of ways, Vieira may yet prove collateral damage. Being Fournier and Rivere's appointment, Fournier had flown out to New York to convince Vieira to sign for the club, his position is weakened by Fournier and Rivere's departure. A position that has already been tested following a shaky start and some uninspiring

'But whether Nice's new investors, a group lead by Lee and Paul Conway who also own an 80% stake of League One Barnsley, truly shared the 'desire to build' Rivere saw in Fournier remains debatable.'

Those differences centre on their re-investment policy. In an interview with L'equipe, Rivere dispelled the ideal Lee and Conway would plough millions into the club and insisted that all summer 2016 moves were "due to our own funds". Keen to back their manager, former Arsenal midfielder Patrick Vieira, another club principle, Fournier and Rivere wanted to sign either Younès Belhanda again or Ryad Boudebouz as an established, proven player to aid Vieira in 2019, but according to L'equipe the club's new investors are keen to see Rivere and Fournier sell players for large fees but not reinvest those fees, as they had done so successfully before.

As the January transfer window closed, Nice were left without an experienced, quality addition as news of investors vetoing various such deals emerged, including a return for Gemain. Rivere had stated: "On sales, we always agree, but on arrivals, a little less. Well, we manage departures and they manage arrivals. We are not in conflict with the shareholders, but we are not comfortable with this management." Fournier, who had had full control over transfer policy and likes to act quickly,

football with results often accredited to in-form goalkeeper Walter Benitez. Having suffered through an exodus of talent in the summer, Vieira needs quality to stabilise the team but is only likely to get young players not ready to make an impact. As Monaco have shown this season, a shift too far in that direction can be disastrous as experience is crucial to guiding fledgling talents.

Their replacements found, Fournier has been linked with the sporting director role at Southampton, while Rivere, having recovered 11m euros of his initial 12m investment, in a typically astute piece of business while still owning 20% of the club, is unlikely to resurface anytime soon. Despite his departure a new stadium and training facilities plus Vieira's improving management and the form of full back Yousuf Attal as well as lightning forward Allan Saint-Maximin are all ongoing testaments to Rivere's leadership. "There is no crisis at the club," Rivere insisted as he Fournier closed their press conference. For now he's right but without their visionary Chairman to guide them, Nice's players, staff, fans and mayor may soon disagree.

HUDDERSFIELD

A NEW

TOWN:

DIRECTION



DAVID WAGNER, FORMER HUDDERSFIELD COACH

NOT TOO LONG AGO Huddersfield Town F.C made a bold and unusual decision. One that directly affects their future, their fans and specifically their young players.

Owner Dean Hoyle decided to close Huddersfield's academy, or more specifically re-categorised their academy, meaning the club will focus on their U18 and U23 teams, giving those players a strong football education, learning the same playing style and philosophy as the First Team, which should result in a better

Over the last few years, Huddersfield have had just one prominent player in their squad who was promoted from their academy - Philip Billing. This will be his fifth season with Huddersfield, playing over 70 games for the club. Although, having joined as a 16 year old, you could argue that the Huddersfield academy has little to do with his early development. Recently, their academy has only brought in around £2m from player sales, largely from Jack Hunt's 2013 transfer to Crystal Palace, meaning the team's academy isn't really all that financially viable in that sense either.

'Dean Hoyle decided to close their academy, or more specifically they re-categorised their academy, meaning the club will focus on their U18 and U21 teams.'

chance of them making it in the senior squad, but in doing so they are giving up on all of their squads up to the U17s and are not allowed to recruit any players younger than 17.

Of course money is involved in this decision, as keeping an academy running is very expensive and for a team like the Terriers it's much easier to just loan a few kids from Chelsea, Liverpool or any of the other Premier League giants, like they did a few years back when they got promoted, rather than worry about the expense and the time involved as well as everything else that comes with developing your own young players.

On top of that, the moment the best of those youngsters prove they are good enough they're approached by a big team and lured away, leaving clubs like Huddersfield, who discovered them in the first place, empty-handed. But who can blame them? It's not just the name that lures those players away but everything that comes with signing for a big club; the facilities, the high quality coaching, the whole package.

A negative side to Huddersfield's transformation is that the clubs with an academy of Category 4 (Huddersfield's new category) don't get a license to participate in the Champions League or Europa League, but for a team like the Terriers that's unlikely to be a big concern.

All that said, is there a negative side to this decision? Won't it be better for everybody if the money is spent somewhere else? A new top signing maybe? Doing it seems like the right choice but is it the right choice for everybody? As a fan, I wouldn't have been thrilled by this decision. Despite all the benefits and few negative sides, one thing doesn't feel right.

Ask every football fan on the Earth: "What's your dream? Where do you want to see your club?", most will answer with "Winning the league" or "Winning the Champions league" or something similar, but is it really as sweet to achieve those goals with so few (or any) home grown talents? A squad that the fans may not warm to as easily, knowing that the moment they shine they might move back to Chelsea after a loan? A squad that doesn't have it's own Wayne Rooney or Steven Gerrard, your own local lad that rose through the ranks to the First team, perhaps to the captaincy.

To see that player, who's been with the club through thick and thin, that legend that made you love not only your club but the game as a whole, lift that trophy just once, for me it would be worth all the trophies we might have won otherwise.

Georgi Georgiev, Polish Ekstraklasa Analyst

**THE GREATEST
PREMIER LEAGUE
TEAM OF ALL TIME**

Eden
Hazard



FOR YEARS fans and football followers alike have argued over one common question – who has been the greatest team in the Premier League era so far? Some will say it's without a doubt Arsenal's invincible team of 2003-2004, where not a single loss was recorded in their league campaign.

Others disagree and would argue it's when Jose Mourinho first took the helm at Chelsea in 2004-2005 and gained a then record total of 95 points. Others perhaps might favour the magnificent partnership of Andy Cole and Dwight Yorke back in the late 90s that helped secure Manchester United a famous treble. These discussions could go on for hours, days and weeks on end without anyone ever coming to some sort of conclusion and that's before we've even delved into Ronaldo's 31 joint-record goal scoring campaign in 2007-2008 or, more recently, Manchester City's rise to the top.

'To be the best, you have to beat the best' is a phrase that holds a lot of accuracy, as to win the league title you are not only expected to pick up points against the lesser quality sides but also against other title contenders as well. An away match at the Theatre of Dreams or entertaining Arsenal on your home turf would usually be a much more of a difficult match than a game against one of the bottom sides. However both instances will still gain a team a maximum of 3 points, despite the obvious difference in difficulty.

It is with this rationale that the standard premier league table doesn't paint the full picture of the strength and quality of the resulting champion and an adjustment would need to be made in order to help determine our aim of finding out which side has been the greatest so far. In last year's edition of The Roligan Football Journal, I attempted to resolve this debate by using a unique way of comparing the total points gained from the previous champions through the implementation of a modifier.

Premier league champions from the 1995-1996 campaign right until the then most recently concluded campaign, which was then 2016-2017 were analysed. The implementation of a modifier was used in order to multiply any points gained depending on the difficulty of the opponent.

The opponent's difficulty was assessed on where the team finished in the league and the average points of that league position from 1995-1996 right up to 2016-2017. In order for this to be fair for all 23 teams, the same set of multipliers were used for all campaigns (see table 1). This means that every team had the same opportunity to gain the same amount of points as their competitors.

After collecting the average amount of points for each position, the modifiers were separated into 5 different categories; Easy (x1), Easy-Mod (x2), Moderate (x3), Mod-Hard (x4) and Hard (x5). Home and away matches were also not valued the same (plus 50% of the multiplier for away fixtures). The same multipliers were then used and applied onto every team's match results in their campaign, where the best team would be the one who collected the most points in total.

Position	PTS Mean	Difficulty	Home	Away
1	85.8		x	x
2	79.3	H	x 5	x 7.5
3	74.0	H	x 5	x 7.5
4	68.5	H	x 5	x 7.5
5	64.1	M-H	x 4	x 6
6	61.1	M-H	x 4	x 6
7	57.6	M-H	x 4	x 6
8	54.0	M-H	x 4	x 6
9	51.6	M	x 3	x 4.5
10	49.1	M	x 3	x 4.5
11	47.5	M	x 3	x 4.5
12	46.1	M	x 3	x 4.5
13	44.4	M	x 3	x 4.5
14	42.7	E-M	x 2	x 3
15	41.8	E-M	x 2	x 3
16	40.0	E-M	x 2	x 3
17	38.5	E-M	x 2	x 3
18	35.8	E	x 1	x 1.5
19	32.2	E	x 1	x 1.5
20	26.2	E	x 1	x 1.5

Table 1 - This table shows the difficulty of each position and the multiplier used of all home and away fixtures when compared to the league position and average total of points gained from 1995-1996 to 2016-2017.

Table 2 - This table shows the rankings and total points of all 23 teams analysed.

Pos.	Year	Team	Campaign PTS	Modifier PTS
1	2004-2005	Chelsea	95	341.5
2	1999-2000	Man United	91	332.5
3	2003-2004	Arsenal	90	324.5
4	2005-2006	Chelsea	91	322.5
5	2016-2017	Chelsea	93	321
6	2001-2002	Arsenal	87	317.5
7	2011-2012(2)	Man United	89	314
8	2006-2007	Man United	89	309.5
9	2002-2003	Man United	83	309.5
10	2013-2014	Man City	86	302
11	2007-2008	Man United	87	301
12	2011-2012(1)	Man City	89	300
13	2012-2013	Man United	89	297
14	2014-2015	Chelsea	87	296
15	2009-2010	Chelsea	86	295
16	2008-2009	Man United	90	286.5
17	1996-1997	Man United	75	277.5
18	2015-2016	Leicester	81	277
19	1995-1996	Man United	82	276
20	1997-1998	Arsenal	78	268.5
21	2000-2001	Man United	80	263.5
22	2010-2011	Man United	80	256.5
23	1998-1999	Man United	79	254.5

The results (table 2) showed that the greatest Premier League team ever was, according to this method, the Chelsea team of 2004-2005 with a total of 341.5 points, when Jose Mourinho first took charge delivering the Blues their first league title in 50 years. The second greatest Premier League team was the Man United side of 1999-2000 with 332.5 points that had already won the treble the previous year, followed by Arsenal's invincible team of 2003-2004 with 324.5 points. With the Chelsea team of 2004-2005 coming out on top, table 3 goes into further detail breaking down their results versus each team before and after the multipliers were used. Using this same methodology, can the Man City 'centurions' of last year attain a points total of more than 341.5 and take the top spot off Jose Mourinho's Chelsea side in 2004-2005?

2004-2005	Teams	PTS H	PTS A	PTS H & A	DIFF	MULT x H	MULT x A		MPTS H	MPTS A	MPTS H & A
1	Chelsea										
2	Arsenal	1	1		H	5	7.5		5	7.5	
3	Man United	3	3		H	5	7.5		15	22.5	
4	Everton	3	3		H	5	7.5		15	22.5	87.5
5	Liverpool	3	3		M-H	4	6		12	18	
6	Bolton Wanderers	1	3		M-H	4	6		4	18	
7	Middlesbrough	3	3		M-H	4	6		12	18	
8	Man City	1	0		M-H	4	6		4	0	86
9	Tottenham	1	3		M	3	4.5		3	13.5	
10	Aston Villa	3	1		M	3	4.5		9	4.5	
11	Charlton Athletic	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	
12	Birmingham City	1	3		M	3	4.5		3	13.5	
13	Fulham	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	91.5
14	Newcastle United	3	1		E-M	2	3		6	3	
15	Blackburn Rovers	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	
16	Portsmouth	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	
17	West Brom	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	54
18	Crystal Palace	3	3		E	1	1.5		3	4.5	
19	Norwich City	3	3		E	1	1.5		3	4.5	22.5
20	Southampton	3	3	95	E	1	1.5		3	4.5	341.5

Table 3 - This table shows the points gained for each game, as well as the points after the multipliers were used for Chelsea's 2004-2005 campaign (341.5).

Table 4 - This table shows the points gained for each game, as well as the points after the multipliers were used for Man City's 2017-2018 campaign (357)

2017-2018	PTS H	PTS A	PTS H&A	DIFF	MULTI x H	MULT x A		M PTS H	M PTS A	M PTS H&A
1 Man City										
2 Man United	0	3		H	5	7.5		0	22.5	
3 Tottenham	3	3		H	5	7.5		15	22.5	
4 Liverpool	3	0		H	5	7.5		15	0	75
5 Chelsea	3	3		M-H	4	6		12	18	
6 Arsenal	3	3		M-H	4	6		12	18	
7 Burnley	3	1		M-H	4	6		12	6	
8 Everton	1	3		M-H	4	6		4	18	100
9 Leicester City	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	
10 Newcastle	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	
11 Crystal Palace	3	1		M	3	4.5		9	4.5	
12 Bournemouth	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	
13 West Ham	3	3		M	3	4.5		9	13.5	103.5
14 Watford	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	
15 Brighton	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	
16 Huddersfield	1	3		E-M	2	3		2	9	
17 Southampton	3	3		E-M	2	3		6	9	56
18 Swansea	3	3		E	1	1.5		3	4.5	
19 Stoke City	3	3		E	1	1.5		3	4.5	22.5
20 West Brom	3	3	100	E	1	1.5		3	4.5	357

With a difference of 15.5 points, Pep Guardiola's Man City team of 2017-2018 (357 points) takes the top spot and the bragging rights from Jose Mourinho's Chelsea team of 2004-2005 (341.5 points).

Looking at tables 3 and 4, both teams attained maximum points against the three relegated sides (22.5 points), with results against teams placed 14-17th almost identical. Interestingly, Chelsea

the Premier League being more like a marathon than a sprint. It's the points gained from positions 5th to 13th that make the difference, with City only drawing 3 times in those 20 games.

An argument often made is that the real test of the Premier League can be trying to maintain an excellent standard over a prolonged period of time with games especially around the Christmas period coming thick and fast as fatigue and

'AN ARGUMENT COULD BE MADE HERE THAT PERHAPS CHELSEA DESERVE TO BE CROWNED AS THE BEST SIDE, SINCE THEIR RESULTS AGAINST THE TOP SIDES ARE BETTER.'

attained more points against the other top 3 sides due to being unbeaten (87.5 vs. 75 points), with City losing at home to Man United and failing at Anfield as well.

An argument could be made here that perhaps Chelsea deserve to be crowned as the best side, since their results against the top sides are better, however I feel it would be unfair to disregard the rest of their results completely, with the nature of

injuries start to kick in. City last year dealt with this challenge exceptionally well by going on an 18 game winning streak, which is significantly better than Chelsea whose winning streak only reached 8 games. Maintaining this excellent standard for an entire half a season is what's made the difference and deservedly has earned them the top spot in my table of Premier League champions.

Senar Etem, English League One Analyst

KOSCIELNY NSOKI BENZEM AGI
ULYABIDA DIABY PAULET AMB
APPE PAPIN CANTONA SARR BA
TTISTON PLATINI 21 ZIDAN ETHU
RAM KAMARA PETIT KAREMBEU
LLORIST CHOUMENI LIZARAZ
UBOGH OSSIAN SIX TOBIDO MAT
UIDI BADIASHILE PAYET CAVAN
UNDER THAU VINDESCHAMPS
MICOUD FERNANDES DIOP GIRE
SSEHENRYSILVA 21 WILTORD K
OUNDE PIRES PELLEGRIBARTHE
ZLACAZETTE GIGNAC BLANCVE
RRATTIRIBERY GUEBBELSTREZ
EGUET KALULEBOEUF KARAMO
HTIGANABOLIANELKADJORKA
EFFIN DESAILLY ALAKOUCH VIE
IRAEVRAKANTE AMIAN GRIEZM
ANNREINEADELAIDEPOGBAF
ONTAINEKOPA ANDERSON BOS
SISAOUAR VARANE IBRAHIMO
VICMAKELELEGIROUDI KONE
UGARRY LIGUE1 SAGNOLGALL
ASANGLOMAMAKENGO PAVA
RDVALBUENACANDELALAMA

DEVELOPING AND SOMETIMES EXPLOSIVE

young talent is perhaps the most endearing and enthralling aspect of French football. As underlined by the depth of the national team squad that won the World Cup, and those that missed out, Ligue 1 is a league almost designed for, and successful at, nurturing burgeoning talent.

So much so that it has become the league's selling point as Ligue 1 officially branded itself as 'The League of Talents' this season. Various clubs overtly adopt this idea as a sustainable model. Most notably Monaco and Nice in recent times enjoyed success in scouting Ligue 2 and more niche markets that offered value, signing young players at low cost

(or developing them at academy level) while offering a clear path to the first team for all.

As successful players are sold on at a profit, the void is often filled by a younger prospect from within further down the Ligue 1 table or Ligue 2, affording the newcomer first team football in a competitive yet under the radar environment. This list is comprised of 21 players under the age of 21 at the start of 2019 who have graced Ligue 1 this season and cover the full spectrum of that development process; from debut-less prospects to Barcelona's latest signing. Keep your eye on them.

Adam White, Ligue 1 Analyst

PSG (19)

Having broken into the squad under Unai Emery, with PSG lacking centre back cover, Nsoki has forged a reputation as a physically imposing yet technically gifted defender in the last year, despite only fleeting appearances. Equally comfortable in the centre of defence or at left back, Nsoki was heavily linked with a move this summer; Newcastle and Marseille supposedly interested after the 19 year old initially rejected an extension to his PSG deal having not been given guarantees on game time. Despite eventually signing a new contract he remains on the fringes of the 18, a summer move seems ever more likely.



MOUSSA DIABY WINGER

PSG (19)

Given the lack of faith placed in youth products in Paris since QSI's takeover with only Presnel Kimpembe and Adrien Rabiot really establishing themselves as anything other than a young prospect to be sold or loaned out in that time, Moussa Diaby's impact this season becomes all the more impressive. Fitting snugly into the wing back roles used by Thomas Tuchel in the autumn, by the end of January Diaby's five Ligue 1 assists came in just 543 minutes of play and placed him inside the top 10 providers in France. He may be a little raw at 19 but a refreshing self-confidence and lack of deference to Kylian Mbappe and Neymar (which has drawn the ire of his more illustrious teammates on occasion) makes him an exciting watch. A mazy dribble and assured finish to win a cup tie at Orleans in the Autumn, while also being a candidate for PSG's goal of the season, is hopefully a sign of things to come.

KYLIAN MBAPPE FORWARD

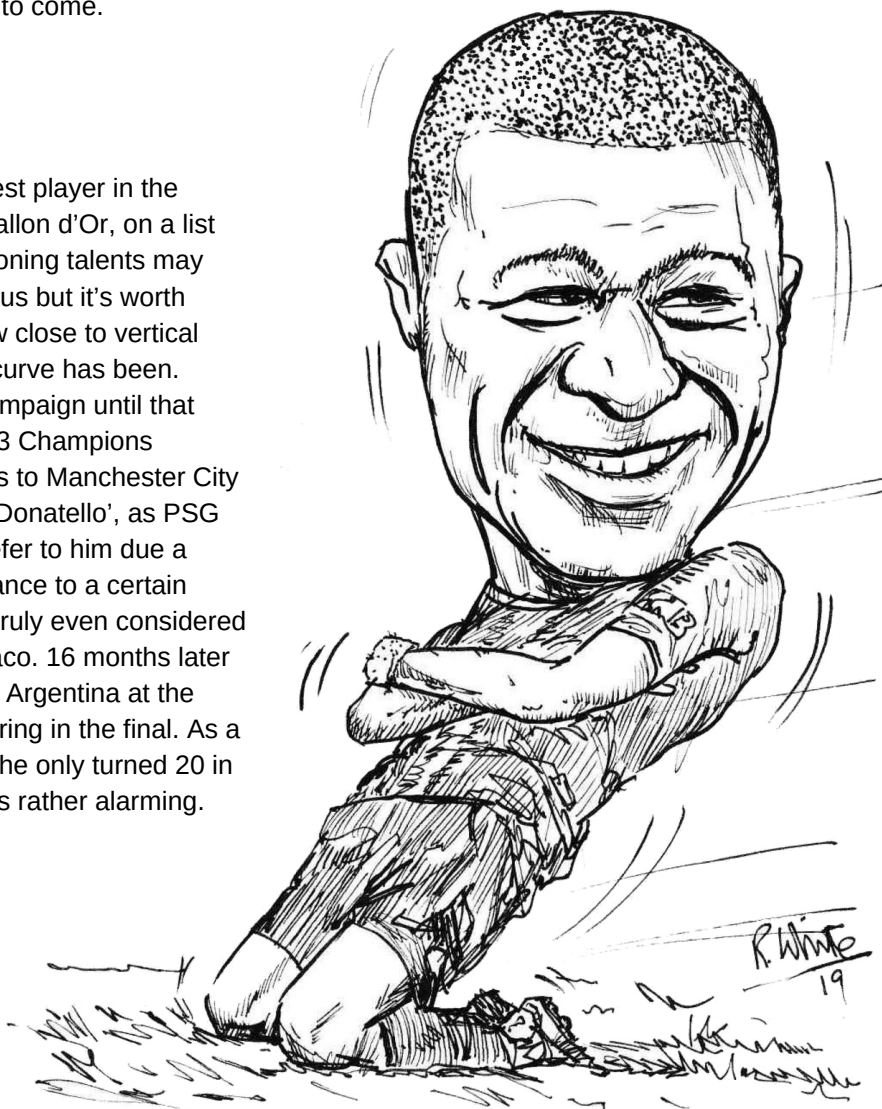
PSG (20)

Including the 4th best player in the world, as per the Ballon d'Or, on a list designed for burgeoning talents may seem a little facetious but it's worth underlining just how close to vertical Mbappe's upward curve has been. Despite a stellar campaign until that point, before the 5-3 Champions League first leg loss to Manchester City in February 2017, 'Donatello', as PSG teammates often refer to him due a supposed resemblance to a certain ninja turtle, wasn't truly even considered first choice at Monaco. 16 months later he was dismantling Argentina at the World Cup and scoring in the final. As a result, the fact that he only turned 20 in December becomes rather alarming.

ISMALA SARR FORWARD

RENNES (20)

Like a number of players on this list, it's tough to grasp the fact that he remains so young, given his level reached and responsibility assumed. Sarr joined then Ligue 1 Metz for the start of the 16/17 campaign from their Senegalese feeder club Generation Foot but despite flashes of his loping brilliance it took until the final third of the campaign for him to establish himself - a devastating cameo off the bench in a 3-2 loss to PSG proved a highlight. Tricky, direct and imposing physicality, the Senegalese International has developed a knack for the spectacular at Rennes, moving to the Breton region after a sole season with Metz. A host of thunderous strikes have characterised his upward curve to becoming arguably Rennes' premier player after a trip to the World Cup in the summer. Whether a mooted shift towards a more central role would be beneficial remains uncertain. His talent, however, is in no doubt.



YANN KARAMOH FORWARD BORDEAUX (20)

A lot has happened in Yann Karamoh's short career. Having fought through the ranks at Caen, a breakthrough 16/17 season in France took the forward to Inter Milan on a two year loan where, unfortunately, opportunities proved rare. His first Serie A start didn't come until February but an all-action, if a little erratic, display, which saw him score a superb winner, lead to more game time in the run in where he often impressed off the bench with his speed, directness and keenness to take on a full back. However, form during a subsequent loan (from the original loan with Inter) at Bordeaux has become intermittent. A place in the 11 is not assured with the talents of Samuel Kalu and Francois Kamano his competition. Impressive strikes and the odd terrified full back have been balanced out by absent, ineffective displays and a poor first touch. One such low point in Coupe de la Ligue semi final loss at Strasbourg saw him dropped from the 18 in January, reportedly at the behest of Les Girondins' new American owners. An unauthorised trip to Paris and an altercation with a coach the following week saw him exiled to train with the reserve side. A promising talent's career now sits at a crossroads with both his Bordeaux and Inter loans up in the summer despite having been reintegrated at FCGB.



BOUBAKAMARADEFENDER

MARSEILLE (19)

Highly regarded at OM for sometime, Kamara broke into the squad on a regular basis last season and has seen significant game time again this term. Good on the ball, mobile and astute defensively Kamara has been slated for an eventual evolution into a midfielder having played across the back line under Rudi Garcia with a maturity beyond his teenage years.

JEANMAKENGO MIDFIELDER

NICE (20)

A fringe member of Lucien Favre's Nice team last term, midfielder Makengo has become a consistent part of Patrick Vieira's squad this time around. Comfortable deeper in central midfield as well as an attacking midfielder, Makengo somewhat came of age during a match winning display at Nantes in September. Nice's current defensive outlook may limit his growth however.

BENOITBADIAHILEDEFENDER

MONACO (17)

One of 49 players used this season by Monaco in all competitions, Badiashile may be the only debutant to have an immediate future in the ASM 18. Since the 4-0 loss to PSG in mid November he started all but one game under Thierry Henry but with Naldo arriving and Leonardo Jardim back in charge, meaning a likely to switch back to a four man defence, Badiashile may have to wait for another chance at centre back. But at just 17, his future remains bright.

MALANGSARRDEFENDER

NICE (20)

A fluctuating career to date saw Sarr initially break into the Nice eleven as a seventeen year old under Lucien Favre at the start of the 16/17 campaign, impressing many before his form evaporated in the new year. Two further stints in the side since were fairly unsuccessful but he has finally found his feet again this term under Patrick Vieira and is starting to make good on that initial promise.

WILLEM GUEBBELS FORWARD

LYON (17)

Excitement has surrounded Guebbels for some time as the latest talent to be produced by Lyon's increasingly prolific academy. However, the versatile forward's development has been halted of late. Firstly by a protracted transfer dispute between OL and Monaco, Guebbels only played 88 senior minutes for Bruno Genesio as a result, and then successive lengthy injury layoffs having finally arrived at the principality club. Monaco's disastrous season may have been an opportunity missed for the young Frenchman given the swathes of absentees and young players of lesser repute than him thrown in at will by Thierry Henry to compensate. As such, despite the hype, Guebbels' impact remains merely a potential one at senior level, for now at least.

AURELIENTCHOUAMENI MIDFIELDER

BORDEAUX (19)

An athletic and technical all round central midfielder, Tchouameni forced his way into a thin looking Bordeaux midfield during pre-season under Gus Poyet at just 18. Despite Poyet's bizarre sacking, the France under 19 international has remained on the scene under Eric Bedouet and Ricardo Gomes' stewardship, drawing reported interest from Inter Milan amongst others. Despite clear potential, Tchouameni can still be swallowed up by more intense matches. An ability to impose himself in midfield needs to be nurtured as his career progresses.

JONATHANIKONE FORWARD

LILLE (20)

Marginalised as a PSG youth product, as is the norm, and unable to find form on loan with a defensive minded Montpellier team, forward Ikone has finally found a home under Christophe Galtier at Lille. One third of BIP (Bamba-Ikone-Pepe), a reference to the sound the Road Runner cartoon character makes, Ikone has become an integral part of a free-wheeling, Champions League chasing, attacking outfit. Coalescing nicely with Pepe and Bamba, his pace and direct style have been counterbalanced by a newfound elusiveness, an ability to drop off and find space playing behind a central striker. At just 20, he remains an intriguing prospect, three years teammate Pepe's junior.

JEAN-CLAIR TOBIDO CENTRE BACK

BARCELONA (19)

Rangy ball playing centre back Tobido, who draws parallels with Rio Ferdinand, has endured a tumultuous season so far. Barely more than a Toulouse youth teamer during preseason, Tobido ended 2018 as a Barcelona player despite just 10 senior outings for Les Violet. Having initially been thrown in by Alain Casanova with defensive options limited back in August for the visit of Bordeaux, that short spell included last minute goals, a sending off and a controversial refusal to sign a pro deal. His youth contract expiring in the summer, interest was already rife in Tobido and, in a bid to unobstruct a summer move to a bigger club, Tobido rejected club president Olivier Sadran's advances. With the club facing the prospect of getting nothing for an extremely talented player, nurtured through the youth ranks at the Stade Municipal, an infuriated Sadran banished Tobido to the reserves. Having secured a deal from the summer, Barcelona eventually negotiated an early transfer for 2m euros this January. While his short career to date may have been unpredictable, his ability remains unquestionable. Skillful with an eye for a pass and a proclivity to gracefully, although sometimes riskily, play his way out of trouble, coupled with a burgeoning defensive intelligence make Tobido one of the most exciting defenders to emerge from Ligue 1 in the last decade. Barcelona seems the right fit.



JEFFREINE-ADELAIDEFORWARD

ANGERS (now 21)

The former Arsenal youngster proved crucial to Angers' rejuvenation in the second half of last season. His dribbling abilities and tendency to drop off and find space, whether used as a winger or part of a central forward pairing, can make the Frenchman an elusive and threatening proposition. Although he remains an important cog in Stephane Moulin's masterful management of a club who continue to survive despite minimal resources, examples of the match winning displays he's capable of remain rare.

KELVINAMIANDEFENDER

TOULOUSE (now 21)

Having broken into the eleven during Toulouse's miraculous survival at the end of the 15/16 season under Pascal Dupraz alongside fellow youngster Issa Diop, now of West Ham, Kelvin Amian's form has proven somewhat undulating since. Equally comfortable at right back in a four man defence or on the right of three centre backs, Amian suffered as Dupraz's aggressive intensity ran out of steam and Toulouse became meek and conservative. This season however, individual defensive displays have solidified despite TFC's fluctuating form and amounted to Premier League links in January.

SAMUELKALUWINGER

BORDEAUX (20)

An inconsistency prevalent in Belgium with Gent hasn't been completely overcome in France but the Nigerian winger is starting to affect games more often than not and has outperformed more heralded teammates Francois Kamano and Yann Karamoh of late, becoming one of few positives in an underwhelming season for Les Girondins.

SOFIANEDIOPMIDFIELDER

MONACO (18)

A beneficiary of player turnover at Monaco during the summer and a shift (ill-advised, as it turns out) towards even younger additions, Diop moved to the Stade Louis II from Rennes despite never having made a senior appearance. A gifted attacking midfielder with a waspish intensity, he remains rather lightweight and has struggled to consistently impact games despite an extended run in the side and obvious ability.

HOUSSEMAOUARMIDFIELDER

LYON (19)

A silky and graceful midfielder often reminiscent of Andres Iniesta as he drifts around midfield and picks passes, Aouar has become crucial to a young and vibrant Lyon team under Bruno Genesio. Although his path to the zenith of the European game seems assured, for now he lacks an ability to dictate games and take responsibility for his side consistently. That will hopefully come with time as Aouar's potential remains enormous nevertheless.

SOFIANEALAKOUCHRIGHTBACK

NIMES (20)

Consistent and reliable, Alakouch has quietly become one of Ligue 1's premier full backs. Promoted with Nimes at the end of last season, the 20 year old Moroccan has adapted seamlessly to a higher level of football, proving diligent and assured defensively while his considered use of the ball and willingness of overlap further forward have made him one of many threats in Bernard Blaquart's attacking team.

PIETROPELLEGRISTRIKER

MONACO (17)

Joining Monaco for a mammoth 20m euros as a 16 year old, after brief scoring exploits in just 9 outings with Genoa, Pellegri's promising career has been decimated by injury in Ligue 1 thus far. Impressing in narrow windows between issues, a powerful finish at Bordeaux in August being a highlight, the prospect of a consistently fit Pellegri remains tantalising but at just 17, he has time.

JULESKOUNDEDEFENDER

BORDEAUX (20)

Emerging from the CFA side in January under Gus Poyet ice-cool Kounde has become a crucial part of the Bordeaux defence, quickly asserting himself with his intelligent and assured defending. A diminished confidence that affected his displays after Poyet's removal has been rectified and he is again hitting his best form and proving something of a leader.

LAURENT BLANC WORLD CUP WINNER



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