



SOCCER360 MAGAZINE

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THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY

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AND WHO IS NOT

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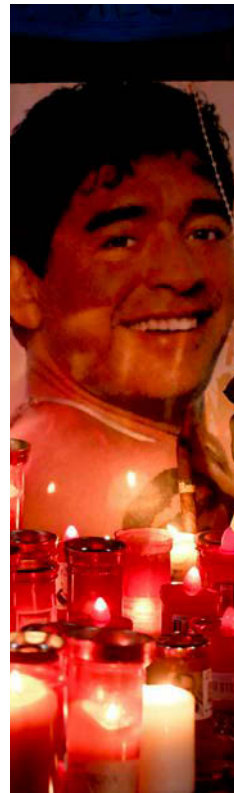
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COVER FEATURE: THE LEGEND, DIEGO MARADONA

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FIFA CHANGES ARE NEEDLESS

BY: GABY MCKAY



‘THINGS ARE BEAUTIFULLY POISED FOR A DRAMATIC SEASON’

Fans have been locked out of stadiums across the world in an effort to control the coronavirus, and while that's understandable in the face of a deadly pandemic it has proved the old adage that football without fans is nothing. We've seen the Derby d'Italia, the Old Firm and El Clasico behind closed doors and the backdrop of an empty stadium is not fit to host some of the world's most intensely felt games.

Even where fans have been allowed in it's been at vastly reduced capacities with distancing and masks, but with a vaccine for COVID-19 starting to be rolled out across the world we can now dream of a return to normality. We can dream of the day we say goodbye to piped-in crowd noise on television broadcasts, of the moment we're allowed back into a stadium to shout, to hug and to cheer. It may take some time, but that day is coming.

Then of course we have the action on the pitch. While there are legitimate fears of player burnout with a packed schedule, things are beautifully poised for a dramatic season. In Italy you've got the revival of Milan, led by a 39-year-old Zlatan Ibrahimovic, as Juventus' grip on the Scudetto looks to be loosening. Look over to Spain and the Barcelona-Real Madrid duopoly could be smashed this season. Barça are clown car and Madrid not much better – can Atletico Madrid, or even Real Sociedad or Villarreal take advantage? The Premier League sees Liverpool continuing their dominant form of last season but Jurgen Klopp's men won't have it all their own way this time. Big spending Chelsea look to be in a position to challenge after a shaky start while, across London, Sauron appears to have recovered the One Ring as Jose Mourinho turns Tottenham into legitimate contenders. If international football is what floats your boat then there's the rescheduled Euro 2020 to look

forward to. Some have criticised the format, spread across several cities, and it remains to be seen if that setup holds in the current climate. Assuming it can go ahead as planned though we should see fervent home fans in London, Rome and Munich. And if you thought "Will Grigg's On Fire" was the sound of 2016 just wait until Scotland's Tartan Army invades London armed with Spanish disco curio 'Yes Sir I Can Boogie'.

Perhaps transfer intrigue is your thing? If so there's plenty to look forward to on that score too. After the late summer saga of his planned Barcelona departure, Lionel Messi is out of contract on June 30. Provided he hasn't inked a new deal – which looks unthinkable – the Argentine superstar will be free to negotiate with other clubs from January. Expect Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain to be at the front of the lengthy queue.

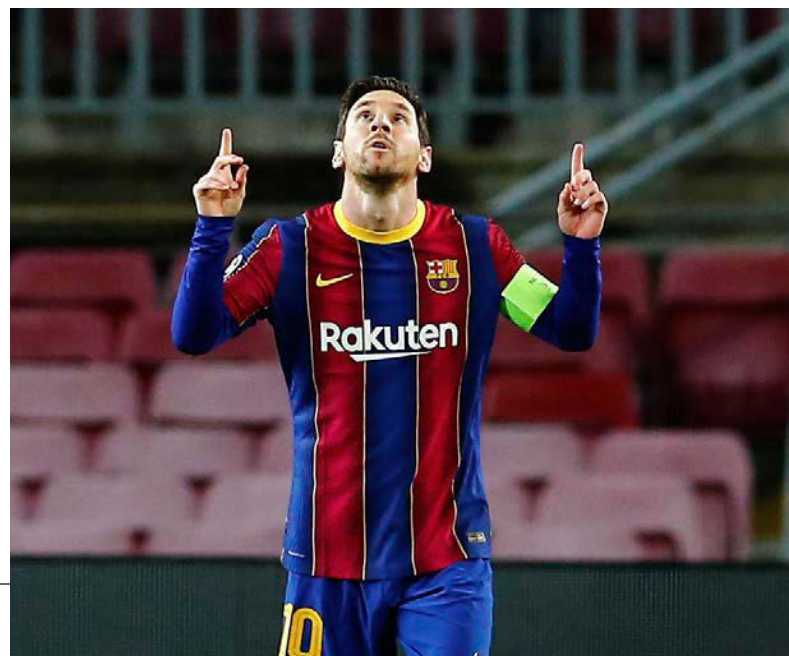
The French giants have issues of their own though with Kylian Mbappe and Neymar's deals both expiring in 2022. Could we see one of them on the move? Real Madrid haven't had a Galactico signing in a while – or rather Eden Hazard can't get on the pitch – will they make a big play in the summer?

Then there are the little, unpredictable things that make up the rich tapestry of football and could enter the history books. Those are all to come. Hey, 2020, your number is up. 2021: get out there and make it happen for us.

ABOVE:
Fans should return to stadiums in 2021

LEFT:
There's the European Championships to look forward to

BOTTOM:
Lionel Messi's contract is sure to dominate headlines



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REMEMBERING A
Legend

Argentinian soccer legend Diego Armando Maradona kisses the Mexico 1986 Soccer World Cup trophy

TOP LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Maradona playing for Sevilla in 1992

TOP RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Brazilian soccer legend Pelé (L) and Argentinian soccer legend Diego Maradona (R) during the match between Italy and Argentina in Zurich, Switzerland, 10 June 1987

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): sculpture of Argentinian Diego Armando Maradona, created by young artists Julian Chavero, Leandro Quintanilla, Gaston Amate and Lionel Diaz from Mar del Plata city

REMEMBERING A *Legend*

DIEGO MARADONA PASSED AWAY IN NOVEMBER, AND THE FOOTBALL WORLD STILL MOURNS HIS DEATH. GREG MURRAY EXAMINES THE LIFE OF A PLAYER THAT TRANSCENDED THE GAME OF FOOTBALL...

La Liga Legacy

THE NO.10 SPENT A LARGE PART OF HIS CAREER IN LALIGA, PLAYING FOR FC BARCELONA, SEVILLA FC AND, CURIOUSLY, ALONGSIDE HIS BROTHERS FOR GRANADA CF.



It was in LaLiga that Maradona took his first steps in European football, joining Barcelona for a then-world-record fee of \$7.6 million after starring in his home country for Argentinos Juniors and Boca Juniors. Joan Gaspart, who was the vice-president at Barcelona at the time, later revealed in interviews that the Barça directors who went to Argentina to work on the signing had to travel in a tank because the Argentine authorities feared for their safety. Prizing Maradona away from his loyal fans in Buenos Aires was tough, but it was worth it. Barcelona had acquired an elite player. Injury and illness meant Maradona didn't play as many games for the Blaugrana as the club had hoped, but when he did take to the pitch of Europe's biggest stadium it was quite a spectacle.

Even at the Bernabéu, the home of Barcelona's eternal rivals Real Madrid, Maradona impressed. In one match, he was even applauded by the fans of the capital city side, with white handkerchiefs waved respectfully in the air after Maradona performed a graceful sidestep right next to the goal line to leave right-back Juan José flying into the post as the No.10 rolled the ball into the net.

"I remember our early training sessions with him, where the rest of the team were so amazed that they just stood and watched him," Lobo Carrasco, one of the other Barcelona squad members at that time, recalled when looking back to that era.

After leaving Barcelona to embark on his iconic adventure with Napoli in 1984, Maradona returned to Spain in 1992. This time he signed with Sevilla FC and reunited with Carlos Bilardo, who'd been the coach as Argentina won the 1986 World Cup in Mexico with Maradona as the star of the show.

It was only one season, but that 1992/93 campaign was one that all Sevillistas from that time still remember. In his first home game at the Ramón Sánchez-Pizjuán, Maradona scored the only goal in a 1-0 victory over Real Zaragoza. Who else?

It wasn't peak Maradona at Sevilla and he'd been out of the game for the year before his arrival, but his mere presence made an impact across the club. Fans would arrive at the stadium early just to watch his famous warm-ups, while the forward made an impact on the young players in that squad, players such as Diego Simeone or current Sevilla Sporting Director Monchi.

"He helped me in a spectacular way at Sevilla," Simeone remembered. Monchi, meanwhile, has often told a story that sums up Maradona's generosity: "I was walking with Maradona one day and he saw that I had a Rolex, which I admitted to him was a fake one. Then, after training one day, he told me to wait behind and he gifted me a Cartier so that I'd never have to wear a fake watch again." Maradona intended to stay at Sevilla for some time, bringing several of his favourite cars to the city. But he departed at the end of the 1992/93 season, returning to Argentina.

It wasn't only at Barcelona and Sevilla that Maradona left an impact in Spain, though. He also impressed fans in Barcelona and Alicante, the cities where Argentina played during the 1982 World Cup. And, in 1987, Maradona even featured for Granada in a friendly match against Swedish side Malmö, doing so alongside his brothers Hugo and Lalo, who had just signed for the Andalusian club, at the old Estadio de Los Cármenes. That game remains to this day the only game in which the three brothers lined up on the same side.

Despite spending just a few years of his legendary career in Spain, Maradona made a huge impact, netting 27 goals in 62 games and winning the Copa del Rey, the Copa de la Liga and the Spanish Super Cup. His legacy will never be forgotten in Barcelona, Seville... or anywhere.



REMEMBERING A
Legend

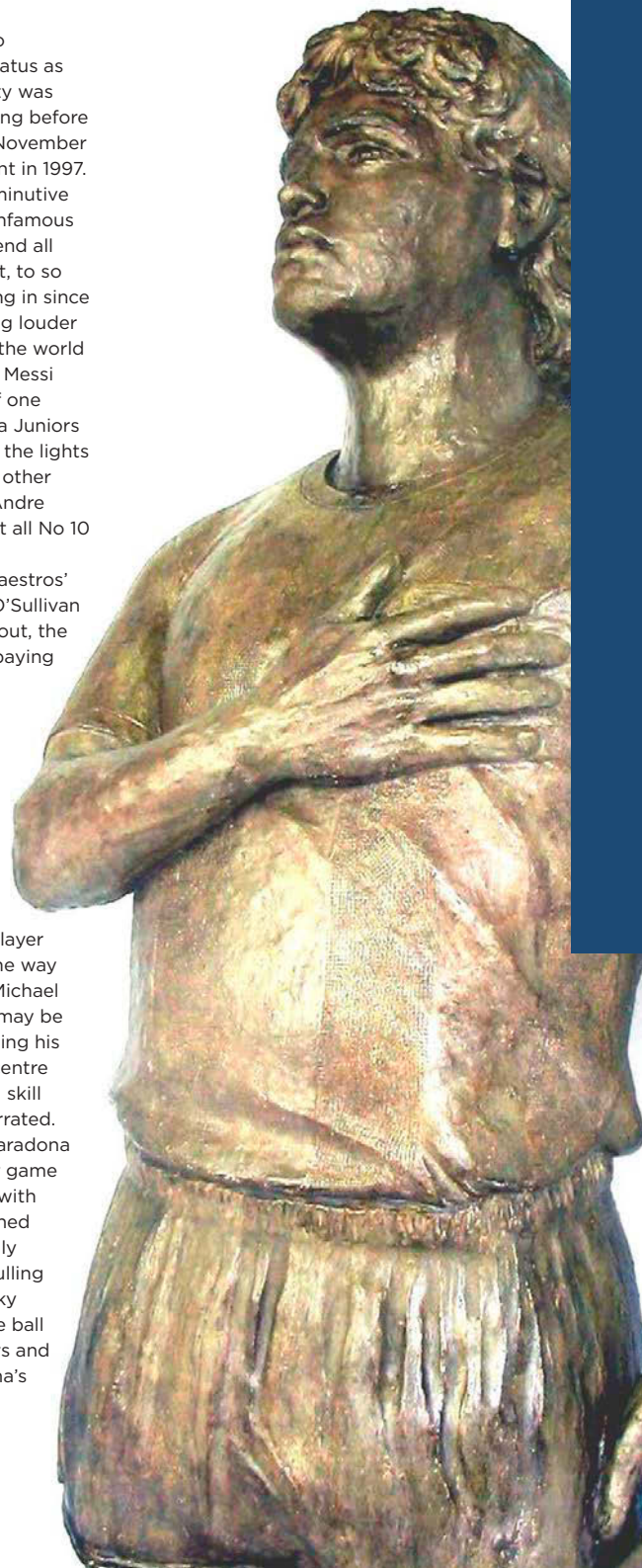
“HIS BEAUTY WAS IN HIS FLAWS, AND PERHAPS ENHANCED BECAUSE OF THEM”

Diego Armando Maradona's status as a football deity was established long before his death on November

25 2020, preceding even his retirement in 1997. In the English-speaking world, the diminutive forward had been vilified due to the infamous 'Hand of God' goal. But the No 10 to end all No 10s meant so much more than that, to so many more. Tributes have been flowing in since November, with actions often speaking louder than words. Football matches across the world observed a moment of silence, Lionel Messi dedicated a goal eerily reminiscent of one scored decades earlier by Diego, Boca Juniors postponed a match and turned off all the lights in the legendary Bombonera stadium other than those in Maradona's box, while Andre Villas Boas went as far to suggest that all No 10 shirts should be retired in his honour.

It was not just football that felt the maestros' departure, with snooker star Ronnie O'Sullivan and ionic boxer Mike Tyson speaking out, the New Zealand rugby union All Blacks paying tribute too and Argentina president Alberto Fernandez announcing three days of national mourning. The most followed sport in the world evidently has roots that go deeper than the game itself, so what made Maradona so special? To start with, and at risk of stating the obvious, Maradona was really, really good at football.

For many, the Argentine leads the way in the debate over the greatest player of all times and defines the sport in the way that Muhammed Ali does boxing, or Michael Jordan does basketball. The forward may be best known for his dribbling ability using his rapid bursts of acceleration and low centre of gravity, but his vision and technical skill were also world class and often underrated. More than the stats, which saw the Maradona average more than a goal every other game during his spell in Italy, it was the joy with which Maradona played with that earned him legions of fans. Whether tauntingly juggling the ball past an opponent, pulling off an unnecessary nutmeg or a cheeky lob, the Argentine wizard's flair on the ball provided entertainment for supporters and rival fans alike. In addition to Maradona's talent, the era in which he played is a factor. Nostalgia of course provides rose-tinted spectacles, but the 1980s



MARADONA MOMENTS

EVEN IN A LIFE MOSTLY LIVED UNDER THE GLARE OF THE WORLD'S SPORTING PRESS, THERE ARE STILL SOME DIEGO MARADONA MOMENTS THAT STAND OUT MORE THAN OTHERS.

THE WARM-UP

The 1989 UEFA Cup semi-final between Bayern Munich and Napoli was the stage for arguably the most iconic Maradona moment of all time. As the players prepared for kick-off, jogging and stretching to warm-up, the Argentine instead opted to display his ball-juggling skills to the half-empty stadium. However, this was no sign of ego or arrogance, instead just the pure image of a man doing what he loves, carefree and at the very top of the world.

THE HAND OF GOD

It's an injustice that a career such as Maradona's is defined by many by his handball in the 1986 World Cup semi-final against England. Even so, the action typified the No 10 in many ways. This was no Luis-Suarez-handball-against-Ghana, where the Uruguay forward reacted instinctively and obviously to prevent a goal against his team. Instead, Maradona dribbled past three opponents to create the chance, before incredulously outjumping a goalkeeper six inches his taller to finish it off. Even in one of his greatest controversies, there was brilliance to be found.

THE SECOND GOAL

Just four minutes after the infamous handball, it was Maradona's feet that earned the status of godly. Picking the ball up in his own half, it took the diminutive player just 11 seconds to beat half the England team, before calmly slotting the ball past Peter Shilton. The goal is widely regarded as the best in World Cup history, with Gary Lineker later saying: "For the first time in my career I felt like applauding the opposition scoring a goal."

THE IMPOSSIBLE FREE-KICK

Maradona's second season with Napoli provided his most iconic goal for the Partenopei. The unbeaten league leaders Juventus had travelled to the San Paolo – as Napoli's home was then known – and the game was a stalemate when in the 70th minute the referee gave an indirect free-kick within the Bianconeri penalty area. With the wall just five metres away, and the goal another five behind, Maradona instructed teammate Eraldo Pacci to lay the ball off, before delicately placing it into the top corner.



ABOVE (MAIN): Two goals against England in the 1986 World Cup summed-up Maradona

ABOVE, TOP (SMALL): Argentinean soccer player Diego Armando Maradona (L) next to Argentinean player Sergio 'El Kun' Aguero (R) as they attend the 2008 Beijing Olympic games in China.

ABOVE, BOTTOM (SMALL): Argentinean soccer legend Diego Armando Maradona (C) embraces his daughters Dalma Nerea (L) and Gianinna Dinora (R) during a tribute match held in his honour at Boca Juniors Stadium in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 10 November 2001

were undoubtedly a harder period for strikers, who had to deal with more difficult playing conditions, less protection from referees and no VAR-awarded penalties. Furthermore, Diego's time in Serie A came when the league was arguably the strongest, defensively, it has ever been, with opponents including the likes of Franco Baresi, Paulo Maldini, Gaetano Scirea and Antonio Cabrini. While Italian defenders have remained a source of national pride, the current focus on ball-playing centre-backs and attacking full-backs has arguably made the job easier for forwards. The old-fashioned defending-first defenders, who would kick an opponent soon as look at them, are a thing of the past. The Napoli No 10's form in Italy was such that he led the Azzurri to their first ever Scudetto in 1987, with the club also winning the Coppa Italia that year. However, it was the World Cup win with Argentina the year prior that, for many, takes Maradona past the

level of compatriot, and current Balon d'Or holder, Lionel Messi. The Barcelona magician is viewed by many as Diego's heir-apparent, with similar playing style, stature and both playing for Barcelona. That being said, there are a number of important disparities between Maradona and the Barcelona captain. Despite both being born in eastern Argentina before playing for the Catalan club, Messi differs to his predecessor in that he was developed in the prodigious La Masia academy from a young age. Maradona, on the other hand, had already made a name for himself with Boca Juniors and the national team before making a transfer record-breaking move to Barcelona. Likewise, whereas Lionel Messi has been at times criticised for not challenging himself outside of La Liga, Maradona left for Napoli aged just 24 after a short, tempestuous time at Camp Nou, with the Italian club having finished the last season in 11th place. The underdog story is always a popular one and

DIEGO MARADONA TIMELINE



1960:

Born Oct 30 in Lanus, Buenos Aires province



1970:

Joins Los Cebollitas under-14 team



1976-1981:

Plays for first division club Argentinos Juniors



1981:

Signs for Boca Juniors, wins first division championship

TRIBUTES

THE WORLD OF FOOTBALL UNITED IN PAYING TRIBUTE TO DIEGO MARADONA. GREG MURRAY PICKS OUT A SELECTION OF WHAT SOME OF THE SPORT'S BIGGEST NAMES SAID...

CARLO ANCELOTTI: "He was my opponent, then he became my friend"

LIONEL MESSI: "A very sad day for all Argentines and for football. He leaves us but does not leave, because Diego is eternal."



PELE: "What sad news. I lost a great friend and the world lost a legend. There is still much to be said, but for now, may God give strength to family members. One day, I hope we can play ball together in the sky."

CRISTIANO RONALDO: "Today I say goodbye to a friend and the world says goodbye to an eternal genius."

ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC: "Maradona is not dead, he is immortal. God gave the world the best gifted football player of all times. He will live forever and ever."

JOSE MOURINHO: "Don Diego. Friend I miss you"

ANDREA PIRLO: "The god of football goes away...thanks for everything Diego."

MAURICIO POCHETTINO: "Broken with pain. Diego, you were my hero and friend, I was so fortunate to have shared football and life with you. You will always be in my heart. All my love to your family"

DRIES MERTENS: "Napoli lost part of its soul today. You were, and will always be, an inspiration to all of us. If my name has ever been placed next to yours, I apologise, I will never be at your level. What you did for 'our' city will go down in history forever. It was an honour to have met you. Forever my idol."



REMEMBERING A Legend

enhanced the reputation and popularity of 'El Pibe D'Oro'. However, the most significant difference between the two Argentine magicians is the controversy caused and at times courted by Maradona. The Hand of God goal may have embittered Peter Shilton, the England goalkeeper Maradona beat twice, for life, but it has seemingly been forgiven by a large number of the 1986 England squad. Rather it was the Napoli man's battle with addiction that at times has blemished his legacy. To those that watched him, Maradona was a genius and like many geniuses before him, he struggled with his demons. Failure to pass a spot drugs test following a match against Bari in 1991 led to a 15-month ban and solidified a rumour that had been following him since his days at Barcelona. This moment signified the beginning of the end Maradona, as his actions and increasing murmurs of links to Neapolitan organised crime forced Napoli into selling their beloved adopted son. Although Maradona did not retire for another six years, spells at Sevilla, Newell's Old Boys and a return to Boca Juniors failed to recapture the magic. A further ban having tested positive for ephedrine during the 1994 World Cup proved a sad end to a phenomenal career. These battles plagued Maradona for the rest of his life, as he struggled to leave the world of football, but also was ill-fitted to life after playing. There were a number of spells as a coach, including of the Argentina national team, as well as roles as a sporting director and even as an honorary president. However, it was impossible for anything to live up to the memory of him as a player, while his lifestyle was poorly suited to the rigours of management. As a man who loved football and inspired others to do so, it was perhaps no surprise that Maradona remained managing until the day he died, as head coach of Gimnasia y La Plata. In many ways, he reflects Naples, the city in which he enjoyed the most success, and in which he remains adored to this day. Whereas Lionel Messi is Mr. Barcelona, a squeaky-clean, well-mannered, commercial gold mine, Maradona is Naples through and through. Yes,

he had his problems and was rough around the edges, but his beauty was in his flaws, and perhaps enhanced because of them. Much like Naples, those that knew Maradona grew to love him. Both the club and the city have intertwined their legacies with that of their legendary No 10: the stadium has been renamed the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona, murals have never left walls of the quartiere Spagnoli - the city's famous Spanish Quarter - and captain Lorenzo Insigne has a tattoo of his idol, while midfielder Diego Demme got his name from his Napoli-supporting father. Following his death, the two most prominent words that stood out amongst the floods of tributes were 'god' and 'friend'. To many, he was both, performing miracles with a ball at his feet one day, and partying the next. Perhaps this is why Maradona has had more of an impact than the world class footballers that preceded or followed him. After all, who else could simultaneously inspire such wonder and affection?

FAR LEFT: Lionel Messi is the player most often compared to Maradona

ABOVE: The president of SS Soccer Napoli, Aurelio De Laurentiis (R), and the Nigerian forward, Victor Osimhen, during the presentation of a mural, dedicated to the champion Diego Armando Maradona. The outpouring of emotion after Diego Maradona died revealed the love for him across the world

BOTTOM: Diego Armando Maradona waves to photographers as he leaves a hotel in Barcelona city, northeastern Spain, after meeting FC Barcelona's Argentinian striker Lionel Messi



1982:
Joins Barcelona for world-record \$8 million



1984:
Sold to Napoli for more than \$10 million. Elevates team to most successful era in its history



1986:
Captains Argentina to victory at World Cup in Mexico. Scores two most famous goals - Hand of God and Goal of Century - in quarter-final against England



1990:
Argentina knock host nation Italy out of World Cup but lose final against Germany

DARLING OF THE NEAPOLITANS, DIEGO MARADONA DAZZLED THE WHOLE OF ITALY WHEN HE ARRIVED AT NAPOLI FROM BARCELONA. GIANCARLO RINALDI REMEMBERS ARGUABLY THE GREATEST PLAYER SERIE A HAS EVER KNOWN.

King OF NAPLES

ABOVE:
"Maradona is Naples through and through"

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Two Scudetti victories with Napoli enshrined Maradona in Azzurri hearts

His impact on world football has been tremendous, but his effect on the Italian game was positively seismic. He ripped up the unwritten rule that teams from south of Rome had no hope of winning the Scudetto. He took a club that had made an art form out of underachievement and made it a European heavyweight. By his mere presence, he helped to ensure that Serie A became the undisputed best league in the world. In the process, he won the undying love of an entire city. The tale of Maradona's Neapolitan adventure can be told in a series of images which remain crystal clear in my mind. The first is of a bright, sunny day at the San Paolo stadium with a little figure in its center circle. He kicks the ball high into the air to be met with rapturous applause. Tens of thousands of success-starved Napoli fans had turned out just to see their new hero unveiled to the public. The weight of expectation was intense but he did not let them down.

In truth, the Pibe d'Oro - Golden Child - had been envied by Europe since the first pictures of him juggling a football as a youngster were flashed around the world. It was Barcelona who brought him to the continent, shortly after a 1982 World Cup which had brought more frustrations than joy to the young player. He made a powerful impression on LaLiga over a couple of years, but it would never become his spiritual home. A terrible injury inflicted by Andoni Goikoetxea in 1983 threatened to kill Maradona's career just short of his 23rd birthday. Instead, he came back stronger than before and made his move to Italy in the summer of 1984. His capture for a little under \$14m was a bold statement of intent by a club with serious ambitions to rival the traditional big teams of the north: Inter, Juventus and, above all, Milan. There have been a lot of attempts to portray what happened at Napoli as a single-handed success for the mercurial Maradona. In truth, however, the Azzurri had put together a strong side around him which contained plenty of Italian internationals and, in due



DIEGO MARADONA TIMELINE



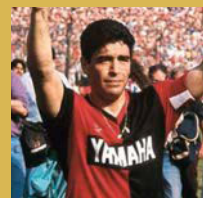
1991:

Banned for 15 months after positive cocaine test



1992:

Joins Spanish Club Sevilla



1993:

Returns to Argentina to play for Newell's Old Boys



1994:

Expelled from World Cup in U.S. after failing drug test for ephedrine

MARADONA BY THE NUMBERS

ON THE PITCH GENIUS, TEMPESTUOUS TALENT, BREATHTAKING BRILLIANCE ARGENTINA'S LEGENDARY NO.10

- 1** FIFA World Cup title (1986)
- 4** FIFA World Cup tournament appearances (1982, 86, 90, 94)
- 5** Players dribbled past during Goal of Century in 1986 World Cup quarter-final against England
- 6** Clubs - Argentinos Juniors, Boca Juniors, Barcelona, Napoli, Sevilla and Newell's Old Boys
- 8** Joins Barcelona for world-record \$8 million fee in 1982 - surpassed by \$10 million transfer to Napoli two years later
- 10** No.10 jersey worn - synonymous with iconic, talismanic leadership
- 11** Trophies - including two Serie A titles and 1989 UEFA Cup with Napoli
- 15** Age - professional debut for Argentinos Juniors in 1976
- 16** Age - full international debut for Argentina, against Hungary
- 34** International goals - including eight World Cup strikes
- 51** Minutes played when famous Hand of God goal is scored
- 53** Dribbles at 1986 World Cup - unparalleled at single tournament
- 91** Appearances for Argentina
- 259** Club career goals
- 491** Club appearances (1976-97)

course, a couple of top-quality Brazilians in Alemão and Careca. There's no doubt that the Argentine was the star around which this universe revolved, but he was not without some able assistants. That such a team could be constructed in such a volatile location was miraculous though - like putting a palace on top of Vesuvius.

"It's difficult to build something in a city like Naples," said Club President Corrado Ferlaino. "There is always somebody who doesn't want you to succeed, either for their own interests or some other motive. Certainly, it is almost impossible to work here."

And yet, for a while at least, Napoli became the very heart of Italian football. Looking back, it's clear that Maradona gave a different rhythm to Serie A. At the time, the undisputed monarch of the division was Michel Platini, the man they called Le Roi - The King. His elegance and style fitted perfectly with the aristocratic ideals of Juventus. In time, Milan's cosmopolitan feel would be enhanced by the glamour-filled Dutch trio of Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard and Marco van Basten. Over at Inter, they would emphasize their northern roots with the good German stock of Lothar Matthaus, Andy Brehme and Jurgen Klinsmann. None of them would have fitted in at Napoli.

Maradona was in touch with his new city and its fans from day one - it was as if he had a hotline to their soul. He knew what it meant to feel like an underdog, and he played his football with the guile, passion and occasional subterfuge which suited his new surroundings perfectly. Naples at last felt it had a team which could compete with the rest of Italy - and on its own terms.

This is where my second image of Diego's career clicks in. He scored countless wonderful goals but one which remains with me was an audacious indirect free-kick against Juventus from inside the penalty box. Most players in that position would elect to blast the ball but instead Maradona chose a seemingly impossible option. With the ball rolled to his feet, he scooped it over the wall and it dipped into the net to the amazement of almost everyone in the ground. Such astonishing acts became the hallmark of his time in Serie A. The rewards did not come overnight at Napoli but they were worth the wait. Two Scudetti, a couple of second-place league finishes, a Coppa Italia, the UEFA Cup and the Italian Super Cup were delivered to supporters who had scarcely sniffed a trophy before his arrival. In seven glorious years the Neapolitani enjoyed honours beyond their wildest dreams. The San Paolo between 1983 and 1991 was the only place to be if you wanted to experience the true drama and passion of Italian football. The third image of the relationship between Maradona and Italy comes at the World Cup in 1990. When Argentina met the Azzurri in Naples, the talismanic figure said that Napoli fans should be supporting his nation rather than their home country. In some quarters it was felt that he had gone too far and when his team knocked Italy out of the World Cup, there were great feelings of resentment. Within a few months, Maradona was banned from the game for cocaine use and his Italian dream had come to an acrimonious end.

With his departure, Napoli lost their way too. The club has never been able to rediscover the form it enjoyed when he played for them



"MARADONA IS NAPLES THROUGH AND THROUGH"

and it seems to be in a constant search for the heir to his throne. It is unlikely anyone will ever manage it, though, given the level of success he achieved. Italian football has never seen the likes of Diego Maradona and it probably never will again.

BELOW: The city of Naples instantly renamed Napoli's San Paolo to the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona



1995-1997:
Second stint at Boca Juniors



1997:
Retires before his 37th birthday. Retirement plagued by several health issues due to cocaine habit and alcoholism. Suffers major heart attack in 2000



2008-2010:
Manager of Argentina, takes team to World Cup quarter-finals



2020:
Dies at age 60, three weeks after successful surgery on brain blood clot



'ROSSI WENT HOME WITH NOT JUST A WINNER'S MEDAL, BUT THE GOLDEN BOOT, GOLDEN BALL AND 1982'S BALLON D'OR'



PAOLO ROSSI'S DEATH IN DECEMBER LEFT FANS AND FORMER TEAMMATES DEEPLY SADDENED. NICK VALERIO EXPLAINS WHY THE 1982 WORLD CUP WINNER WAS SO BELOVED...

INSPIRATIONAL ROSSI

14 days after the tragic passing of Diego Armando Maradona, the footballing world was dealt another shattering blow as Paolo Rossi died at the age of 64. The Tuscan native was suffering from a long-term, undisclosed illness and his loss has sent shockwaves around Italy, and, indeed, the world. Beyond his on-field achievements, the plaudits have flooded in, above all, for a man and friend. "His smile, his kindness and his way of life will be sorely missed," devastated teammate Giuseppe Bergomi told reporters. Former Juventus colleague Zbigniew Boniek praised the striker's human qualities. "With Paolo Rossi I haven't just won trophies, with Paolo Rossi I lived through the best things in my life, the best days of my life. Paolo was fantastic." The attacker had a memorable career, and will be remembered fondly for his involvement at the 1982 World Cup, inspiring a group of prodigiously gifted youngsters in the process. Roberto Baggio penned a letter to his idol in the *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. "I wanted to be like you, you made the dream of millions of Italians come true," Baggio wrote. 2006 world champion Pippo Inzaghi also gave an emotional tribute to his 'childhood idol' while Alberto Gilardino was similarly full of admiration. Rossi was part of Enzo Bearzot's squad for the tournament in Spain and the tactician deserves immense credit for sticking by his man despite his lack of minutes and fitness. The ex-Juventus and Milan ace was embroiled in the Totonero match-fixing scandal in 1980, and received a three-year ban from the sport. The player vehemently denied any involvement,

and his suspension was subsequently cut by 12 months but time was running out to secure a place in the final squad. Bearzot was widely expected to select Serie A top scorer Roberto Pruzzo, but overlooked the leading marksman for Rossi, who only featured in the final three fixtures of the 1981-82 domestic campaign and looked well off the pace. The decision drew considerable criticism and the tactician would face similar pressure as the competition unfolded. Italy were not convincing in the first group stage, squeezing through with draws against Poland, Cameroon and Peru. The Azzurri only netted two goals in 270 minutes of action and there were growing calls for Rossi to be dropped from the line-up. But the forward had a special relationship with Bearzot, and had the backing of the whole travelling party. "All of us would tell him that the gaffer doted on him, so he just needed to stay calm," Bergomi recounted. As it transpired, Rossi repaid his manager's faith in stunning fashion, initially in the second phase as the Azzurri were pitted with holders Argentina and favourites Brazil. Efforts from Marco Tardelli and Antonio Cabrini handed Italy victory in the encounter with the champions, setting up a winner takes all in the final contest with the Seleção. Bearzot's troops tussled it out with a star-studded squad, led by Zico. The South American idol could do everything and was the chief threat to the Azzurri's hopes of progressing, though in Franco Baresi and the late Gaetano Scirea, the playmaker was facing arguably two of the finest defenders of all-time.



ABOVE (MAIN): Paolo Rossi was a controversial choice for Italy's World Cup 1982 squad

ABOVE (SMAL): Paolo Rossi holds up his 1982 Ballon D'or

RIGHT: Paolo Rossi with his Golden Boot

THE CHAMPIONS OF '82

PAOLO ROSSI WAS ONE OF A NUMBER OF ICONS FROM THE ITALY SQUAD THAT WENT TO THE WORLD CUP IN 1982 AND RETURNED AS CHAMPIONS. NICK VALERIO HIGHLIGHTS ROSSI'S TEAMMATES...

Goalkeeper Dino Zoff is the oldest player to win a World Cup. The 40-year-old stopper captained the squad and had a formidable defence in front of him in Gaetano Scirea, Claudio Gentile, Fulvio Collovati, Antonio Cabrini and Giuseppe Bergomi. Scirea and Gentile partnered each other at club level for Juventus, winning six championships, two Coppa Italia trophies and two European honours in the Italian giants' backline. Bergomi and Collovati picked up league medals with Inter and Milan, respectively, while Cabrini picked up 13 honours with the Bianconeri. The left-back began his playing days in a more advanced role and was an integral member of the side despite not receiving the same plaudits as Scirea or Gentile. Gabriele Orioli anchored the midfield and his work ethic and discipline were vital in allowing the more attack minded players to flourish. Marco Tardelli, Bruno Conti and Francesco Graziani featured behind Rossi and it was Tardelli who gave the Azzurri a two-goal lead. Conti was a left footer but widely considered one of Italy's finest right wingers and Roma club-mate Graziani featured on the other flank but came off after just seven minutes due to injury. Replacement Alessandro Altobelli extended the advantage in the closing stages as Enzo Bearzot's troops scooped the title for the third time in the Azzurri's history.

O'S TO HEROES

THE PEAK OF PAOLO ROSSI'S CAREER CAME AFTER ITS LOWEST EBB. NICK VALERIO PICKS OUT SOME OTHER PLAYERS WHO WENT FROM THE OUTHOUSE TO THE PENTHOUSE.

As Paolo Rossi proved, a controversy and a long suspension need not be the end of a player's career. Once he had served his time, Rossi returned to play an integral part in one of Italian football's greatest moments. He's not the only player to have been forced to the sidelines, only to recover and experience more success. Jaap Stam tested positive for Nandrolone during his time at Lazio. The imposing Dutch centre-half was part of Manchester United's treble winning squad in 1999 and picked up the Coppa Italia with the capital club before finishing his career in his homeland with Ajax. Luis Suarez is no stranger to controversy and has received three long-term suspensions during his career. The striker served a seven-match ban while at Ajax for biting an opponent and was sidelined for the same offence while at Liverpool. The Uruguayan also missed eight matches after being found guilty of racially abusing Patrice Evra and later moved on to Barcelona where he enjoyed much success with Lionel Messi. Rio Ferdinand missed a routine drugs test and was ruled out for eight months. The defender returned in 2004 and subsequently won five Premier League medals, two League Cups, a Champions League and a Club World Cup.

'HIS SMILE, HIS KINDNESS AND HIS WAY OF LIFE WILL BE SORELY MISSED' - GIUSEPPE BERGOMI



At the other end of the pitch was Rossi, who was without a goal for the national team in nearly 15 hours of football. The much-maligned hitman took centre stage and came to life against the very best, firstly hitting a treble to eliminate the frontrunners, affectionately earning the nickname 'Pablito' in the process.

The drought was over, and a brace in the semi-final with Poland, followed by the opener in the showpiece event with West Germany saw Rossi head home with not just a winner's medal, but the Golden Boot for his six-goal haul, Golden Ball and that year's Ballon d'Or. This feat was unmatched until Ronaldo Nazario scooped the three honours in 2002.

Bearzot was vindicated and Rossi returned to a hero's welcome and 'personal redemption', in his own words. The talisman's achievements are still felt to this day. It took three decades for another player to hit a hat-trick against Brazil, albeit, in friendly format. Lionel Messi's exploits took place in 2012 but did not result in anything more than bragging rights.

On the goalscoring front, Pablito is tied with Baggio and Christian Vieri on nine World Cup strikes, a record that is likely to remain in the Azzurri history books for the foreseeable future. In total, the iconic figure aptly struck on 20 occasions for Italy, the number he proudly wore as he lifted the most prestigious honour in the game.

Domestically, he shone. Rossi led Vicenza to Italy's top flight in 1977 and became the first player to top the scoring charts in Serie B and

Serie A in back-to-back seasons.

Juventus part-owned the forward but quickly snapped up his services on a permanent basis and he went on to six trophies, including two Scudetto's, one Coppa Italia, one UEFA Super Cup, one Cup Winners' Cup and the European Cup in 1985. Rossi was prolific during his four terms with the Bianconeri and part of a golden era alongside Michel Platini and Boniek and the trio developed a close rapport.

Rossi was a symbol of Italian football and had it all; pace, skill, agility, balance, technique and also versatility. He was deeply respected by his peers, but also opponents, and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, the legendary German that was left disconsolate in Madrid on 11 July, 1982 showed his class: "Paolo was my friend and a great goalscorer. Without question, the most important duel between us was the 1982 World Cup final in Madrid. He won 3-1 with Italy and also scored a goal," said the 1980 UEFA European victor.

Rossi departed Juventus for Milan in 1985, after clinching the European Cup, before hanging up his boots in 1987 with Hellas Verona.

The much-loved Tuscan fought the odds right from the beginning, undergoing three knee operations during his teenage years and after stirring Gilardino, Baggio and Inzaghi to greatness, the next generation, Andrea Pinamonti and Gianluca Scamacca, will look to follow in Pablito's footsteps and etch their places in Italian folklore.

ABOVE (MAIN): Without him, the Azzurri would not have won their third World Cup

BELOW (MAIN): The much-loved Tuscan fought the odds right from the beginning'

BELOW RIGHT: Paolo Rossi and his most beloved trophy

BELOW LEFT: Roberto Baggio is just one of many future stars who grew up idolising Rossi





CHAMPIONS & EUROPA LEAGUE FOCUS

SECOND STAGE READY

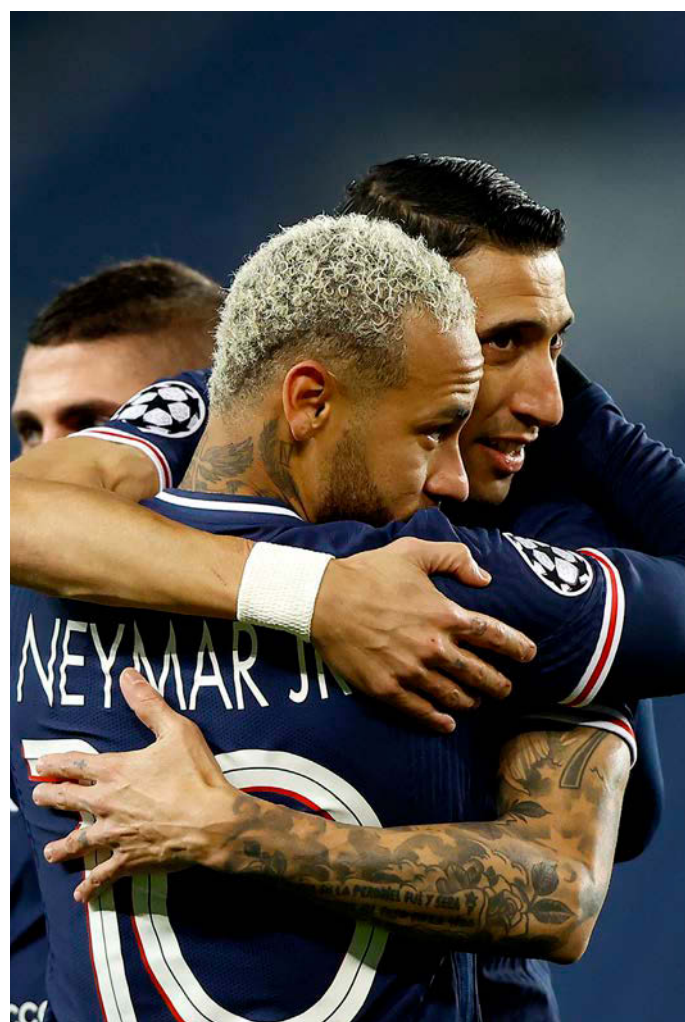
THE GROUP STAGES OF THE EUROPEAN COMPETITIONS HAVE THROWN UP BRILLIANT GAMES, OUTSTANDING GOALS AND THEIR SHARE OF CONTROVERSY, DAVID WHITWORTH WRITES...



The first halves of the 2020-21 Champions League and Europa League campaigns were fascinating affairs, with excitement and surprise in spades. And though the lack of supporters in stadiums has removed the atmosphere for the biggest European nights, it has arguably contributed to more unpredictable results than ever before. There were 32 teams in the Champions League group stage when it got underway on October 20, representing 14 countries. Some were dreaming of reaching the final, scheduled for May 29 at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium in Turkey, while some were almost expecting to be there.

The competition was marred when it was alleged an assistant referee in the Istanbul Basaksehir vs. Paris Saint-Germain fixture in December used a racist term towards Pierre Webo, one of the Istanbul coaches. The match was abandoned after 14 minutes with the scores goalless when the Istanbul players walked off, followed by their opponents. UEFA decided that the game should resume 24 hours later - with a new set of officials - and was won 5-1 by PSG. UEFA announced an investigation into the incident, but many onlookers applauded the decisive action from Istanbul and their players, and the support offered by PSG.

This year's Champions League games have seen several surprise outcomes. Real Madrid losing at home to Shakhtar Donetsk 2-3 - the Ukrainians going 0-3 up at one stage - was the standout shock, and lightning struck twice with Madrid succumbing to a 2-0 defeat in Ukraine as they suffered back-to-back defeats against Donetsk. Shakhtar really did throw a curveball in this group as they also secured a



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DRAW

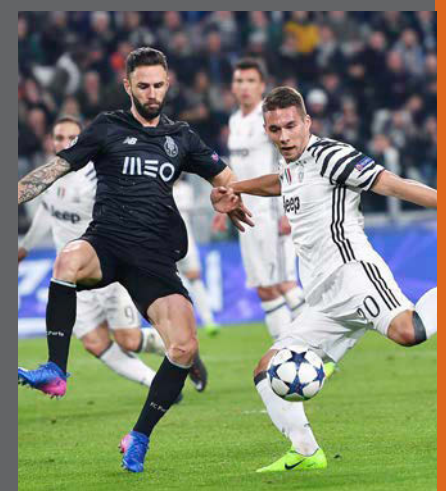
THE ROUND OF 16 PAIRINGS LEFT THE COMPETITION WIDE OPEN, DAVID WHITWORTH WRITES, WITH HEAVYWEIGHTS AND UNDERDOGS EQUALLY REPRESENTED...

The draw for the Champions League Round of 16 took place in Nyon, Switzerland, in mid-December, and threw up some intriguing ties. An argument could be made for any one of the eight fixtures to be the pick of the bunch. Highlights include a tasty tussle between Ronald Koeman's Barcelona and Thomas Tuchel's Paris Saint-Germain. Barca are enduring a torrid season domestically and will hope for some momentum from their European voyage. These two super-clubs have meant frequently in recent years – remember the 2017-18 Round of 16 double-header that ended 6-5 on aggregate to Barca? – and any game that sees Lionel Messi and Neymar on the same pitch is one to watch. Elsewhere, holders Bayern Munich face Italian opposition in Lazio. The Bavarians continue to fly domestically and in Europe and are hot favourites to retain the Champions League, with Robert Lewandowski's goals key to their hopes. An evenly matched battle sees experienced Atletico Madrid face a youthful Chelsea. Atleti have fond memories of their last trip to England – when they defeated the then-defending champions Liverpool in an epic second leg. Atletico grabbed two injury time goals to win 3-2 on aggregate in March 2020 – will they be celebrating 12 months later?

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ROUND OF 16 DRAW IN FULL:

Borussia Monchengladbach vs. Man. City
Lazio vs. Bayern Munich
Atletico Madrid vs. Chelsea
RB Leipzig vs. Liverpool
Porto vs. Juventus
Barcelona vs. Paris Saint-Germain
Atalanta vs. Real Madrid
Sevilla vs. Dortmund

First leg ties to be played February 16-17 and 23-24. Second leg ties to be played March 9-10 and 16-17.



'THE MOST IMPRESSIVE TEAM IN THE GROUP STAGE WAS HOLDERS BAYERN MUNICH'

goalless draw at the San Siro against Inter, who remarkably crashed out of Europe altogether, finishing bottom of Group B.

In other surprise results, Manchester United's win away 1-2 at Paris Saint-Germain and Atalanta victorious against Liverpool 0-2 at Anfield were both fully deserving, and quite surprising in their own right.

Barcelona hammered 3-0 at Camp Nou against Juventus showed the Catalans are in free fall – losing at home in the group stage for the first time since 2016. In the showcase individual battle, meeting for the first time since May 2018, it was Cristiano Ronaldo who got the better of Lionel Messi with a decisive performance and two penalties. Ronaldo has now scored 134 goals in the tournament and the Portuguese shows no signs of letting up. Neither does 42-year-old Gianluigi Buffon, who with a clean sheet became the first goalkeeper to record shutouts in four different decades from the 1990s.

But the most impressive team in the group stage was holders Bayern Munich. The Bavarians powered past a strong Atletico Madrid on the group stage's opening night, netting four goals without reply. That set the tone for an unbeaten group stage, as Bayern took 16 points from a possible 18.

Bayern weren't the only Bundesliga side to catch the eye, though, as Borussia Monchengladbach impressed too. In a difficult group that also featured heavyweights Real Madrid and Inter, Gladbach finished second with eight points. It may have been the lowest total of any team to qualify for the knockout stage, but it was no less deserving.

One of the group stage's standout individual performers was also found in the Bundesliga, as Erling Braut Haaland continued to rack up the goals. The Norway international became the fastest player to reach 15 Champions League goals – from only 12 appearances, with six goals this season. To put that into context, after 12 Champions League games Messi had only scored twice, and Ronaldo hadn't scored at all.

Also on six goals after returning to Juventus was Alvaro Morata, while Marcus Rashford's on-field performances were often as heroic as his off-field work. His late winner against PSG and superb hat-trick against RB Leipzig were highlights of Manchester United's disappointing group stage. Neymar rounds on the six-goal quartet, having also grabbed a hat-trick against Istanbul Basaksehir. It wasn't all sunshine and roses for Morata, though. The Spain international set an

MAIN (OPPOSITE PAGE): Champions League holders Bayern Munich were excellent in the group stage

BOTTOM LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Allegations of a racist remark caused Istanbul Basaksehir and Paris Saint-Germain to leave the pitch

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): The fixture resumed a day later with PSG winning comfortably

TOP: Champions League holders Bayern Munich were excellent in the group stage

RIGHT: One of the group stage's standout individual performers was also found in the Bundesliga, as Erling Braut Haaland continued to rack up the goals

BELOW: Alvaro Morata is one of a clutch of players to plunder six group stage goals

BOTTOM RIGHT: Porto vs Juventus from 2017



EUROPA LEAGUE DRAW

THE EUROPA LEAGUE SOMETIMES GOES UNDER-THE-RADAR BUT THE DRAW FOR THE ROUND OF 32 DESERVES ATTENTION. DAVID WHITWORTH EXPLAINS...

Standout ties for the Europa League Round of 32 pit an outsider from Spain against one of Europe's most successful sides. Real Sociedad, who are enjoying a fantastic La Liga season and have topped the table ahead of Barcelona, Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid already this season, will face three-time Champions League winners Manchester United. Not only is it a David vs. Goliath battle, but it will see David Silva – one of Manchester City's all-time greats – return to the city in which he spent 10 successful years. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's inconsistent Red Devils will have to be at their best.

The pairing of Benfica and Arsenal is one that is rife for a shock. The Portuguese side have the goals of Pizzi and Darwin Nunez, and a familiar face to the Gunners in Jan Vertonghen. With Mikel Arteta's men struggling in the Premier League, this is a tie Benfica should relish.

Perhaps the two most entertaining fixtures will be Lille vs. Ajax and Napoli vs. Granada. The former is a game that pits two teams riding high in their domestic leagues against one another, while the latter is a test of the Granada fairy-tale. Can it survive a meeting with Gennaro Gattuso's aggressive, excellent Partenopei? There's only one way to find out.



'THERE WERE NO SHOCKS FOR ARSENAL, WHO WON ALL SIX GAMES'

unwanted record as he became the only player to record a hat-trick of goals disallowed for offside. Morata was thwarted three times by the assistant referee's flag on matchday two, when Juventus were beaten 2-0 by Barcelona in Turin. When you're luck's out, it's out... Morata and Juve, as well as Barca, made it through to the Round of 16, to be played out in February and March. Joining them are many of the usual suspects, including Madrid, Porto, 2019 winners Liverpool and holders Bayern. Atletico, Dortmund, PSG, Manchester City, Sevilla and Chelsea remain in the hunt too, along with outsiders Gladbach, RB Leipzig, Lazio and Atalanta.

It's Bayern that remain this year's team to beat and the German machine looks as well-oiled as ever. But Champions League kings Madrid can never be written off in what Los Blancos feel is 'their' tournament as the record winners. For a wild card choice, Madrid's La Liga rivals Sevilla know how to win in knockout football. In the strange season that is 2020-21, why not? The race to succeed Sevilla as Europa League champions is equally fascinating. It's the half-century edition of the competition formerly known as the UEFA Cup, and never has it been so closely contested. 213 teams entered from 55 member associations, with May 26 and the Stadion Energa Gdańsk in Poland their aim. Granada had never participated in the Europa League before this season – or any European competition for that matter. But they set the tone by producing an upset to beat European regulars PSV Eindhoven in the first round of group stage action. Steven Gerrard's Rangers almost got a scalp as they led Benfica 3-1, only to draw 3-3, and Lille thrashed Milan 3-0 in the San Siro as the form book was upturned across the continent – Royal Antwerp's 1-0 win over a strong Tottenham Hotspur side just another example.

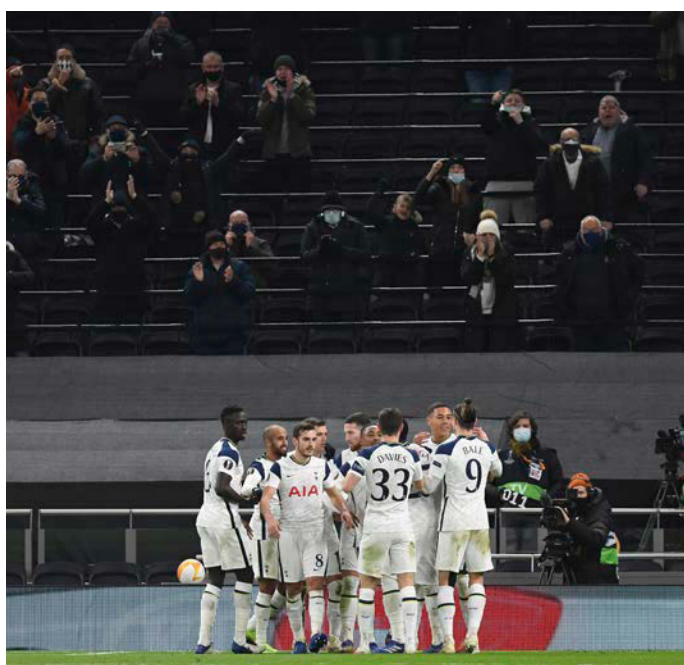
There were no shocks for Arsenal, who won all six games. Granada, reaching the knockout rounds at the first time of asking, were equally impressive with veterans Roberto Soldado and

TOP: Arsenal belied their poor domestic form to win six out of six in the Europa League group stage

BOTTOM: Spurs successfully made it through the group stage and with North London rivals Arsenal are among the tournament favourites

Jorge Molina key to their success. And Rangers recovered from giving up the lead against Benfica to put together an unbeaten group run, claiming first place with 14 points. Benfica could lay claim to one of the competition's standouts as striker Darwin Nunez claimed five goals in as many games. Lille's Yusuf Yazici lit up the competition too, with six goals in six games, including a San Siro hat-trick. Even more remarkably, that was his second treble of the competition, as he also grabbed three at Sparta Prague.

The Europa League also brought moments of farce, as the preliminary round qualifier between Tottenham and Shkendija of North Macedonia was almost played with the wrong size goals. The Spurs 'keepers noticed something was amiss when they went out for their pre-match warm-up, and Jose Mourinho agreed. The UEFA delegate got their tape



EUROPA LEAGUE ROUND OF 32 DRAW IN FULL:

- Wolfsberg vs. Tottenham Hotspur
- Dynamo Kiev vs. Club Brugge
- Real Sociedad vs. Manchester United
- Benfica vs. Arsenal
- Crvena Zvezda vs. Milan
- Royal Antwerp vs. Rangers
- Slavia Praha vs. Leicester City
- Red Bull Salzburg vs. Villarreal
- Braga vs. Roma
- Krasnodar vs. Dinamo Zagreb
- Young Boys vs. Bayer Leverkusen
- Molde vs. Hoffenheim
- Granada vs. Napoli
- Maccabi Tel-Aviv vs. Shakhtar Donetsk
- Lille vs. Ajax
- Olympiacos vs. PSV Eindhoven

First leg ties to be played on February 18.
Second leg ties to be played on February 25.

OLE OLE



“WHAT DO WE DO WITH OLE GUNNAR SOLSKJAER?”

measure out and confirmed the posts were 5cm too short. It was an honest mistake ahead of a game Spurs won 3-1.

Spurs successfully made it through the group stage and with North London rivals Arsenal are among the tournament favourites. So too are Italian qualifiers Napoli and Milan and the Spanish Armada of Real Sociedad and Villarreal.

Indeed, Mourinho won this very tournament with Porto back on 2003 and his in-form Tottenham will be primed for a good run to

finally land a piece of silverware. They'll have to battle Milan's renaissance, inspired by – who else? – Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and the Rossoneri have every chance of success.

Also in the running are Villarreal, coached by three-time winner Unai Emery, and 2017 winners, under Mourinho, Manchester United. They and Ajax, who lost to the Red Devils in that 2017 showpiece, are arguably the pick of the Champions League dropouts and both boast squads strong enough to deep in the competition once more.

Ole has been here before, Manchester United have been here before. This is not the first time those with affiliations to Old Trafford have asked: “what do we do with Ole Gunnar Solskjær?”

They were in the same dilemma in the spring of 2019 and had decided to stick. However, this time, the outcome might be different. Solskjær became Manchester United boss in December 2018 following the sack of Jose Mourinho after a poor run of results. The consensus at the time was that the Red Devils had only hired him on an interim level. His task, it was assumed, was restoring some unity and belief into a United squad destroyed by Mourinho's uncanny antics. The Portuguese had left in acrimonious circumstances following public criticisms of the club and players and a poor run of form that saw the Red Devils lose five times in 17 matches, leaving them in 6th place, 19 points behind leaders Liverpool and 11 off fourth-placed Chelsea in the fight for Champions League places. But with Ole, the club had found a man to steady the ship until the summer when they could go for more established names. A club legend in his own right and a soft mannered gentleman who had learnt at the feet of the club's greatest manager, Alex Ferguson, Ole's appointment was greeted with excitement by only a small section of the fanbase.

However, the baby-faced Norwegian quickly made himself a fan's favourite in a little time, taking the club from 6th to 4th place in his first four months on the job. The former United striker won his first eight games in charge on the way to an overall record of 14 victories and two draws in 19 games, amassing more Premier League points than any other club during that time. There were also some impressive showings in Europe, most notably the away win at PSG in the Champions League. For a while, he genuinely looked like the answer. His performance in about four months was so good that the Red Devils fanbase which had largely been negative in the previous months were once again united and pulling in one direction. Players like Pogba and Martial who had often been vilified by Mourinho were finding some joy and playing their best game in a United shirt. So, when the time came to decide on who will be United's permanent manager, the Old Trafford boardroom was in dilemma. Do they stick with a not-so-experienced Solskjær who was producing results, or do they go for more established winners in the market like Zidane, Max Allegri or Diego Simeone? Do they give in to their sentiment and stick with the club legend, or do they follow a more logical path and bring in a seasoned tactician?

However, the argument seemed to favour Ole's case, after all, he was getting results. He was not just getting results; he had fired up United and had the backing of a large section of the fanbase. Former players were also in full support of his full appointment, with Rio Ferdinand famously stating that “the club must do all it can to keep Ole on the wheel”. Why fix it if it is not broken!

So, in the end, those at the corridors of power at Old Trafford decided that it was worth taking a gamble on the Norwegian, and he was rewarded with an improved contract that will keep him at the club for three years.

However, fast forward about two years later, what looked like a perfect appointment has turned into a not so perfect decision. The United manager is again at the centre of a debate following a series of underwhelming results and a clear lack of leadership at the club. The man who could do no wrong is suddenly under scrutiny again, and this time it looks like the jury might conclude differently. United have looked miserable in recent times, playing without motivation an inspiration. The manager admittedly is not to blame for everything, though he has a good share of the blame as he picks the team. Ed Woodward, the club's divisive chief, is the other protagonist in the drama playing out at the Theatre of Dreams.

But those who argue that Woodward is to blame have quieted in recent days following a series of poor results that have shown up the coaches' lack of tactical ingenuity.

For example, the decision to go three at the back against Leipzig in the Champions League was an excellent illustration of the coach's inability to make the right call when it mattered the most.

He has won many big games and led United to two top-four finishes, but when it matters the most, the Norwegian often seems to get it wrong. Since his appointment, United have failed to win the semi-final of any competition they have taken part in. They may have done the double over Manchester City and finished in third place ahead of Chelsea, Tottenham and Leicester City last season, but it can be argued that the result was not down to United's improvement, but the inconsistency of the other teams.

The Red Devils have this season crashed out of the Champions league in a humiliating manner. They remain 6th on the table after 10 games but have been inconsistent and often over-reliant on Bruno Fernandes. The jury is out again, this time with a large section of the fanbase disgruntled and gunning for a change.

The club has come out publicly to back their manager in recent times, but with Pochettino and more established names like Maximiliano Allegri still out of a job, the United hierarchy will surely consider their options. Once again, the dilemma remains—do they stick with Ole or go for Pochettino who Ferguson once labelled the best manager in England? The answer to that question lies with Ed Woodward and the power players at Old Trafford. But on the evidence of recent performances, the club will be forgiven for thinking about a change.



TOP:
Ole Gunnar
Solskjær

RIGHT:
European
debutants Granada
reached the
knockout rounds

INTERNATIONAL
FOCUS

“THERE WAS A FEELING OF
DEJA VU FOR MANY COUNTRIES,
AS FAMILIAR FACES WERE
DRAWN TOGETHER”

WORLD CUP FOCUS

ROAD TO QATAR

WORLD CUP 2022 IS ON THE HORIZON
AS THE EUROPEAN QUALIFYING
DRAW OUTLINES THE PATH TO THE
TOURNAMENT FOR SOME OF WORLD
FOOTBALL'S MAJOR NATIONS, DAN
ROBERTS WRITES...

ITALY



THE SITUATION ELSEWHERE...

OUTSIDE EUROPE, QUALIFICATION FOR WORLD CUP 2022 IS WELL UNDERWAY IN SOME PARTS OF THE WORLD, AND YET TO GET GOING IN OTHERS. DAN ROBERTS PROVIDES AN UPDATE...

The European nations may have just started sorting out their travel arrangements and updating their frequent flyer accounts, but qualifying campaigns around the world have already begun. Some have been revamped and rescheduled due to the COVID pandemic that has gripped the world in 2020, but there has been some progress. Possibly the most exciting qualification campaign, South America's CONMEBOL, is just four games in but Brazil and Argentina already lead the way. There have already been some surprises though, with Ecuador currently sitting third in the 10-nation group. The coronavirus has severely affected the Asian campaign. But Syria and Australia are both doing very well in their groups, with the improving Uzbekistan topping a group that also includes regional power Saudi Arabia. Qatar has already qualified for the finals as hosts and will be playing friendlies against nations in one of the UEFA groups. The CONCACAF and Oceania campaigns have yet to get going as yet - and have needed some rescheduling this year. But games are expected to be played at the beginning of 2021. The CAF began its qualifying way back in 2019 but was forced to put the campaign on hold in 2020. The groups are now all set to begin playing in May of 2021. With only one nation going through from each, there looks to be some very interesting fixtures coming up.

SHOCKS TO THE SYSTEM

THE SEEDING SYSTEM MEANS QUALIFICATION FOR THE INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS IS WEIGHTED TOWARDS THE BIG BOYS. BUT, DAN ROBERTS NOTES, THEY STILL SOMETIMES SLIP UP...

Major international tournaments always throw up a few surprises. Who could forget the 7-1 mauling that Germany handed out to Brazil - in their own country - at the World Cup in 2018? Or Iceland humbling the 'mighty' England at Euro 2016? Qualifying campaigns usually work out in the end for the bigger nations, but there have been a few shock results in recent years. The United States Men's National Team are regarded as a major player in CONCACAF but didn't make it to Russia in 2018 at all. Three out of the six nations left in the Hex would qualify for the finals but the US won just three of their 10 games and lost to Trinidad and Tobago in the final match to miss out on even a chance to compete in the inter-confederation playoff with Australia. The Netherlands have provided some of the finest ever players and coaches in the game but had missed out on the 2016 European Championship after finishing fourth in their group. But the 2018 World qualifying campaign extended the misery when even a win over Sweden in the final group game was not enough to overhaul their poor goal difference.

INTERNATIONAL FOCUS



There may still be just under two years until the first ever World Cup finals in the Middle East kicks off, but the draw for the UEFA qualifying groups - that took place in Zurich, Switzerland at the start of December - has re-ignited interest in the competition. In a ceremony thankfully free of the usual pomp and circumstance, and overseen by former players Daniele De Rossi and Rafael van der Vaart, the qualification paths to Qatar were laid out for all 55 nations.

There was an intense feeling of déjà vu for many countries, as familiar faces were drawn together. Spain and Sweden - and England and Poland - certainly don't need to do a lot of homework on each other to be prepared for the campaign, but there were some more intriguing match ups scheduled as well. The qualifiers begin in March 2021 and will run through until the end of the calendar year. Ten group winners will qualify automatically for the finals in Qatar, with the 10 runners-up joining two that perform well in the current Nations League campaign in the playoffs. Those final qualifying ties will be played in March 2022, ahead of the re-scheduled World Cup tournament in November. An added attraction will be Qatar playing in one of the groups, serving as a warm up for the finals. The host nation will also be taking part in the Copa America and the CONCACAF Gold Cup in 2021.

Although the seeding for the qualification draw ensures that most of the top teams in Europe should make it to the finals in Qatar in 2022, there will be some old rivalries renewed - as

well as some very long midweek trips for some of the teams in Kazakhstan's group in particular.

Portugal, Spain and France should all find their way to the finals without too much trouble - and Italy should also qualify after the humiliation of missing out on the World Cup in Russia in 2018. The Azzurri have greatly improved in the last two years and won every single game of their Euro 2020 qualifying campaign. Switzerland should be the sternest test for Roberto Mancini's side, but it would seem as though Italy will grace the Qatari stadiums in 2022.

Jogi Low looks like he may have been given a reprieve for some truly terrible recent Germany results and now has the chance to build up some much-needed support during what looks like a fairly straightforward qualification campaign. An exciting and youthful Romania might cause a few surprises in the group but Iceland is not the same team it was four years ago and shouldn't be able to stand in Germany's way. A dark horse in that group could be North Macedonia, who recently won their playoff to compete at the European Championship in 2021.

England can usually be relied on to swat aside most opponents during qualifying for major tournaments but there have been some less convincing displays recently from Gareth Southgate's side - as well as some disciplinary problems - and the two games against Poland will be the ones to look out for in Group I. These two nations have played each other in six previous



MAIN (OPPOSITE PAGE) AND ABOVE: De Rossi and van der Vaart conducted December's draw which was pleasingly slim-lined

ABOVE: The familiar rivalry between England and Poland goes way back, and they get to battle again

LEFT: France won in Russia 2018 and are among the favourites again

“PORTUGAL, SPAIN, FRANCE AND GERMANY SHOULD ALL FIND THEIR WAY TO THE FINALS WITHOUT TOO MUCH TROUBLE”



World Cup qualifying groups and also met in the group stage at the 1986 finals in Mexico. England usually gain the upper hand but Robert Lewandowski is scoring an incredible amount of goals for club and country and will be a huge threat to the Three Lions. Most of the groups have two obvious contenders for the top two spots with a collection of other nations making up the numbers. But there are also some interesting developments in some of the smaller countries across the tournament that could play out over the next two years and throw up a few surprises.

Finland have just qualified for its first ever major international tournament and seem to have a golden generation of players, rather than the one star name the country has had in the past. Being grouped with World Cup holders France decreases their chances of topping the group, but also-improved Ukraine's participation in Group D ensures that there may be some points spread around between those three.

Other nations previously regarded as minnows, such as Luxembourg, Kosovo and the Faroe Islands will be eagerly looking forward to their games during the upcoming campaign as well. Seen as the whipping boys in the past, these three have all vastly improved since the Nations League provided more competitive games throughout the season and will look forward to testing themselves against Portugal, Spain and Denmark respectively.

There always seems to be some kind of group

of death – even with UEFA's strict seeding system in place – and it looks like being Group G this around. Although Croatia, Slovakia, Russia and Slovenia battling it out for top spot in Group H promises to be fairly intense too. The Netherlands have just about got back to the top table after sensationally missing out on the 2016 European Championship and the World Cup in Russia two years later. But now new boss Frank De Boer must navigate a group that includes Turkey, Norway, Montenegro, Latvia and Gibraltar. Those last two should be beaten fairly easily, but Montenegro could be a potential banana skin for any of the top teams away from home. But it is the enigmatic Turkey and Norway, led by young superstar Erling Haaland, that could pose some real problems for the Oranje. Haaland should be back from injury in time for the qualifiers kicking off in March and could play a huge part in how Group G pans out.

There are plenty of other match ups scheduled for 2021 that will provoke nostalgic feelings for fans of European football. Wales will enjoy reminding Belgium of the quarterfinal of the European Championship in 2016 – and there will be opportunities for revenge for Israel against Scotland, as well as Sweden against Spain. But one thing that can just about be guaranteed is that the next 12 months of qualifying games – and the drama of the ensuing playoffs – will build us up nicely for what will be a World Cup like no other in Qatar at the end of 2022.

UEFA WORLD CUP 2022 QUALIFICATION DRAW

GROUP A

Portugal
Serbia
Republic of Ireland
Luxembourg
Azerbaijan

GROUP B

Spain
Sweden
Greece
Georgia
Kosovo

GROUP C

Italy
Switzerland
Northern Ireland
Bulgaria
Lithuania

GROUP D

France
Ukraine
Finland
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Kazakhstan

GROUP E

Belgium
Wales
Czech Republic
Belarus
Estonia

GROUP F

Denmark
Austria
Scotland
Israel
Faroe Islands
Moldova

GROUP G

Netherlands
Turkey
Norway
Montenegro
Latvia
Gibraltar

GROUP H

Croatia
Slovakia
Russia
Slovenia
Cyprus
Malta

GROUP I

England
Poland
Hungary
Albania
Andorra
San Marino

GROUP J

Germany
Romania
Iceland
North Macedonia
Armenia
Liechtenstein

ABOVE:
Germany coach
Joachim Löw can't
afford to slip up

BELOW:
Germany look to keep
their status as one of
the favourites to win





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"SOME SUGGESTED THAT JOSE MOURINHO'S DAYS OF ACHIEVING SUCCESS AT THE VERY HIGHEST LEVEL WERE OVER"

SPECIAL AGAIN

BY: STEPHEN DONOVAN

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

THE GOOD

There were numerous doubts raised by Tottenham supporters when Jose Mourinho was appointed as manager in November 2019 to replace the hugely popular Mauricio Pochettino. Some suggested that his days of achieving success at the very highest level were over, that his style of football was no longer as effective as it had been in times gone by, that he'd been left behind by the likes of Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp. However, just over a year into his reign and he's restored Spurs to the status of genuine title contenders, and his team is really catching the eye. It's taken time for Mourinho to implement his ideas and find the right balance for his squad, but shrewd signings over the summer have enabled Tottenham to rediscover their winning touch. The midfield now looks especially strong following the addition of Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg, and alongside him Tanguy Ndombele is finally showing exactly why he became the club's record signing, producing a series of influential performances. Yet undoubtedly the most arresting aspect of this Spurs team is the extraordinary attacking



GOING UP

The future is bright for Southampton, who enjoyed a magnificent 2020, rising from relegation battlers to the upper reaches of the Premier League. With a settled side and an excellent manager in Ralph Hasenhuttl, progress has been swift and it doesn't look like their bubble is about to burst any time soon.



GOING DOWN

No team in Premier League history has made a worse start to a season than Sheffield United, who have clearly lost the magic formula that saw them finish a hugely impressive ninth place in 2019-20. The Blades are particularly struggling in attack, with relegation already looking a very strong possibility.



THE UGLY

Since the beginning of this season, nobody in the Premier League has been more outspoken than Jurgen Klopp. The Liverpool manager has had plenty to contend with as he aims to lead a successful title defence, such as high-profile VAR decisions going against them and an unforgiving schedule caused by the knock-on effects of the current global pandemic. However, two things in particular have been the object of his wrath.

The first is the Premier League's unwillingness to follow suit with other European leagues - and indeed the English Football League - by allowing teams to make five substitutions in games. This was rejected at the start of the campaign and despite an increasing number of top-flight managers voicing their support, it has not been voted on again since.

Allowing five substitutes has been seen as a way of easing the burden on players during these challenging times and, perhaps more importantly, reducing the number of injuries. The main counter-argument is that having more options to draw on would favour the so-called bigger clubs, but having been without several key defenders for varying lengths of time, Klopp has felt the consequences more keenly than most.

The German has clashed with Sheffield United counterpart Chris Wilder, who is against the idea. The pair accused each other of being 'selfish', with Klopp insisting that 'it's not for tactics, it's to save the players. It's for all players.'

At the same time, Klopp has been engaged in a dispute with the Premier League's host television broadcasters, Sky Sports and BT Sport, for selecting his side for Saturday lunchtime kick-offs after having played in the Champions League on a Wednesday evening. In an interview following their draw at Brighton, he directly blamed BT for James Milner suffering a hamstring injury. We surely have not heard the last of this.

TOP (OPPOSITE PAGE): Jose Mourinho bringing success to Tottenham

BOTTOM LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (L) of Tottenham in action against Bukayo Saka (R) of Arsenal

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): The extraordinary attacking partnership between Harry Kane and Son Heung-min

ABOVE LEFT: Mikel Arteta, concerned about the lack of cutting edge.

ABOVE RIGHT: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang agreed to a new deal

BELOW: Jurgen Klopp remains the most out-spoken manager in the EPL

TOP RIGHT: Southampton players celebrate

BOTTOM RIGHT: Sheffield's goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale reacts to another loss



partnership between Harry Kane and Son Heung-min. The duo have been the two outstanding players for the North London side for some time, but the understanding they've developed so far this season is nothing short of remarkable and is tearing numerous Premier League defences to shreds.

Kane is already one of the best and most prolific finishers English football has seen in recent times, but under Mourinho's guidance his all-round game has reached an equally sensational level, so much so that he's beginning to rival Kevin de Bruyne as the king of assists in the Premier League. The pacey, confident Son is invariably the beneficiary of Kane's vision and passing ability, and together they seem set to lead a potential title charge that has so far silenced Mourinho's critics.

THE BAD

The renewed optimism that surrounded Arsenal at the beginning of the season has now well and truly dissipated. Regaining a place in the top four of the Premier League was, and still is the aim, but instead the team is struggling to even make it into the top half courtesy of a lengthy sequence of indifferent performances and hugely disappointing results.

There was every reason to believe that the Gunners were truly on the up just a few short months ago, with manager Mikel Arteta having made a remarkable impact by guiding them to FA Cup success, and strengthening the team as a defensive unit in a very short space of time. And with talisman Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang agreeing a new deal to remain at the Emirates Stadium, it looked like more positive times were just around the corner. Two consecutive wins to start the campaign appeared to back that up, but things have fallen away dramatically and Arteta has come under severe pressure as the likes of Leicester City, Aston Villa, and Wolverhampton Wanderers have all come to North London and earned three points, rarely looking troubled in the process.

Even more concerning has been the lack of a cutting edge. When the club has struggled in the past, they have still almost always looked capable of scoring, but lately creating chances has even proved difficult. Willian has been largely anonymous since his summer move from Chelsea and Aubameyang, one of the world's deadliest strikers, has generally been starved of service.

Arteta - who, incidentally, cast aside his most creative player in Mesut Ozil - has shown himself to be an excellent coach and is more than capable of turning things around, but it needs to happen sooner rather than later for the Spaniard after seeing some proud records bite the dust.



HOW TIME FLIES!

BY: JOSHUA BURNSIDE

MID-SEASON REVIEW 2020



"THE PREMIER LEAGUE IS HIGH ON ENTERTAINMENT VALUE. ITS UNPREDICTABILITY MAKES IT STANDOUT."



It feels like it was just yesterday that Liverpool were wrapping up their first Premier League title in history. It feels like just last week Bournemouth and Watford were still playing in the top-flight. But just a few months later, we are back into another absorbing Premier League season that has offered so much entertainment and surprises. Liverpool and Manchester City have remained in the reckoning despite the emergence of Chelsea and Tottenham. Manchester United have been underwhelming but are doing just enough to remain within touching distance, while Arsenal are amid a relegation fight despite doing so well in the Europa League. With so much already behind us, here we look at some highlights of the season including best players, best coach, best performers and the likes, from the beginning of the season till now.

BIGGEST SURPRISE: ASTON VILLA 7-2 LIVERPOOL

The Premier League is high on entertainment value. Its unpredictability makes it standout. In no other league is a bottom-of-the-table team expected to beat the best team than in the PL. However, despite the unpredictable nature of the PL, no one was expecting what was coming when Liverpool travelled to Villa Park

ABOVE (MAIN):
Aston Villa's Ollie Watkins (C) celebrates with team mates scoring a goal during the English Premier League match between Aston Villa and Liverpool FC

ABOVE (SMALL):
A dejected Roberto Firmino of Liverpool FC

LEFT:
Other than the game against Aston Villa, Klopp has kept Liverpool consistent

RIGHT:
Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta gestures on the touchline



HARRY ANEW



When Jose Mourinho was appointed Tottenham manager a year ago, the player on everyone's lips was Harry Kane. With Mourinho's explosive approach to man-management and often defensive tactics considered, many feared that Kane would suffer.

Kane and Mourinho won't work, was the consensus.

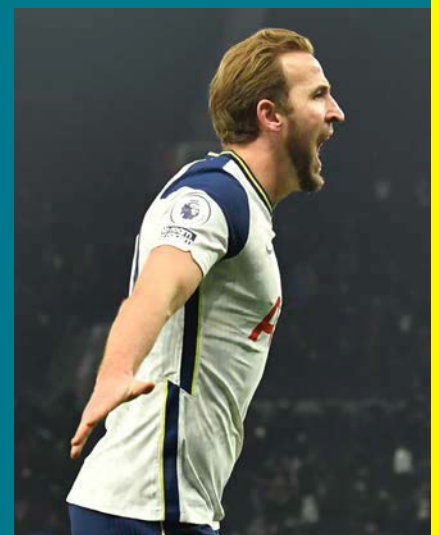
But fast forward 12 months later, the Englishman has become arguably Mourinho's most trusted lieutenant. Kane has transformed into an all-round player since Mourinho came in, taking his game to another level. The England captain was before now known as a poacher in the box, but this season he has added another string to his bow, creating goals.

The Spurs man has taken on more playmaking responsibilities, dropping deep between the lines and creating chances for his fellow forwards. The move deeper has seen him top the PL assist chart, with nine assists after nine games. His off-the-ball work has also been impressive, with his discipline and industry in Spurs win over Manchester City last weekend impressing Skysports pundit Jamie Carragher.

The former Liverpool player who was analysing City's game with Tottenham on Monday Night Football was full of praise for the forwards out of possession work. "I spoke about Harry Kane on this show a month ago about this new role and this new No.10 role," Carragher said on Sky Sports.

"Harry Kane is the most streetwise footballer in the Premier League by a long way, and I love it. After I've done this, if anyone tells me 'he's cheating or he's going down', he's not. It's a big part of the game, and it's a really clever part of the game. He made Man City's defenders look really naïve and not understanding football."

The striker would hope to add to his goals and assists tally with Spurs looking to make a real title challenge this season.



ABOVE LEFT: Mohamed Elneny of Arsenal react after the English Premier League soccer match between Arsenal FC and Burnley FC

ABOVE RIGHT: Arsenal have almost spent more time feuding than scoring

BOTTOM: The Spurs celebrating another goal

TOP RIGHT: Has Mourinho brought out the best in Harry Kane?

BOTTOM RIGHT: Harry Kane

in Game Week Four. The Reds were flying high after winning their opening three games against Leeds, Chelsea and Arsenal and were facing an Aston Villa team that had secured their top-flight future on the last day of the previous season by just a single point.

But at Villa Park, the Reds were blown away sending shock-waves throughout the World. The defending champions were beaten 7-2, a result that remains the biggest surprise in a season that has been filled with a lot of them. Liverpool were shambolic on that October evening, but Aston Villa did their homework well and exploited a ridiculously high back-line to score seven past a Liverpool side that boasted one of the best defences in their title-winning campaign.

The loss remains the biggest shocker in the season so far by a mile.

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Arsenal and Mikel Arteta are surely the biggest disappointments so far this season. The Gunners were expected to mount a top-four challenge after winning the FA Cup last season and beginning the season with a Community Shield win over Liverpool. But so far, they have failed to convince.

Arsenal presently occupy a position closer to the relegation zone than to a European spot.

Mikel Arteta is also dealing with internal issues within the squad with indiscipline and lack of commitment a constant theme in a season that has seen Arsenal struggle to score in the league.

Their start to the season is also their worst in 39 years, leading to calls for Arteta to be given the boot. Surely, the directors at the Emirates Stadium will be less than enthused with what they are seeing just one year after they sacked Unai Emery.

BEST PLAYERS

A lot of players have offered tantalising football in the Premier League this season, but none has come close to matching Harry Kane's consistency. The English striker is perhaps the sole reason Tottenham are mounting an unlikely title challenge as he remains the most important piece of Jose Mourinho's puzzle. Kane has adapted his game this season to suit Tottenham's style of play. His off-the-ball work also has made him the most complete player in the Premier League at the moment.

Kane already tops the assists charts by a mile and is also among the top five goal scorers in the league at this stage in the season. At this rate, the England captain is primed to take home the best player award by the end of the season. Other high performers in the league



"HARRY KANE IS THE MOST STREETWISE FOOTBALLER IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE BY A LONG WAY, AND I LOVE IT."

THE ASTON VILLA CAPTAIN HAS PRODUCED CONSISTENT RESULTS THIS SEASON, ALMOST SINGLE-HANDEDLY DRAGGING HIS TEAM ALL GAME.



are; Jack Grealish—the Aston Villa captain has produced consistent results this season, almost single-handedly dragging his team all game. Heung-Min Son has formed a formidable duo with Harry Kane and is on pace to record his best-ever scoring season and Dominic Calvert-Lewin leads the line of a rejuvenated Everton side.

TOP COACH SO FAR

Ralph Hasenhüttl by a mile has been the best coach since the season began. The Austrian tactician has overseen a change of fortune at Southampton, taking the South Coast club from a relegation-threatened team who lost 9-0 to Leicester just over a year ago, to genuine top-six contenders. On their day, the Saints are a match for any side and have proven this season that they are not afraid to get stuck in. Ralph Hasenhüttl has made Southampton very difficult to beat and has improved players like Jan Bednarek, Stuart Armstrong and Ward-Prowse who is gaining rave reviews for his deliveries and expertise at set-pieces. His tactical astuteness has Southampton comfortably sitting in the top half of the table, ahead of more established names like Arsenal. They look the most likely team to break the traditional big-six dominance in the Premier League.

BEST SIGNING

Chelsea outspent every other team in the summer transfer window with the acquisition of Timo Werner, Kai Harvetz, and Edouard Mendy expected to turn the Blues into title contenders. But while these players are still trying to find their feet in the Premier League, it is Liverpool's under-the-radar signing W who has taken the most plaudits. The Portuguese was signed from Wolves without much fanfare but has become a fan-favourite eclipsing fellow summer signing Thiago Alcantara, who has struggled with fitness, as the most important addition to the squad. The 23-year-old was signed to cover for

ABOVE: Jack Grealish of Aston Villa celebrates scoring his team's opening goal during the English Premier League soccer match between West Ham United & Aston Villa

TOP LEFT: Dominic Calvert-Lewin of Everton celebrates after scoring a goal during the English Premier League soccer match between Burnley FC and Everton FC

BOTTOM LEFT: Son Heung-min of Tottenham celebrates towards fans after scoring the opening goal during the English Premier League soccer match between Tottenham Hotspur & Arsenal FC

**RALPH
HASENHUTTL
BY A MILE
HAS BEEN
THE BEST
COACH SINCE
THE SEASON
BEGAN.**



the front-three but such has been his impact that Roberto Firmino's place in the front-three is under threat. The diminutive forward has scored five goals in just nine appearances with three of those goals crucial match winners. Surely the best signing in the summer.

WHAT TO EXPECT FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE YEAR - PREDICTIONS

On the evidence so far, this Premier League season is set to offer up a lot of surprises, come the end of the season. However, a few things are almost guaranteed, and here are a few of them.

SPURS TO GO ALL THE WAY

Tottenham are looking solid at the moment and are really looking like genuine title contenders. Jose Mourinho has moulded the side into a 'result machine' in the words of Jurgen Klopp, and they are looking like the team most likely to challenge Liverpool and City for the title. Unlike in previous years when they were considered a fickle side full of nice guys, Mourinho has instilled a nastiness and guile into the team that is required of any genuine title-winning side.

SHEFFIELD UNITED GOING DOWN

Sheffield United are favourites to go down this season. The Blades have been woeful, so far, taking only one point from the first third of the season and in doing so became the first side to only pick up one point in the opening eleven games of a season.

Chris Wilder's side overachieved last season but have been on the opposite end of their potential this term. It will take a big miracle to see them in the PL next season. But with the January transfer window approaching in a few weeks, the Englishman will have another opportunity to add some firepower to his side.

SEVENTY-FIVE POINTS SHOULD WIN THE LEAGUE

After game week 12 last season, Liverpool were on 34 points while Leicester City, Chelsea and Man City in second to fourth had at least 25

ABOVE (MAIN): Head coach Ralph Hasenhuttl (R) speaks to Jan Bednarek (L) of Southampton

ABOVE (SMALL): Southampton players celebrate after winning the English Premier League soccer match between Southampton FC and Sheffield United

RIGHT: Liverpool's Diogo Jota

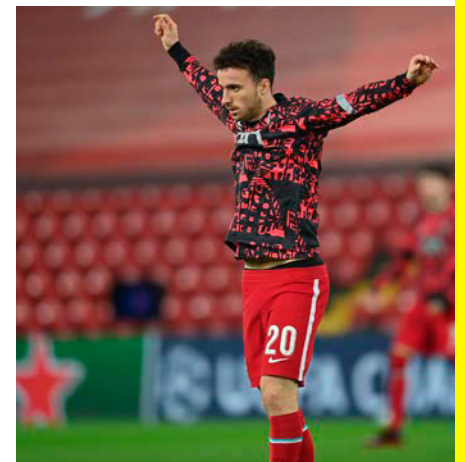
BOTTOM RIGHT: Chelsea's Timo Werner reacts during the English Premier League soccer match between Everton FC and Chelsea FC

points. But this season, leaders Tottenham and Liverpool are on 25 points, meaning that on average the league leaders are taking home 2.08 points per game.

At that rate, the leaders will accrue 79 points after 38 games. Factor in the odd drop-off in point come the festive period and New Year fixtures, then one can expect 75 points to win the league this season.

CONCLUSION

The season is about halfway through, but has already offered up some high-level entertainment. It remains to be seen what will unfold in the remaining matches with the unpredictable nature of the league guaranteeing a lot of shockers and crazy results going forward.



**CHELSEA
OUTSPENT
EVERY OTHER
TEAM IN THE
SUMMER
TRANSFER
WINDOW**



"A CRITICISM OFTEN LEVELLED AT LUKAKU IS HIS INABILITY TO AFFECT THE BIG MATCHES, BUT HE HAS DISPELLED THIS NOTION EMPHATICALLY SINCE MOVING TO THE NERAZZURRI."



THE GOAL HERO

BY: NICK VALERIO

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY



THE GOOD

Antonio Conte was desperate to land Romelu Lukaku during his time in the Chelsea dugout but the Belgian hitman opted for Manchester United in the summer of 2017. The then-Everton striker could not turn down the advances of Jose Mourinho, but Conte finally got his man two years later.

Upon his arrival at Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, the former Chelsea and Juventus title-winning coach handed director Beppe Marotta a list of targets and Lukaku was at the top of it. On this occasion, Belgium's all-time top scorer had no hesitation and made the move to Inter after two difficult campaigns at Old Trafford.

A criticism often levelled at Lukaku is his inability to affect the big matches, but he has dispelled this notion emphatically since moving to the Nerazzurri. Lukaku is Inter's captain without the armband and has always delivered when his

teammates have needed a goal or big moment. Conte also deserves credit for improving the 27-year-old's all-round game and the ex-Toffee fans' favourite is set for another 30-plus haul. Lukaku's exploits have not gone unnoticed, and Manchester City have been linked to a whopping €103m transfer. Pep Guardiola is on the hunt for a long-term successor to Sergio Agüero but the Antwerp native speaks very fondly of his current boss and is unlikely to push for a return to England.

Over the next six months, the challenge for Inter and Lukaku is to finally clinch some silverware. The goal machine has more than 200 career club efforts to his name but aside from a league medal with Anderlecht at the age of 16, he has yet to taste any further success. Juventus remain favourites for the Scudetto but have struggled for consistency, and few would bet against Lukaku to drive Inter on to domestic glory.

THE BAD

Paulo Dybala is in his sixth season at Juventus and if he were to leave in the summer, his time at the club would be considered a resounding success. The Argentine has won five championships, three Coppa Italia and two Supercoppa Italiana during his time in Turin and he is well thought of by his teammates. If Giorgio Chiellini or Leonardo Bonucci are unavailable, Dybala is next in line to wear the captain's armband but his future is now up in the air.

Following his appointment as Maurizio Sarri's successor, Andrea Pirlo made no secret of his desire to bring in a big target man to act as a foil for Cristiano Ronaldo, much in the same vein as Karim Benzema. Edin Dzeko, Arek Milik and Fernando Llorente were all linked before Alvaro Morata returned from Atletico Madrid for a 24-month loan.

The Spaniard struggled under Diego Simeone and in England at Chelsea, but has never let the Bianconeri down and has probably surpassed Pirlo's expectations this term. By the beginning of December, Morata had contributed nine goals and four assists from his first 12 appearances since re-joining Juventus and is playing his best ever football.

The 28-year-old is idolised by the natives and his stellar form has resulted in Dybala starting most games from the substitute bench. La Joya's ability is not in doubt, but in Pirlo's chosen system, there is no role for him and there have been signs of frustration when pictured on the sidelines.

The former Palermo ace was the subject of strong interest from Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur last year and has reportedly been offered to both outfits, along with Arsenal and Chelsea, and the diminutive attacker is likely to evaluate any serious bids at the end of the current campaign.

THE UGLY

12 months ago. The Dane did not pick up any major honours with the club but was recognised by his peers and subsequently named in the 2017-18 PFA Team of the Year. At the end of 2018-19 campaign, the playmaker made it clear he wanted a new challenge and Real Madrid were his dream destination. Los Blancos boss Zinedine Zidane reportedly blocked a move after the club agreed personal terms with the player but the Madrid legend only had eyes for compatriot Paul Pogba. As it transpired, the midfielders remained at their clubs, though Eriksen was swiftly picked up by Inter for a cut price fee at the end of last January's transfer window.

Eriksen, not an Antonio Conte player on paper, featured on 26 occasions for his new side and scored four times. The former Ajax ace was in and out of the XI as Conte altered his shape and trusted a 3-5-2 formation to get the best out of his signing. But unfortunately for the Scandinavian, he has failed to settle in Milan and is well down the pecking order.

This term, the ex-Bianconeri boss has largely gone with Roberto Gagliardini, Arturo Vidal, Marcelo Brozovic, Stefano Sensi and Nicolò



ABOVE (OPPOSITE PAGE): Inter's Romelu Lukaku celebrates scoring the third goal during the UEFA Champions League group B soccer match between Borussia Moenchengladbach and Inter Milan

BOTTOM LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Conte finally got Lukaku, a player he's wanted since 2017

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Beppe Marotta, Inter's director

ABOVE: Paulo Dybala

BELOW: Christian Eriksen

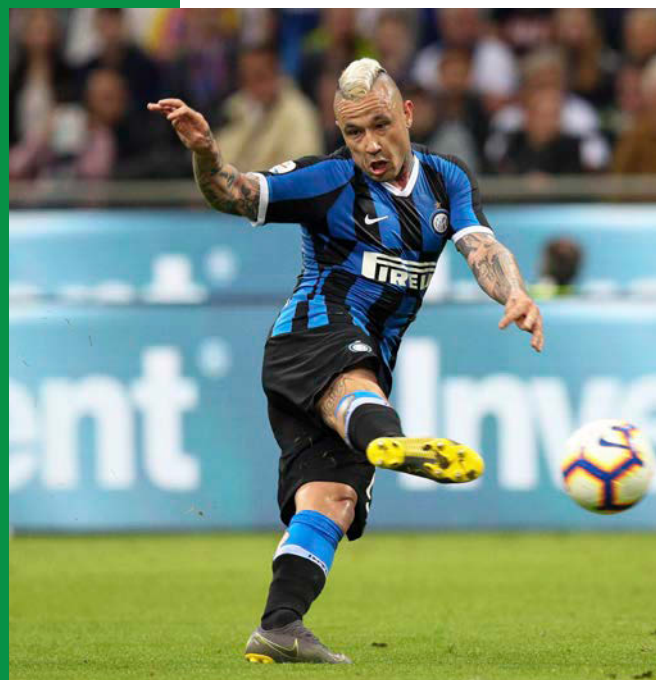
BOTTOM: Radja Nainggolan has been preferred over Eriksen

TOP RIGHT: Gianluca Scamacca

BOTTOM RIGHT: Gaetano Castrovilli

Barella in midfield, even the previously exiled Radja Nainggolan has been preferred to Eriksen. Nerazzurri chief Beppe Marotta has all but confirmed if a suitable bid arrives, the Dane will depart.

With the delayed Euro 2020 around the corner, the 28-year-old needs regular game time and the current frontrunner for his signature is Arsenal. The Gunners are desperate for some creativity in the middle of the park and while Eriksen has a close bond to his old supporters, the prospect of playing two minutes a week understandably does not appeal.



GOING UP

Sassuolo-owned Gianluca Scamacca has been the one positive from another disastrous Genoa campaign. The loanee is attracting interest from Roma and Milan but the Neroverdi expect their player to return to the club at the end of the season and have issued a stern warning to his suitors.



GOING DOWN

Florentina are languishing in the bottom half of the table but have a squad brimming with talent. Gaetano Castrovilli, Sofyan Amrabat, Nikola Milenkovic would not look out of place in teams competing for Europe, while Franck Ribery and Jose Callejon add a touch of class and experience to the Florence outfit. They're going to need it.



ENTERTAINMENT

BY: JOSHUA BURNSIDE

MID-SEASON REVIEW 2020



"AC MILAN AND
INTER MILAN HAVE
WOKEN UP"



If there is a league that has offered up more entertainment, it has to be the Italian league. The Serie A in past seasons has usually been flat and unentertaining for those looking for competition. But this season, it has been different. Four teams are looking like genuine title contenders, while perennial winners Juventus struggle. AC Milan and Inter Milan have woken up while rookie manager Andrea Pirlo is still finding his feet at Juventus. At the other end of the table, Crotona, Torino and Genoa battle to stay in the top flight with Spezia and Fiorentina equally on the brink. With half of the season already played, we look at the big talking points in the Serie A so far in 2020/2021 season.

BIGGEST SURPRISE

The biggest surprise of the season is AC Milan, and Ibrahimovic. The Rossoneri have barely put a foot wrong since football returned after the lockdown. Milan are looking like the most likely to dethrone Juventus and are doing so with a side led in front by a 39-year-old Ibrahimovic and kept at the back by a 21-year-old Italian keeper. Added to these is the fact that just a few months ago, the club was in some


ABOVE (MAIN):
AC Milan celebrate
yet another win in
this year's Serie A
campaign

ABOVE (SMALL):
Inter Milan's
Romelu Lukaku
(2-R) celebrates with
teammates after
scoring his team's
first goal during the
Italian Serie A soccer
match between FC
Inter and SSC Napoli

LEFT:
Milan's 21-year-old
goalkeeper Gianluigi
Donnarumma

RIGHT:
Milan's forward Zlatan
Ibrahimovic in action
during the Italian
Serie A soccer match
Napoli vs Milan





"STEFANO PIOLI HAS DONE AN INCREDIBLE JOB WITH THIS TEAM, AS THEY ARE ON ROUTE FOR GLORY"

form of crises after current coach Stefano Pioli and club legend Maldini took exception to the way the club had publicly flirted with Ralf Rangnick.

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Lazio were looking like a team that will be genuinely challenging Juventus for the title this season. But fast forward to January, Simone Inzaghi's side are far away from a title challenge and are languishing in upper mid-table. It is still early days to judge their season, but I Biancocelesti, we can admit, have disappointed based on last season. Their form at the back has been the major reason for their disappointing campaign so far. They have too often conceded. Meanwhile, Juventus have been disappointing by their ridiculously high standards. Andrea Pirlo is still a rookie in the job, so the jury isn't yet out on him. But if the results don't improve after the January transfer window, you can be sure to start hearing whisperings of a change of guard at the Turin stadium.

BEST PLAYERS

Ibrahimovic has become the biggest attraction to Serie A. The big Swede has almost single-handedly transformed AC Milan from a mid-table club to a real force in the league.

ABOVE: Milan's coach Stefano Pioli gestures during the Italian Serie A soccer match between FC Crotone and AC Milan

RIGHT: If Ralf Rangnick replaced Stefano Pioli, would AC Milan have the same fate?

BELOW: Romelu Lukaku celebrates scoring

BELOW (SMALL): Andrea Belotti has stood out as well

Even at 39 years old, Ibrahimovic finds himself amongst the top scorers in Serie A. His agent Raiola has boasted that the former Juventus striker will play till he is 45. Few players have achieved such a feat, but on the evidence of how fit Zlatan is, who can argue with him? Andrea Belotti and Romelu Lukaku are two other players that have stood out so far in this season. The former has scored plenty for a Torino side battling relegation, while Lukaku remains Inter's main focal point in attack and will be battling Ronaldo and Ibrahimovic for the capocannoniere.

TOP COACH SO FAR

When Stefano Pioli was appointed AC Milan coach in October 2019, few gave him a chance to last on the job. The consensus was that he was not the man to lead the team back to glory. Within days of his appointment, Milan faithful gathered against him and made their displeasure known on social media with #PioliOut trending all over the world in November.

By May, the Italian was deemed surplus to requirement at the San Siro and was to be replaced by Ralf Rangnick. But a last-minute change of plans meant he kept his job while Rangnick remained in Germany. But this season, the former Juventus defender is the



"LUKAKU REMAINS INTER'S MAIN FOCAL POINT IN ATTACK"





HIS BIGGEST STRENGTH HAS BEEN HIS ABILITY TO MOTIVATE AND IMPROVE PLAYERS WITH HIS MIDFIELD THREE OF FRANCK KESSIE, ISMAEL BENNACER AND HAKAN CALHANOGU



leading light in a new generation of Italian coaches ahead of more established names like Antonio Conte and Gian Piero Gasperini. He has fixed the Rossoneri's problems and has led his team towards the top of the table. His biggest strength has been his ability to motivate and improve players with his midfield three of Franck Kessie, Ismael Bennacer and Hakan Calhanoglu taking their games to a better level. At the back, Theo Hernandez and Davide Calabria have greatly improved to enter the reckoning as one of Europe's best full-back pairing. He has also managed to work to his team's strength to get the best out of the players in his disposal, moving from his preferred 4-3-1-2 formation to a more flexible 4-2-3-1 to accommodate his players he has. Surely, the former Lazio man is the most exciting coach at the moment.

ABOVE: AC Milan's Franck Kessie scores the 2-0 lead from the penalty spot during the Italian Serie A soccer match Ac Milan vs Fiorentina

LEFT: Milan's Ismael Bennacer (R) challenges for the ball Sparta Praha's Andreas Vindheim

BOTTOM LEFT: Hakan Calhanoglu has gained the respect of veteran teammates such as Ibrahimovic



IBRAHIMOVIC, CRISTIANO RONALDO, LUKAKU AND IMMOBILE ARE ALL ABLE TO CRACK UP TO 25 GOALS A SEASON.



BEST SIGNING

Juventus snapped up Weston McKennie from Schalke 04 in the summer with the surrounding hype at roof level. However, the midfielder has somewhat lived up to the hype providing some assurance and balance to the Juventus midfield.

His form in recent times has seen him move ahead of more experienced stars like Aaron Ramsey in the midfield for Juventus. Inter Milan's Achraf Hakimi signed from Real Madrid in the summer is another player that has caught the eye. The defender known for his bombing runs forward has made the right-back berth his own at Inter, despite some recent struggles. His potential is high and once he gets comfortable with the league, he'll be a real threat for Inter going forward.

WHAT TO EXPECT FOR THE REST OF THE SEASON - PREDICTIONS

EXPECT REAL COMPETITION FOR THE GOLDEN BOOT

Serie A is presently awash with top-quality strikers with the quartet of Ibrahimovic, Cristiano Ronaldo, Lukaku and Immobile able to crack up to 25 goals a season. With all four players and the likes of Belotti and Edin Džeko able to score loads of goals, expect the competition for the league's top scorer to be a real fight.

JUVENTUS HAVE REAL COMPETITION. Whatever happens, come the end of the season, one thing is certain; this season is primed to be a competitive one. If ever there was a year where it looked like Juventus are unlikely to retain the scudetto, it's this one, with both

MILAN CLUBS PUTTING UP A FIGHT. With these team fighting, Juventus will find it tough to win their 10th scudetto in a row. Ramsey or Eriksen will be gone before season's end. These players share something in common—they both come from the Premier League and both came in with much fanfare. Eriksen has had it tough at Inter and is mulling on a move to PSG, while the emergence of McKennie means Ramsey can start looking for a route out.

ABOVE (MAIN): Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after scoring the 4-1 lead from the penalty spot during the Italian Serie A soccer match between Spezia Calcio and Juventus

ABOVE (SMALL): Although still finding his ground, Pirlo has some world-class talent at his disposal

RIGHT: Dzeko observes during a match

RIGHT (SMALL): Lazio's forward Ciro Immobile (R) and Napoli's defender Kostas Manolas in action during the Italian Serie A soccer match SSC Napoli vs SS Lazio



EXPECT THE COMPETITION FOR THE LEAGUE'S TOP SCORER TO BE A REAL FIGHT.



NEW FAVOURITES

BY: FEARGAL BRENNAN

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

"DIEGO SIMEONE'S ATLETICO MADRID HAVE HAPPILY EMERGED AS TITLE FAVOURITES"

THE GOOD

With Real Madrid and Barcelona struggling to pick up results with any consistency in the opening months of the 2020-21 season, Atletico Madrid have happily emerged as title favourites. Diego Simeone has reignited some of the old battling firebrand attitude within his squad and that defensive resilience has formed the bedrock of their early season with an incredible two goals conceded in their first 10 games of the campaign. Instilling a strong defensive backbone in his team has been a priority for Simeone, after undergoing a transition in 2019-20 following the key exits of Juanfran Torres, Diego Godin and Filipe Luis from the Spanish capital. Los Rojiblancos now look to be back to their street fighting and tactically astute best so far in 2020-21, with the ever-present defensive spine allowing Simeone's midfield and attack to flourish. Thomas Partey's departure to Arsenal left a hole in Simeone's engine room with Lucas Torreira and Hector Herrera both vying for the role of his permanent replacement. The rehashing of Marcos Llorente from a hard running midfielder into a potent auxiliary attacker has proven to be a masterstroke with the developing talent of Joao Felix dovetailing brilliantly with new arrival Luis Suarez. Felix arrived at the club with an enormous price tag in 2019, with the Portugal international struggling under the weight of being Antoine Griezmann's replacement last season. However, an unhindered pre-season has allowed him to show exactly what he is all about in a slightly deeper role in behind Suarez. Simeone's clever manipulation of the summer civil war at Barcelona to bring in Suarez could



prove to be the definitive move in the title race, with the Uruguayan showing he is still one of La Liga's deadliest finishers if managed correctly. Next year will be seven years since Atletico broke the Madrid-Barca duopoly and won the Primera title. Is it their time again?

THE BAD

Getafe have been on a general upward curve following their return to La Liga in 2017, with coach Jose Bordalas leading them to an eye-catching three successive top half finishes. However, he has been forced to battle with expectation management in the last 12 months, after clinching a fifth place finish and subsequently Europa League qualification in 2019. The fact his side missed out on another European adventure this season came from a poor run of form at the back end of the restarted 2019-20 campaign. Bordalas surprisingly came in for criticism over that, with expectations raised on the back of the previous season and a strong showing in Europe in 2019.

That pressure has increased at the start of 2020-21, with poor results both home and away forcing his team down the table, and the voices of frustration to increase in volume and number. Bordalas' straight-talking style has won him both ardent admirers and critics, and his previous record should buy him time at the Estadio Coliseum Alfonso Perez into the second half of the season.

The likelihood will be a back to basics approach from Bordalas and his senior players as they look to return their trademark defensive steel and military organisation back into their performances. Participation in Europe last season stretched Bordalas' thin squad to its limit, and with only domestic matters to concentrate on in coming months, he will invoke a siege mentality and rely on the nous and experience of his squad to steer themselves away from relegation danger.

13 points from their first 11 league games does not make for positive reading for Getafe fans, but with a spine of David Soria, Marc Cucurella, Dakonam Djene, Mauro Arambarri and Nemanja Maksimovic, they will be confident of digging their way out of trouble in 2021.

THE UGLY

Lionel Messi made it clear ahead of the 2020-21 season that he saw his long-term future lying away from Barcelona. That decision sent the footballing world into a temporary meltdown, amid wild gossip over whether he would actually end his two decades in Catalonia and force through a move away. Messi eventually opted to remain at the Camp Nou and see out the final year of his contract, but the Argentinian did little to hide his displeasure at the situation, hinting that the spirit of his release clause was being blocked by the club.

The 33-year-old has cut disjointed figure in the first half of the season, with his talent and commitment as strong as ever, but his body language has made clear his apathy towards issues engulfing the club off the pitch, indicating he will leave in 2021.

Barcelona are likely to dig in over the contract stand-off once again and try to keep Messi tied to the club, but as their grip on his future wanes, the relationship between both parties looks set to deteriorate. Ronald Koeman has endured a mixed start to the first few months of his tenure and despite a steadfast loyalty to his captain, the Dutch boss looks resigned to losing any influence over Messi's future choices. Where Messi could move on to will be the source of speculation in the coming months, with Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain again rumoured frontrunners for his signature. But if Messi does begin to drift, the simmering war of words will restart in 2021, as despite the departure of controversial former club president Josep Bartomeu, Barcelona know they may need to fight dirty to stand any chance of keeping Messi in Spain. This ugly situation is only going to get uglier.



ABOVE
(OPPOSITE PAGE):
Diego Simeone

MIDDLE
(OPPOSITE PAGE):
Luis Suarez

BOTTOM
(OPPOSITE PAGE):
Joao Felix

ABOVE:
Getafe's head coach
Jose Bordalas

RIGHT:
Ronald Koeman

BELOW:
Lio Messi

TOP RIGHT:
Unai Emery

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Huesca's head coach
Michel (C) celebrates
with his players their
victory



GOING UP

Unai Emery's summer arrival at Villarreal raised eyebrows after his disappointing tenure at Arsenal came to a close at the end of 2019. However, the former Sevilla coach has given a reminder of his capabilities in the opening months of the 2020-21 La Liga season, with a Champions League push well within the Yellow Submarine's reach in 2021.



GOING DOWN

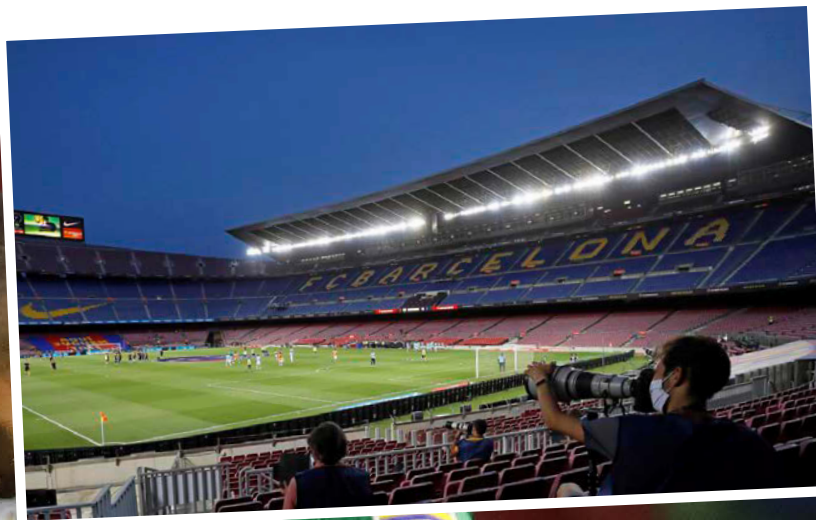
Huesca secured promotion back to the Spanish top flight after edging out Cadix in the 2019-20 Segunda Division title race. But they have found La Liga life tough going in 2020-21, with no wins from their first 12 league games of the season. It's still early, but already Huesca look doomed.



CONTINUING ON

BY: JOSHUA BURNSIDE

MID-SEASON REVIEW 2020



"ATLETICO MADRID HAD TO PLAY A CRUNCH LALIGA MATCH WITHOUT THEIR KEY MARKSMAN LUIS SUAREZ"



The effects of the Coronavirus is still strongly felt in the world of football and it's more strongly felt in LaLiga than any other major league in the world. The novel virus has taken its toll on the league and inadvertently upset the table of power, somehow creating a level playing ground for all teams in Spain. The economic and financial constraints imposed by the pandemic has made it impossible for top teams who have been known to attract the best prospects and gleefully splash out cash to sign them, to suffer. The past summer transfer window has been a rather quiet one for the likes of Barcelona and Real Madrid in terms of arrivals as no big names were signed like in previous seasons when they snapped up any exciting prospect emerging in Europe. Both teams have rather reverted to selling and sending out players on loan to balance their accounts. This has given the less financially buoyant teams leverage as a depleted Valencia will bear testament to. Also football psychologists say that the lack of fans in the grounds tends to affect the big teams and players more. Furthermore one needs to take into account the threat/risk of a player catching the virus before a match, in the event of this, regardless his team plays. Atletico Madrid had to play

ABOVE (MAIN): Atletico Madrid's Luis Suarez (L) celebrates after scoring the 2-0 lead during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Atletico Madrid and Real Betis

ABOVE (SMALL): Empty Stadiums have been proven to affect the big players & teams

LEFT: Villareal's players celebrate after scoring

RIGHT: Sevilla's players celebrate the 0-1 during the Spanish LaLiga soccer match between Getafe CF and Sevilla FC



"THE ARGENTINE HAS ENDURED HIS WORST START TO A SEASON THIS YEAR."



a crunch LaLiga match without their key marksman Luis Suarez. These events and scenarios have made the Spanish league more open and unpredictable for the first time in many years unlike in previous seasons when Barcelona and Real Madrid contested for the title and only Atletico Madrid challenging them. This season we've seen the likes of Real Sociedad, Villarreal, Sevilla, Cadiz and Granada all cause problems for the top clubs as they compete for a spot in Europe. Here we take a look at hits and misses in this early stage of the season. Best coaches, best signings and breakout players.

HIT OR MISS MIKEL OYARZABAL

At just 23 years of age, the Spaniard looks set to be the next big thing out of Spain. The starlet finds himself amongst the top goal scorers this season, competing with more experienced strikers like Suarez, Messi and Benzema

VERDICT. HIT

HIT OR MISS LIONEL MESSI

The Argentine has endured his worst start to a season this year. After his failed attempt to leave Barcelona in the summer, the Argentine

ABOVE: Barcelona's striker Leo Messi reacts during the Spanish LaLiga soccer match between Atletico de Madrid and FC Barcelona

ABOVE (SMALL): Messi has been more disappointed than not this year

RIGHT: Real Sociedad's Mikel Oyarzabal celebrates after scoring the 1-0 lead from the penalty spot during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Real Sociedad and SD Huesca

BELOW: Barcelona's striker Antoine Griezmann in action during the Spanish LaLiga soccer match between Atletico de Madrid and FC Barcelona

BELOW (SMALL): FC Barcelona's Antoine Griezmann at the arrival of the team to the gathering hotel ahead of their game against Atletico Madrid

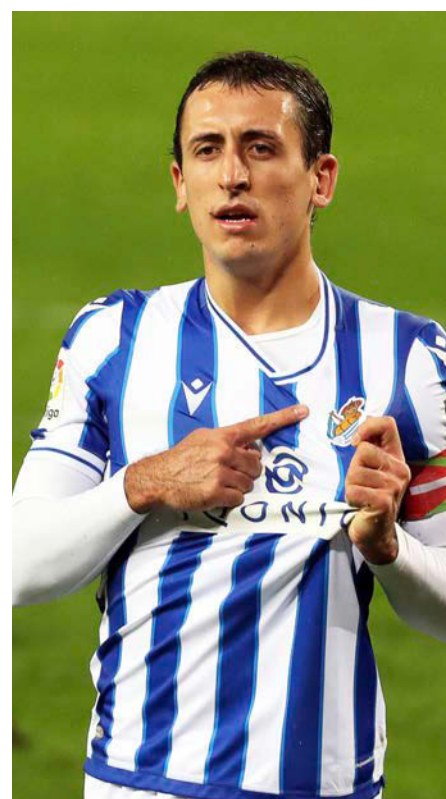
considered by so many as the greatest player to ever play the game, has looked a shadow of himself by his enormous standards. Probably owing to institutional problems and sporting issues the Argentine has not put up numbers we've come accustomed to seeing from him.

VERDICT. MISS

HIT OR MISS ANTOINE GRIEZMANN

The French man was brought in last season to provide some much needed help to Messi and reduce the work off his shoulders but the Frenchman has been a shadow of himself since joining the LaLiga giants. With off-field controversy plaguing him, the French footballer has not hit the ground running this season as was expected. With the departure of Luis Suarez more was expected of Griezmann but he has disappointed even though he has been featured in virtually all attacking positions this season from CF,SS,LWF,RWF but in all these positions the Frenchman has been unable to make the most of the chances he's been given.

VERDICT. MISS



"THE FRENCH FOOTBALLER HAS NOT HIT THE GROUND RUNNING THIS SEASON AS WAS EXPECTED"



**BUT IT IS REAL
SOCIEDAD'S DAVID
SILVA WHO HAS HIT
THE GROUND RUNNING
IN LALIGA**



BEST SIGNINGS/BREAK OUT STARS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Barcelona were the busiest team in terms of transfers and arrivals. But it is Real Sociedad's David Silva who has hit the ground running in LaLiga. Arriving on a free transfer from Manchester City, the Spaniard has helped transform Real Sociedad into the team they are now with his vision and creativity controlling the midfield and dictating play. The Spaniard boasts a passing accuracy of 86% and has dished out a strong challenge when necessary. Since joining La Real, we've seen a new David Silva who has gone from mister nice guy to a brutish midfield dynamo racking up quite a few yellow cards already this season.

BREAK OUT STARS TO WATCH

Pedri has been nothing but sensational,

outperforming the likes of Ousmane Dembele and Griezmann in the Barcelona set up. Statistics may not do justice to his performance and relevance. But his worth has been underlined as he has cemented his place in the starting line-up getting the nod ahead of Dembele and Coutinho. Not bad for an 18 year old.

Ferland Mendy was brought in to provide competition for Marcelo but has ousted the Brazilian and outperformed him to be Real Madrid first choice left back. He has been so impressive this season and one of Real Madrid's most consistent players. The Frenchman has been a revelation this season bombing down the left flank either to snuff out opponents attacks or launching one for his team. The beginning of the LaLiga season belonged to Ansu Fati, until injury halted his

ABOVE: Real Sociedad's David Silva

LEFT: Atletico's defender Kieran Trippier (2-L) in action against Barcelona's midfielder Pedri (R) during their Spanish LaLiga soccer match

BOTTOM: Celta Vigo's Joseph Aidoo (L) in action against FC Barcelona's Ansu Fati (R) during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Celta Vigo and FC Barcelona

BOTTOM (SMALL): Real Madrid's Ferland Mendy celebrates after scoring the 1-0 lead during the Spanish LaLiga soccer match between Granada CF and Real Madrid





**"BEATING
JAN OBLAK IS
SOMETHING THAT
IS NOT EASILY
DONE."**

impeccable start in which he scored in almost every match and broke a host of records along the way. He is the youngest player to score for the Spanish national team and the youngest ever scorer in the Champions League.

BEST COACH/KEEPER/DEFENDERS

After his dismal and shambolic spell at Real Madrid, Julien Lopetegui has been able to put that aside and rejuvenate Sevilla. Winning the Europa league last season, Sevilla is now one of the most entertaining team to watch in Spain. The best defence in the league boasts the best goalie in the league too. Atletico Madrid's defensive stronghold is the best in the league, with a center back pairing of Stefano Savic and Jose Gimenez the duo are proving hard to beat when played together. If that wasn't enough, and a player somehow gets by them, they still have to beat Jan Oblak, who stands in goal. Something not easily done.

PREDICTIONS

Real Sociedad to bottle it. Despite the good work put in by both the players and the coaches, La Real do not have what it takes to win the league this season. With how La Real are playing currently and with the inconsistency of the big two clubs, one would think that this is another year when an outside team will break the Duopoly of Real Madrid and Barcelona. Atletico Madrid are the ones that stand the best chance to capitalize on a Madrid/Barca slip up and win the league. The January transfer window presents a perfect chance for underperforming teams to strengthen and the big boys will certainly do so in order to make a push and retain their honor. The title race will most likely still remain between Barcelona, Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid. If the early season patterns continue, Atletico Madrid will be favourites to win the league this season with Barcelona and Real Madrid settling for Champions League spots. Don't rule out Real Sociedad from claiming a spot in Europe's most prestigious club competition next season either.

ABOVE:
Atletico Madrid's
goalkeeper Jan Oblak
warms up

RIGHT:
Jose Gimenez reacts
during his La Liga
match earlier this
season

RIGHT (SMALL):
Sevilla's head coach
Julien Lopetegui
(L) reacts during
the Spanish La
Liga soccer match
between Sevilla FC
and Real Betis



**"ATLETICO
MADRID'S
DEFENSIVE
STRONGHOLD
IS THE BEST IN
THE LEAGUE,
WITH A
CENTER BACK
PAIRING OF
STEFANO
SAVIC
AND JOSE
GIMENEZ"**

"BOSZ'S
SIDE HAVE
HIT THE
GROUND RUNNING
IN 2020-21."



IMPRESSIVE MANEUVERS

BY: FEARGAL BRENNAN

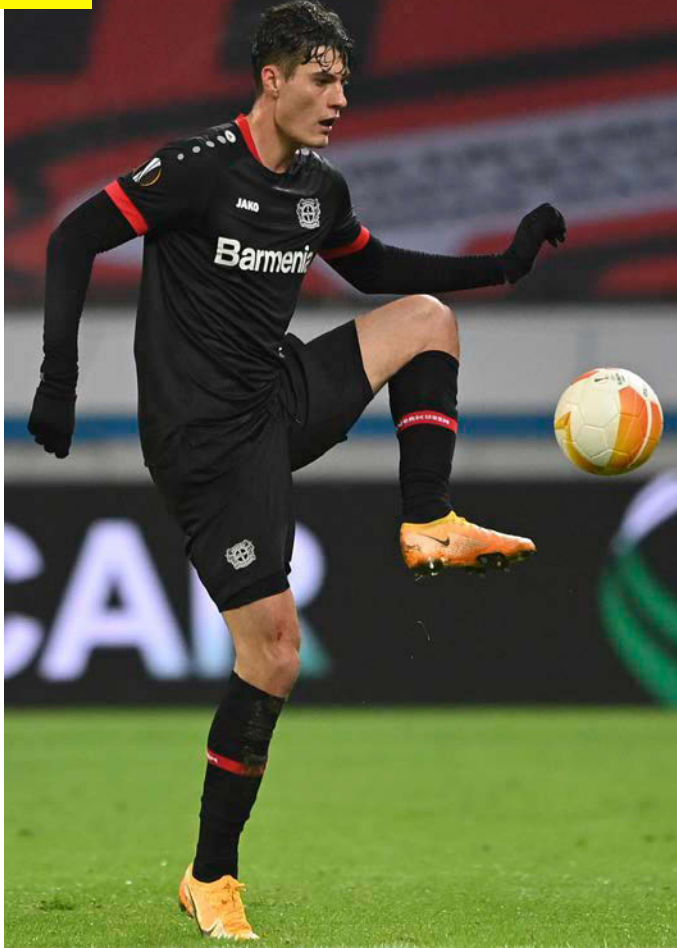
THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

THE GOOD

Bayer Leverkusen's 2019-20 Bundesliga campaign ended on a frustrating note, as Peter Bosz's side eventually missed on securing a Champions League qualification spot for 2020-21. But despite a mixed run of results in domestic action, and a Europa League exit at the hands of Inter, Bosz's side have hit the ground running in 2020-21.

Their task was made harder by the summer departure of key attacking pair Kevin Volland and Kai Havertz to AS Monaco and Chelsea. Bosz reacted swiftly to their exits and brought in Roma striker Patrik Schick after RB Leipzig declined to make his loan move a permanent deal. The Czech Republic international has played a rotating role for Bosz in an impressive new attacking line up with Leon Bailey, Lucas Alario and Moussa Diaby.

After some initial teething problems in the opening weeks of the season, his squad have clicked into gear, with 19 points picked up a possible between October and December in the Bundesliga. That run of outstanding consistency has forced Bosz's players into the title race, alongside RB Leipzig and Borussia Dortmund, in the battle to break Bayern Munich's Bundesliga hegemony. Leverkusen have also had to contend with another Europa League campaign but escaped Group C in comfortable fashion to reach the knockout rounds again. A tighter budget at the start of 2021 will dictate if Bosz can dip into the winter transfer market, but based on Bayer's



form at the end of the calendar year, he looks confident in his current options. The new creative axis should be enough to power a strong run of form in 2021, but the deep lying playmaking impact of Charles Aranguiz continues to be vital for Bosz, alongside the defensive nous of Lars and Sven Bender and Jonathan Tah.

THE BAD

Schalke's disastrous end of season run in the 2019-20 Bundesliga campaign saw David Wagner's side slide right out of the reckoning for a European qualification place. 10 defeats from their final 15 games of the campaign cost Wagner his job over the summer with the former Huddersfield Town boss only surviving for two league games in 2020-21. Wagner was initially given an extended stay of execution after convincing the club's board he was capable of dramatically turning their form around in the second half of 2020. However, an opening day 8-0 hammering by Bayern Munich and a 3-1 defeat to Werder Bremen inevitably led to his dismissal, but new boss Manuel Baum has found things equally as difficult at the Veltins Arena. The former Augsburg coach has been unable to stop Schalke's plummet right down into the relegation zone, with just three points picked up from a possible 24 in his first eight games in the Bundesliga. The lack of European football also cost Wagner his star player from 2019-20, with United States international Weston McKennie joining Juventus and experienced defender Sebastien Rudy leaving on a free transfer. Baum will have an increased challenge on his hands to convince the board to back him during the winter transfer market, with another European qualification failure firmly on the cards in 2021. Indeed, Schalke's first 10 league games saw more than three goals conceded per game, on average, and thoughts of European football have had to be banished as simply staying up became the priority. But if Schalke are facing an even deeper relegation battle in the second half of the campaign, he will need to bring in new faces to avoiding dropping down to the German second tier for the first time since 1991.

THE UGLY

Werder Bremen's Bundesliga clash with Stuttgart looked to be drifting towards a straightforward 1-0 defeat at the start of December. However, the game exploded in negative style in added time with two goals and a major sportsmanship controversy. Silas Wamangituka-Fundu's first half penalty put the visitors in front, but the Congolese striker's winner left the home side furious in the final seconds. After a comical mix up between Bremen centre-back Omer Toprak and goalkeeper Jiri Pavlenka, Wamangituka-Fundu pounced and walked the loose ball all the way to the unattended goal before poking into an empty net. His actions were classed as unsportsmanlike by referee Frank Willenborg, who opted to book him for mocking the Stuttgart players with his exaggerated finish, despite protests from Wamangituka-Fundu and his teammates. David Selke netted a late consolation for the hosts, seconds after Wamangituka-Fundu's tap in, before the towering striker confronted him at full time at the Weserstadion. Welke was visibly angry over the incident after the final whistle, rushing immediately to angrily remonstrate with Wamangituka-Fundu over his conduct, labelling the 21-year-old as 'disrespectful' in a later TV interview. Wamangituka-Fundu dismissed Welke's criticism in his own post-match interview, claiming it was his responsibility to decide how to finish off easy chances, with Stuttgart boss Thomas Hitzelsperger backing his striker's actions in front of goal as perfectly acceptable.



ABOVE (OPPOSITE PAGE): Peter Bosz

BOTTOM LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Patrik Schick

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Lucas Alario

ABOVE: Omar Mascarell and Bastian Oczipka of FC Schalke 04 talk to referee Benjamin Cortus

MIDDLE: Silas Wamangituka

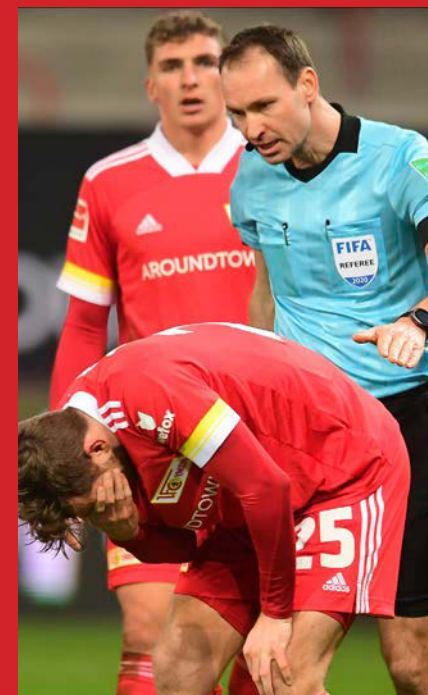
BELOW: David Selke

TOP RIGHT: Union Berlin Players

BOTTOM RIGHT: Jan Moritz

GOING UP

Union Berlin's first ever Bundesliga season ended in an 11th place in 2019-20 and Urs Fischer's team have started their second season strongly. Just two league defeats from the opening three months of the Bundesliga season have pushed them into the early reckoning for shock European qualification challenge in 2021.



GOING DOWN

Schalke look set to be joined by struggling Mainz in a relegation battle at the start of 2021 with Jan Moritz-Lichte's team enduring a nightmare start to the 2020-21 season. With no new faces arriving at the club ahead of the season, Moritz-Lichte will need to work his magic in the winter market to secure reinforcements.



LOTS OF DRAMA

BY: JOSHUA BURNSIDE

MID-SEASON REVIEW 2020



"ONE THING REMAINS TRUE. BAYERN MUNICH ARE STILL THE TOP TEAM, AND THE ONES TO BEAT"



We've seen plenty of drama so far this season in the German Bundesliga, but one thing remains true. Bayern Munich are still the top team and the ones to beat. This season the Bavarians are being run close by Leverkusen and Leipzig, and while traditional second-place finishers Dortmund are struggling a little, you cannot rule them out. Schalke 04's woes from last season have continued into this season despite a change of coach while Bundesliga new boys Stuttgart, are exceeding expectations. With the first half of the season played, we look at a few talking points in the season below.

BIGGEST SURPRISES

When Stuttgart got promoted to the Bundesliga on the last day of last season, many predicted that Pellegrino Matarazzo's men would struggle in the top-flight. However, rather than struggle, Stuttgart has exceeded expectations by far, sitting rather comfortably above relegation with a memorable result against Dortmund leading to the sack of Lucien Favre. Pellegrino Matarazzo's men are hard to beat and have little trouble scoring. They have been the biggest surprise in German football so far this season, and it will take something

ABOVE (MAIN): Team captain Manuel Neuer of FC Bayern Muenchen lifts the trophy to celebrate the championship following the Bundesliga match between VfL Wolfsburg and FC Bayern Muenchen at Volkswagen Arena on June 27, 2020

ABOVE (SMALL): Leipzig has been impressing the world

LEFT: Leverkusen's Kerem Demirbay in action during the German Bundesliga soccer match between 1. FC Koeln and Bayer Leverkusen

RIGHT: Rather than struggle, Pellegrino Matarazzo's Stuttgart has exceeded expectations by far



"LUCIEN FAVRE'S SACKING AT DORTMUND WAS ANOTHER DISAPPOINTING EVENT IN THE BUNDESLIGA"



catastrophic to happen for them to drop to the second division by the end of the season.

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Schalke 04 has to be the biggest disappointment in German football these days. The club, who just two seasons ago were contesting for a Champions League spot in the league, are this season rooted in a relegation battle. Despite letting former manager David Wagner go after matchday two, the North Rhine-Westphalia side has found it difficult to turn the corner. The Royal Blues have conceded plenty of goals and shoring up their defence may be their best bet to turning things around. Offensively they aren't much better, as they're one of the lowest scoring teams in the Bundesliga so far. At this rate, only a major turn of events will guarantee that they remain in the Bundesliga top-flight next season. Lucien Favre's sacking at Dortmund was another disappointing event in the Bundesliga. Just last season the German coach was challenging Bayern for the title, having overseen the configuration of a squad full of exciting players. But after losing 5-1 at home to newly promoted Stuttgart, Favre was gone to be replaced by Terzic. His sack clearly is a disappointment for the young players he had brought through the ranks at Dortmund.

ABOVE (MAIN): Dortmund's former head coach Lucien Favre reacts before the German Bundesliga soccer match between Borussia Dortmund and VfB Stuttgart

ABOVE (SMALL): Referee Sven Jablonski shows a yellow card to Benito Raman (R) of Schalke during the Bundesliga match FC Schalke 04 and SC Freiburg

RIGHT: Bayer Leverkusen's coach Peter Bosz

BELOW: Bayern's Robert Lewandowski gives thumbs up during the German Bundesliga match between Arminia Bielefeld and Bayern Muenchen

BELOW (SMALL): Dortmund's Erling Haaland in front of Cologne's goal during the German Bundesliga soccer match between Borussia Dortmund and 1. FC Koeln

BEST PLAYERS

Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski remains the biggest name in the Bundesliga, even at 32 years. The Polish striker is well into double digits, leading the scoring charts and doesn't look like stopping anytime soon. Like wine that gets better with age, Lewandowski is setting the standard for modern-day strikers all over the world. Meanwhile, Erling Haaland remains one of the most exciting players in the Bundesliga and is not far behind Lewandowski as Bundesliga's best player. The Norwegian has also hit double digits of goals scored as he looks to keep Lewandowski company at the top of the goal scoring race.

TOP COACH SO FAR

Bayer Leverkusen's Peter Bosz just edges out Julian Nagelsmann as Bundesliga's best coach so far. The former Ajax and Borussia Dortmund coach has reborn Leverkusen, moving them from a mid-table club to Champions League in his first season. But it is this season that Bosz is showing his best side as Bayer Leverkusen are title contenders halfway through the season, despite losing their star player to Chelsea in the summer. While talk about their first-ever league title is certainly too early, it is safe to agree that Leverkusen will excite many this season.



"THE POLISH STRIKER DOESN'T LOOK LIKE HE'S STOPPING ANYTIME SOON."





"FOR A FREE TRANSFER, KRUSE HAS PROVEN A BARGAIN AND IS ARGUABLY THE BEST VALUE SIGNING"



BEST SIGNING

Max Kruse's return to the Bundesliga was greeted with muted approval by a small section of Union Berlin supporters. The striker was returning to Germany as something like a cult hero after spending one year in Turkey. He was not expected to bang 20 goals or help Union mount a title challenge, after all, he was a free transfer. The idea was that in Kruse, Urs Fischer was getting a decent striker able to contribute and help the team stay average. But fast-forward to today, and Kruse is a key player in the clubs strong start to the season and may prove more valuable if Union Berlin manage to secure a spot in Europe next season. For a free transfer, Kruse has proven a bargain and is arguably the best value signing so far ahead of the likes of Sane and Jude Bellingham.

WHAT TO EXPECT FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE YEAR - PREDICTIONS

BAYERN TO WIN THE BUNDESLIGA

Despite the emergence of Leverkusen and Leipzig as a genuine force, we can still comfortably predict that the Bundesliga title will end up at Munich. Bayern Munich remains the team to beat and are scoring goals at will. Although they have been leaky at the back so far (for their standards), expect them to clinch the title come May.

STUTTGART TO FINISH IN TOP SEVEN

It was only in August that Stuttgart were playing in the 2. Bundesliga, but today, they are one of Bundesliga's top-performing team. With the way they are going about their business in the top-flight, expect them to finish very close to a European spot by May.

ABOVE: Max Kruse (2-L) of Union Berlin celebrates scoring the opening goal during the German Bundesliga match between TSG Hoffenheim and 1. FC Union Berlin

LEFT: Urs Fischer, head coach of Union Berlin, arrives for the German Bundesliga soccer match between TSG Hoffenheim and 1. FC Union Berlin

BOTTOM: Stuttgart has shown the capabilities to take on the best teams in Bundesliga and prove themselves

"EXPECT STUTT GART TO FINISH VERY CLOSE TO A EUROPEAN SPOT BY MAY."





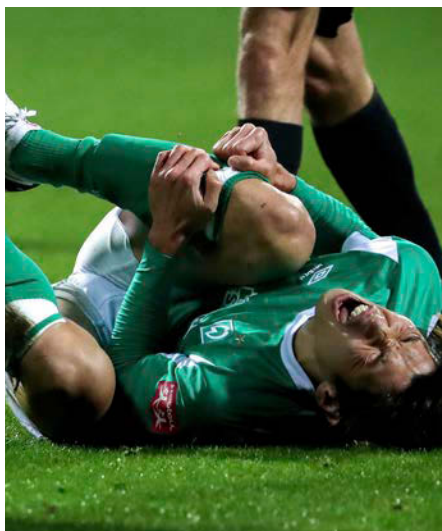
"WE CAN STILL COMFORTABLY PREDICT THAT THE BUNDESLIGA TITLE WILL END UP AT MUNICH"

SCHALKE 04 WILL GET ANOTHER COACH
 Manuel Baum replaced Wagner after two games, but Schalke have fared no better since then. Unless results improve dramatically, expect Manuel Baum to be out of a job before May.

LUCIEN FAVRE TO BE BACK SOON
 Lucien Favre left Dortmund with a whimper, but he put himself in the shop window in his brief time at the club. With established names like Schalke and Bremen struggling, the Swiss would not be out of a job for long. On the evidence of his performance at the club, you can expect the 61-year-old to be lining the Bundesliga touchline very soon.

CONCLUSION

The Bundesliga has been straight forward in recent times with Bayern expected to finish top of the league regardless. But with the absence of fans in stadiums and the emergence of other teams, Bayern are likely to be run close this time around. The fight for the European spot is also taking an interesting twist with as many as six teams vying for the four remaining positions behind Bayern and Leipzig. Whatever happens going forward, we can be sure that we will be entertained.



ABOVE:
 A common scene - Bayern Munich celebrating a goal

RIGHT:
 Schalke's head coach Manuel Baum talks to the media prior to the German Bundesliga soccer match between Borussia Moenchengladbach and FC Schalke 04

RIGHT (SMALL):
 David Wagner was replaced by Baum

BOTTOM LEFT:
 A struggling Bremen could mean a new job for Favre



"UNLESS RESULTS IMPROVE DRAMATICALLY, EXPECT MANUEL BAUM TO BE OUT OF A JOB BEFORE MAY."



MLS FOCUS

CREW ON TOP

MARCO D'ONOFRIO DIGS DEEP INTO THE ROAD TRAVELLED FOR THE 2020 MLS CUP CHAMPIONS THE COLUMBUS CREW...

When Tim Bezbatchenko left Toronto FC for the Columbus Crew following the 2018 season, many couldn't fathom the decision. Why would the former Reds general manager choose to leave what had become one of the biggest clubs in Major League Soccer with a plethora of resources for a team that had been on the brink of relocation? The answer proved to be simple. He wanted to return home.

Bezbatchenko's parents had been Crew season ticket holders since the club's inception and he had the opportunity to rebuild his hometown club as the president and general manager of the team. "It's a tough one because we really settled in Toronto," Bezbatchenko said in an interview at the time. "We fell in love with the city and we weren't going to leave for any other place."

Bezbatchenko watched on as his replacement Ali Curtis thrived in Toronto – even after Sebastian Giovinco had opted to leave for Saudi Arabia. Much like Bezbatchenko, Curtis had supporters quickly forgetting about Giovinco with Alejandro Pozuelo fitting in well as the team's newest Designated Player. Bezbatchenko had no option but to watch on while the club that he had largely built made a deep run in the playoffs, culminating in an MLS Cup final appearance. It was the third appearance in four years for TFC, but the first the former general manager was not a part of. His team had finished in 10th place in the Eastern Conference and well out of the playoffs with just 38 points.

The Reds ultimately lost to the Seattle Sounders in the MLS Cup Final, but were still an elite side heading into the 2020 campaign. Many fans and journalists alike had them

pegged to win the league's most prestigious prize. Columbus on the other hand, seemed to be a mere after thought.

The Crew wasted no time during the offseason though, signing Designated Player Lucas Zelarayan on a reported \$7m deal. The Argentine was acquired from Mexican club Tigres in the hopes he could help make the club competitive on the pitch again.

"The Zelarayan signing is a statement of intent and commitment in the team by the ownership," Bezbatchenko said at the time the move was completed. "To compete in this league, you need a well-rounded team, we know that. But as we've seen over the last five MLS Cups — I had the pleasure of participating in a few of them — you need Designated Players, TAM players and difference-makers on the field to win." Bezbatchenko had caught lightning in a bottle once with his pursuit of Giovinco and the way it worked out in Toronto, and he was hoping he could do it again with Zelarayan.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything for everyone and much like the rest of the globe, the league was halted in March for several months. When it did return for the MLS is Back tournament in July, the Crew were one of the most impressive teams in the group stage, winning all three of their games.

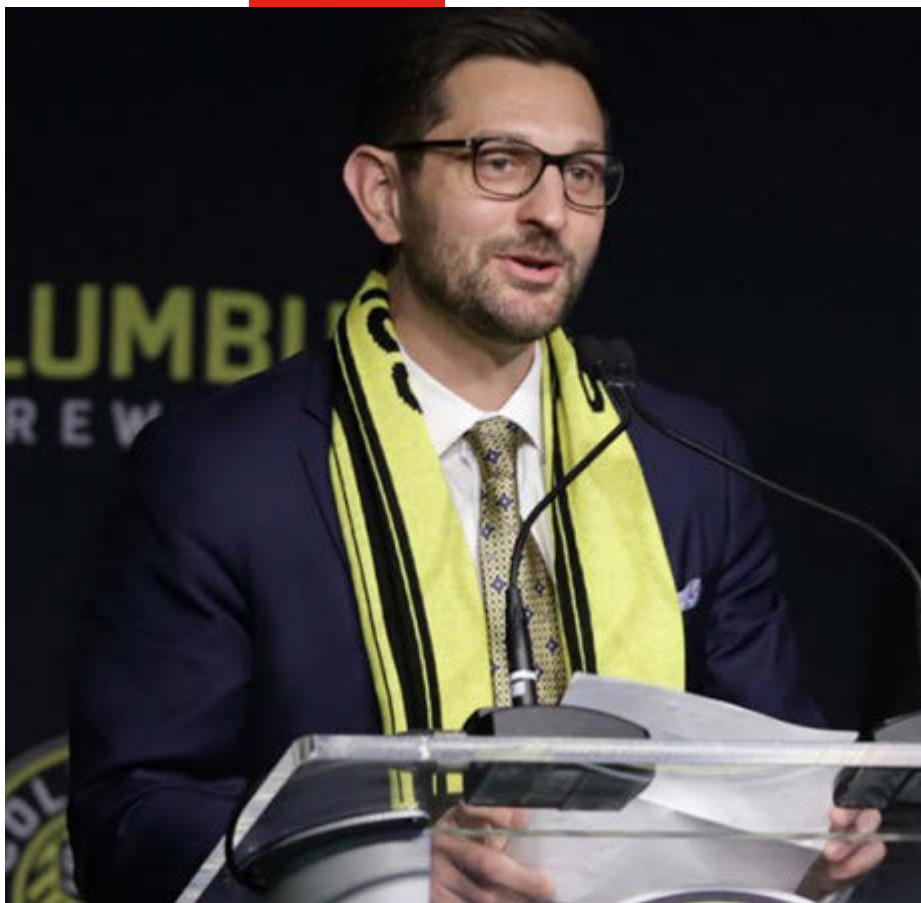
However, they failed to get it done when it mattered most in the competition and were eliminated by Minnesota United in the Round of 16 after a penalty shootout. After topping a group that included the New York Red Bulls and Atlanta United, the Crew were headed back home.

When the season did resume, Bezbatchenko



FINAL TABLE

TEAM	PTS
Philadelphia Union	47
Toronto FC	44
Columbus Crew	41
Orlando City	41
Sporting KC	39
Seattle Sounders	39
New York City FC	39
Portland Timbers	39
Minnesota United	34
FC Dallas	34
LAFc	32
NYRB	32
Nashville SC	32
New England	32
SJ Earthquakes	32
Colorado Rapids	28
Vancouver	27
Montreal Impact	26
Inter Miami CF	24
Chicago Fire	23
LA Galaxy	22
Real Salt Lake	22
Atlanta United	22
DC United	21
Houston Dynamo	21
FC Cincinnati	16



ABOVE LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): The Columbus Crew won just their second ever MLS Cup when they defeated the Seattle Sounders 3-0.

BOTTOM RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): After reaching the MLS Cup Final in three of the last four years, many were anticipating Toronto would make another deep playoff run, however, they received news of Greg Vanney's resignation.

TOP RIGHT: Columbus' president and general manager left Toronto FC for the Crew following the 2018 MLS campaign.

FAR RIGHT: Chicharito is the highest paid player in all of MLS, earning \$7.2m per season.

BELOW: The first ever soccer-specific stadium in MLS went out in style by hosting the MLS Cup Final in 2020.

found his side in a battle with his former club and the Philadelphia Union for the Supporters' Shield. Regardless of whether they had been victorious or not, the team had shown they had significant progress over the last several months going from a non-playoff team to a legitimate contender.

It would take all the way until the final match day, but the Union prevailed as Supporters' Shield winners, ending the shortened season with 47 points from 23 games. Toronto FC finished second with 44 points, while the Crew concluded the campaign in third with 41 points.

After reaching the MLS Cup Final in three of the last four years, many were anticipating Toronto would make another deep playoff run with superstar striker Jozy Altidore also returning to the squad from injury. It was not meant to be this time, though, as expansion side Nashville SC pulled off one of the biggest surprises in league history knocking out TFC in extra time. One of the league's most potent offences was silenced by a team that few had even realised even made the playoffs. Toronto weren't the only top team to be eliminated in the opening round, with the Union also being shocked by the New England Revolution. Bruce Arena's side had toppled Philadelphia 2-0 after losing 2-0 to the Union just two weeks prior in the last game of the regular season.

Unlike TFC or the Union, the Crew kept advancing after taking out the New York Red Bulls 3-2 in their first round match-up. Columbus then went on to eliminate both teams that had caused issues for Toronto and Philadelphia on their way to the MLS Cup Final. The Crew defeated Nashville in the Eastern Conference semi-final before picking up the 1-0 win against the Revolution in the Eastern Conference final.

Somehow, the Crew were not only in the MLS Cup Final but they were hosting it as a result of finishing the regular season with more points than their opponents - the Seattle Sounders. The Sounders presented the Crew with quite a daunting challenge. 2020 represented their fourth MLS Cup Final in five years, already winning one on the road in Toronto in 2016. Bezbatchenko knew the defending champions well as this was now the third time he would meet them in the MLS Cup final since 2016. While the Sounders entered the game as favourites according to the bookmakers, the game proved to be a blowout with Seattle struggling to keep up with the Crew on their

home field. Columbus had chance after chance and while Sounders goalkeeper Stefan Frei kept his team in the game for as long as he could, eventually the pressure was too much and Zelarayan found the back of the net in the 25th minute. He then set up teammate Derrick Etienne just a few minutes later with the second goal of the game in the 31st minute. Zelarayan eventually put the game away with another goal in the 82nd minute and just like that, the Crew were champions. They had humiliated the defending champions 3-0.

It was the fairy tale ending that the league's first ever soccer-specific ground - Mapfre Stadium - deserved. The Crew will be playing in a new downtown soccer-specific stadium come 2021 after calling Mapfre Stadium home since 1999. Though there were only a limited number of spectators in attendance due to COVID restrictions, the moment was truly a special one for the Crew and the league.

"We shared a great moment after the game, he said something that I'll never forget," Columbus head coach Caleb Porter said following the MLS Cup triumph when asked about Zelarayan. "He told me I changed his life and I told him he changed my life.

"I brought him here to win championships, he seemed to be looking for something new to stimulate him, reinvigorate him," Porter explained. "These guys are people - yeah they make money, yeah they've got to perform. But they're people and a lot of times I've seen this with guys, they're cut-throat, they sell their souls a little bit and they lose their way. And he came here and I think he looks like a new man, but he's an unbelievably special player." It was a fitting ending to what will surely go down as the most unpredictable season in MLS history.



MLS 2020: BY THE NUMBERS

MARCO D'ONOFRIO PICKS OUT SOME OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF THE 2020 MLS SEASON...

1 - The Seattle Sounders became the only team in history to reach the MLS Cup final four times in five seasons.

308 - Nashville went 308 minutes without conceding a goal during their first ever playoff run. The expansion team shut out both Inter Miami and Toronto FC before ultimately conceding to the Crew in the 99th minute of the Eastern Conference semi-final.

7.2M - The Los Angeles Galaxy's Javier Hernandez was the highest paid player in the league in 2020, earning \$7.2m.



5 - While LAFC's Diego Rossi had the most goals scored during the regular season with 14, it was Toronto FC's Alejandro Pozuelo who led the league in game-winning goals with five. More than half of Pozuelo's nine goals on the season were game winners.

0 - The amount of games left to be played at the venue that hosted the 2020 MLS Cup Final. The Columbus Crew will begin playing in a new stadium next season.

10 - Three players finished the campaign with 10 assists, the most in the league. Houston's Darwin Quintero, Toronto's Alejandro Pozuelo and Seattle's Nicolas Lodeiro. Six of Lodeiro's assists were game-winning assists, also the most in the league.

3 - Toronto FC had three of the five highest-paid players in the league this season with Michael Bradley, Jozy Altidore and Alejandro Pozuelo earning a combined \$16.63m for 2020.

47 - No team scored more goals than the 47 LAFC had put up in 21 regular season games. Unfortunately, they could only muster one in the playoffs.

19 - Columbus midfielder Aidan Morris became the youngest player ever to start in the MLS Cup Final when he started for the Crew. He was just 19 years and 27 days old.

**"THEY ALSO
REMAIN AS
UNPREDICTABLE
AS EVER,
ENSURING
INTEREST IN THE
LEAGUE UNTIL THE
VERY LAST GAME."**



ENTERTAINMENT FIRST

BY: MARCO D'ONOFRIO

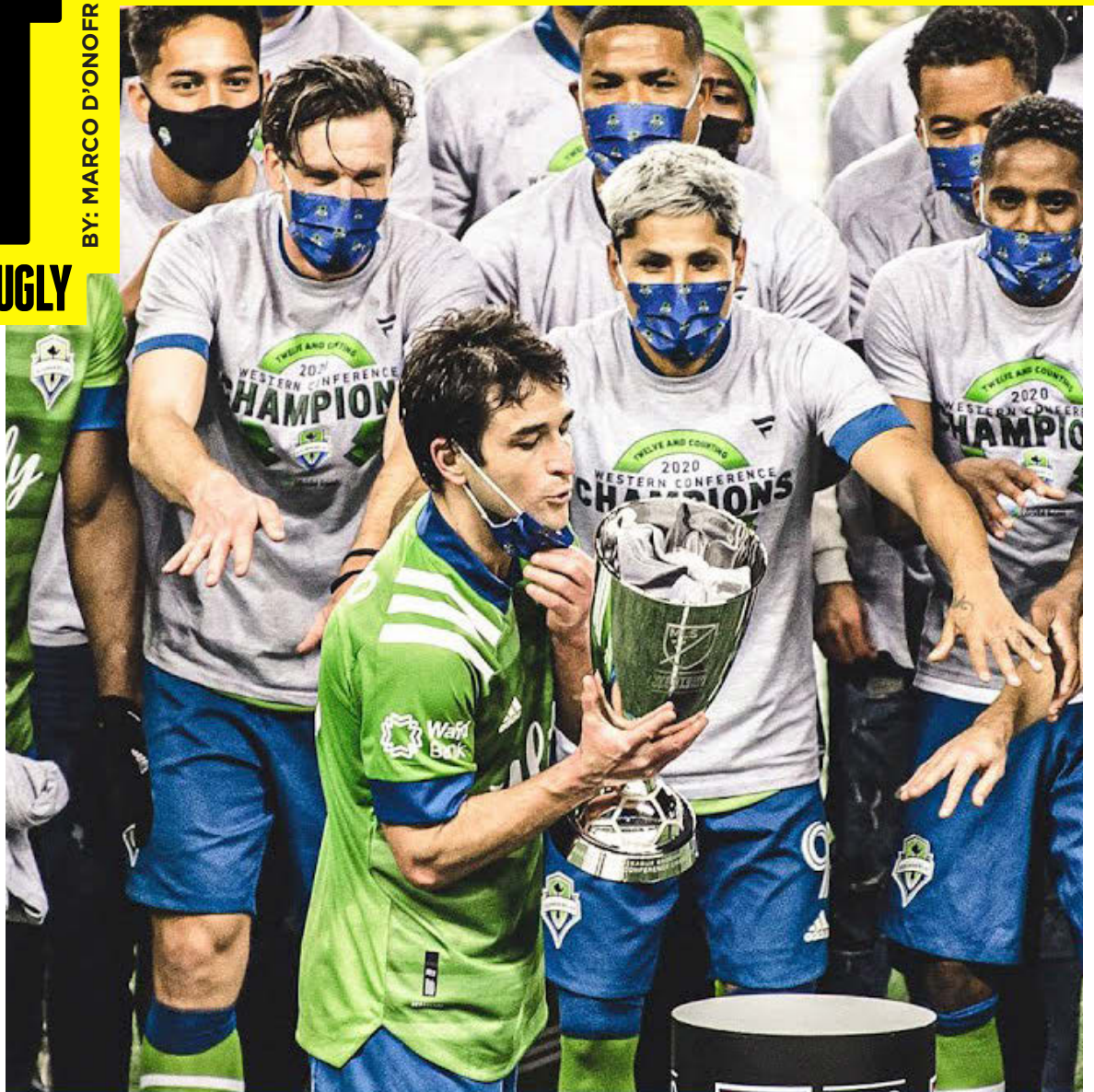
THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

THE GOOD

While many European football traditionalists are quick to criticize the MLS' playoff format, it has certainly provided some of the most entertaining games the league has ever seen. They also remain as unpredictable as ever, ensuring interest in the league until the very last game - the MLS Cup final.

With the league opting to go with a knockout format for the duration of the entire playoffs last season, we've already seen wild finishes that nobody could have seen coming. In 2020, the top two teams during the entire regular season were knocked out in the opening round. Last year's finalists Toronto FC were eliminated by expansion side Nashville SC, who were playing just their second ever postseason match. The Reds had participated in three of the last four MLS Cups coming into the campaign and most expected they'd get there again, especially after an impressive regular season. But it wasn't meant to be.

The Western Conference final showed just why the new playoff format is so great, with Minnesota United playing in the playoffs for just the second time in franchise history against a Seattle side that had been to the MLS Cup final in three of the past four years. With a 2-0 lead and just 23 minutes to play, Minnesota looked set to do the impossible when three goals from the Sounders within 17 minutes crushed their



dream. It was drama that could never have been scripted. "As a soccer fan, when I look back on this in 10 years - I mean, that was an unbelievable performance. I don't know how we did it. I'm just telling you, I don't know how we did it," said Sounders' head coach Brian Schmetzer following the game. While many believe teams should be rewarded more for their success during the regular season, the current playoff structure keeps fans invested in the product until the very end. Unlike many top European leagues where the winner is known for weeks or even months prior to the conclusion, MLS sides are always forced to strive for more competing until December.

THE BAD

While the MLS playoff format has provided for exciting matches on the pitch in which all fans can enjoy, actually finding the game you want to watch can often be confusing and tedious. Unlike the UEFA Champions League where games are set at certain times and days every match day, the MLS playoffs ran on various nights of the week or on weekends making it difficult for neutrals to know when games are being played. For die-hard fans, scheduling is never an issue with most supporters planning their entire lives around their favourite teams - especially come playoff time. But in the North American sporting landscape with the league competing against various other professional sports for eyeballs, MLS needs to make it as easy for viewers to find their product on television as possible. The wild Western Conference final between Seattle and Minnesota didn't kick off until nearly 10 pm ET on a Monday evening, meaning more than half of the continent wouldn't be tuning in solely based on the timing of the match. It was also competing against the juggernaut that is the National Football League's Monday Night Football with the Buffalo Bills taking on the San Francisco 49ers.

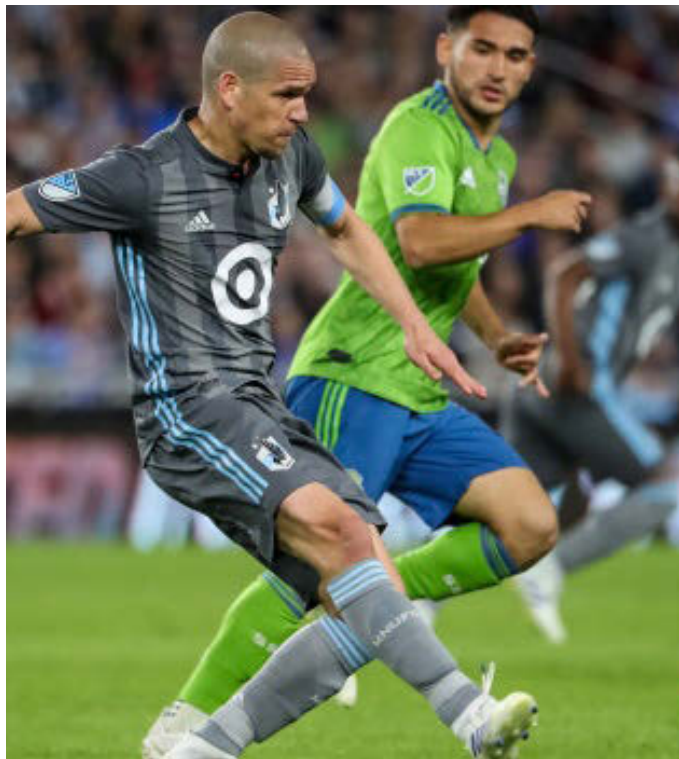
With international breaks and the cold weather, trying to create a cohesive and fair schedule for the postseason can be exhausting but certainly MLS could have done a better job than we saw during the playoffs in 2020. While MLS Cup being played on a Saturday evening at 8 pm ET is fantastic, the league needs to do a better job in generating buzz around their own games.

THE UGLY

The Supporters' Shield was not officially killed, but it may as well have been following the way it had been treated at the end of the 2020 regular season.

On October 17, the Supporters' Shield Foundation - the organization responsible for presenting the Shield - announced that they had decided not to award the Supporters' Shield this season, saying that 'the current climate goes against the spirit of the Shield.' The announcement had come with teams having just five games left to play in the regular season.

The decision did not sit well with the players nor the fans. "My players are p****d," former Toronto FC head coach Greg Vanney told TSN when the decision was announced. TFC were sitting atop of the standings and had been fighting to win the Shield for just the second time in franchise history. "It's a disgraceful decision that delegitimizes the whole idea of the Shield in our opinion. Those who made the decision are like kids in a park who take their ball away when the game isn't going their way." It was hard to disagree with Vanney when the decision came so late in the season. The negative backlash quickly had the Supporters' Shield Foundation reversing the controversial decision less than a week later. "You asked to be heard. In the end it was your input and votes that showed us this is the right choice," the foundation said in a statement on October 23. While ultimately the decision to award the Supporters' Shield was the right one, the confusion and chaos caused by the foundation was detrimental to the prestige of the Shield. The foundation could not get out of their own way and hurt the legitimacy of their



ABOVE (OPPOSITE PAGE): 2020 Champions Columbus Crew

BOTTOM (OPPOSITE PAGE): Seattle has been to 5 MLS Cup Finals in the last 6 years

ABOVE: Even before the 2020 playoffs, Seattle and Minnesota had a rivalry

RIGHT: Philadelphia Union celebrating their 2020 Supporters Shield win

TOP RIGHT: Minnesota FC players

BOTTOM RIGHT: Jozy Altidore

own prize. Teams who have been working hard all season to earn a trophy should not have the opportunity snatched away from them at the finish line. In the end, the Philadelphia Union claimed the Supporters' Shield and lifted the first trophy in franchise's history. It would have been a shame had they not been recognized for their stellar play throughout the regular season. The moment truly was a special one for the Union and their fans, which is what the Shield was created for in the first place.



GOING UP

After reaching the playoffs for the first time in franchise history in 2019, Minnesota United went on an extended run in 2020 making it all the way to the Western Conference final. Supporters have a lot to be excited for in 2021, with the team continuing to make progress towards the ultimate goal.



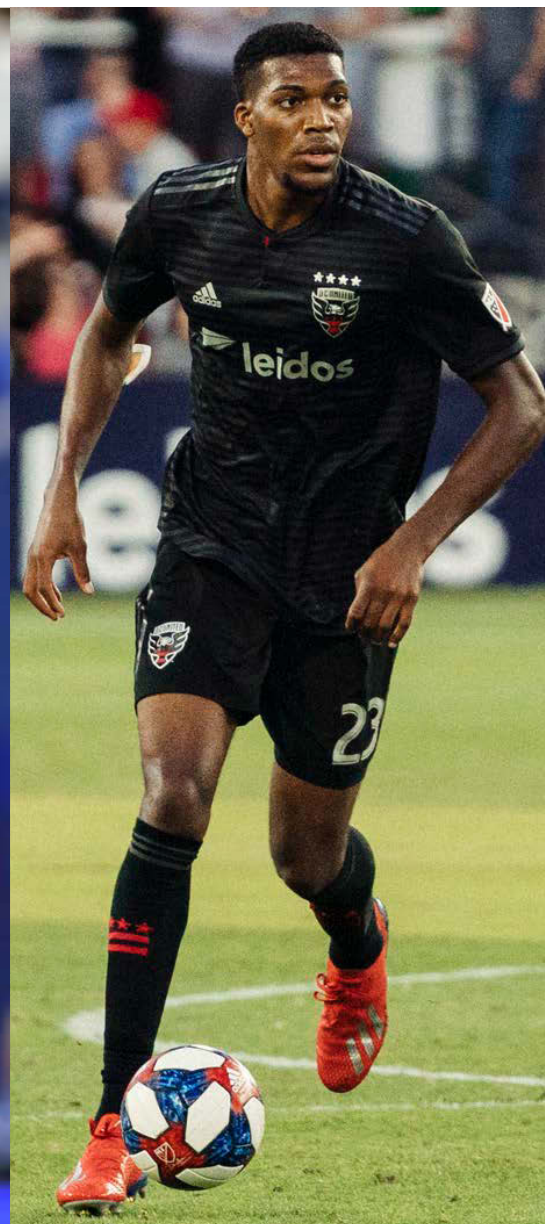
GOING DOWN

Jozy Altidore's contributions to Toronto's numerous accomplishments over the past several years is undeniable, but the Designated Player hasn't been there when the club needed him most the past two seasons. Due to various injuries, he hasn't been on the pitch as often as Toronto or he would like. 2021 will be a big year for Altidore to prove he can still be the player TFC need him to be.



MLS 2020 BEST XI

BY: JAMES NALTON



The end of Major League Soccer's regular season can be viewed as the start of the business end of the campaign — the MLS Cup Playoffs — but in terms of judging overall, consistent performance, the regular season is the most accurate measure. This is why the Supporters' Shield should be considered the most prestigious award in MLS, and also why the regular season comes into its own when using data to measure performance. The variables and variety of opposition allow players to show their quality over long periods and in different scenarios. That's not to discount the importance of the playoffs and the intrigue and entertainment they provide, but the end of the regular season feels like a good time to look at the standout performers in this unique year of league football. This particular XI will look at those who have set off alarms in the stats bunkers across the world of football — those who have excelled in certain areas of the game, posting good numbers in key metrics for their position. A lot of this comes down to what you want, or expect, from each position, and this will vary depending on the system being played, the tactics, and, especially in such a fragmented season, the opposition. An XI based on data could be seen as objective, but the prioritising of certain stats for certain positions, and choosing which data points are more useful than others, is in itself subjective. Nevertheless, it could still be an interesting exercise. One thing we're looking for from all players is a decent amount of minutes on the field — ie availability. It's no use being brilliant if you aren't available for selection. The main source used to compile this team, FBref, gives useful indications of availability, including minutes played, 90s played, and percentage of minutes played, all of which will provide a basis for these

selections. Much of this could be considered personal preference — part of what makes football the beautiful game — but few could argue that the best teams in the world during the past couple of years have been Liverpool and Bayern Munich. Their shape and systems, with four defenders, three midfielders, and three attackers, will provide a rough base for this idealistic MLS stats-based XI. With these teams in mind, and the pressing side of their game becoming an increasingly important part of modern football, the pressing data of attackers and midfielders has been taken into account here. Another issue to point out is that MLS is awash with creative attacking midfield talents, and it's always tempting to add as many as possible to a best XI, sacrificing balance along with any sense of realism. But a best XI shouldn't be a list of the league's most outstanding 11 players regardless of position, it should be a team that could operate effectively were these players assembled to play a game. As a result, there will be some good players who don't make the cut.

GOALKEEPER

It's always pleasing when the stats line up what we see on the pitch, and that is the case in the goalkeeping department. The two standout players in this position are Matt Turner of New England Revolution and Philadelphia Union's Andre Blake. Their post-shot expected goals (PSxG) minus goals allowed, both totals and per 90, stand up. The higher the number in this stat, the more often the player saves difficult shots or the more luck they have. Luck will only take you so far, however, and with the pair having played 24 and 22 matches respectively this season, it's more good shot-stopping than good luck. Goalkeeping isn't just about shot-stopping,



and neither player is quite active enough to be considered a sweeper-keeper, but Turner does have the most throws attempted in the league with 114 and an average throw-length of 40 yards, which suggests he would be good at launching counter-attacks. He also has the second-most actions outside the penalty area in the league behind Toronto FC's Quentin Westberg. Few would argue against the selection of Turner or Blake in any 2020 MLS team of the year. Blake was hugely important to Philadelphia Union's Supporters' Shield win, and the stats show they might not have won it without him, but judging from the data alone, Turner is the standout player.

**MATT TURNER - GK -
NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION**
PSxG +/-: +8.2 (1st)
PSxG +/- per 90: +0.37 (1st)
Save %: 75
Throws: 114 (1st)

FULL-BACKS

One of the key positions in modern football, so any best XI needs to include them. Different systems can require different things of full-backs, but the best modern-day players in this position are attacking, direct and/or creative players with enough pace to hurry back into the defensive line when needed. These traits are epitomised by the likes of Liverpool right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold, or former Vancouver Whitecaps winger Alphonso Davies, now an outstanding left-back with Bayern Munich. With this in mind, we looked at a number of stats, but focused on creativity, dribbling, and expected assists (xA) of MLS full-backs. There is no public data available on speed, which hampers us slightly, though if the player is both a good dribbler and a regular creator, they

AMAZING POZUELO

MARCO D'ONOFRIO REFLECTS BACK ON AN INCREDIBLE SEASON FOR 2020 LONDON DONOVAN MLS MVP ALEJANDRO POZUELO...

It was one of the most bizarre seasons in Major League Soccer history, with the COVID-19 pandemic throwing a wrench into everyone's plans. Yet despite all the challenges and difficulties 2020 threw his way, Alejandro Pozuelo still managed to have a remarkable season, picking up the Landon Donovan MLS MVP award for his efforts.

"I still don't believe I've won the award. I've very proud," he said on a virtual press call after being named MVP. "Maybe tomorrow when I see everybody on Instagram or in the press, I can believe more. But now? I still can't believe it."

While Toronto FC were ultimately a disappointment when it mattered most, the Reds were in the thick of a Supporters' Shield race for the duration of the regular season thanks in large part to Pozuelo's brilliance.



The Spaniard had more points [awarded for combined goals and assists] than any other player in the league, with nine goals and 10 assists. Of his nine goals, five were match-winners, as he often came through in the biggest of moments for his club. The attacking midfielder becomes just the second player in team history to claim the award, with Sebastian Giovinco also being named MLS MVP in 2015. Fans were sceptical that he would be able to fill the void left by the Atomic Ant when he left for Saudi Arabia in 2019, but nobody is doubting him anymore.

"I know before me I came to replace Giovinco, everybody spoke about this," Pozuelo said. "I believe in myself, I know I can play good but I feel like I've played four or five years at a very good level. Next year I'll try to do the same."



are unlikely to be slow. You probably don't need to look at the stats to choose Anton Tinnerholm at right-back, but those creative stats back us up for good measure (the dribbling ones not so much).

Aaron Herrera of Real Salt Lake is the best dribbling full-back in the league, averaging 2.76 take-ons per 90 minutes, completing a very impressive 82% of them, but plays on the same side as Tinnerholm.

Tinnerholm's teammate Ronald Matarrita also bothers the expected assists column on the other side of the pitch, but Vancouver Whitecaps' Ali Adnan does similar while also offering some dribbling numbers as well as a good aerial duel win percentage as a bonus, so gets the nod.

ANTON TINNERHOLM - RB - NEW YORK CITY

XA: 4.1 (1st among defenders)

ASSISTS: 4

GOALS: 4

SHOTS ASSISTED: 39 (1st among defenders)

ALI ADNAN - LB - VANCOUVER WHITECAPS

XA: 3.5 (3rd among defenders)

ASSISTS: 5

TAKE-ONS: 49 (63% success)

AERIAL DUELS WON: 74%

BLOCKS: 52 (2nd in MLS)

CENTRAL DEFENDERS

Availability, aerial success, passing ability, positioning, and composure are the priorities here, but the latter two elements can be difficult to measure statistically.

It would also be a bonus to have a right-footer on the right and a left-footer on the left, and it would be good to have at least one player with good recovery speed.

It should be easy for a central defender comfortable on the ball to approach 90% pass accuracy, regardless of the types of passes they attempt.

Maxime Chanot of New York City FC does a lot of aerial duelling and is very effective, winning an impressive 73% of his duels. He is also a decent enough passer, but given a lack of recovery speed and the occasional error, he would need someone reasonably quick alongside him.

Columbus Crew's Jonathan Mensah has been one of the best players in the league this season and fares well in the air and on the ground. Mark McKenzie has been excellent on the left side of defence for Philadelphia Union, while Walker Zimmerman has impressed for expansion side Nashville SC.

But DC United's Donovan Pines offers great aerial ability in both boxes and is also a regular passer with both feet, allowing him to slot into the left centre-back berth with ease. Despite his 6-foot-5 frame, he also has good recovery speed, fitting the bill alongside

ABOVE LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Matt Turner

ABOVE RIGHT (OPPOSITE PAGE): Donovan Pines

BOTTOM (OPPOSITE PAGE): Anton Tinnerholm

ABOVE: Ali Adnan

BOTTOM RIGHT: Maxime Chanot

FAR RIGHT: Alejandro Pozuelo

Chanot, and though he is the player in our XI with the lowest percentage of his team's minutes played this season (65%), he has been available for much of the season even if not selected, and racked up a respectable 1,354 minutes.

We could have gone more down the possession and passing route with these selections, but instead have gone for a combination of right/left balance, aerial presence, and pace, while still having a good enough passing ability to get the ball forward.

MAXIME CHANOT - RCB - NEW YORK CITY

AERIAL DUELS WON: 78 (1st among CBs)

AERIALS WON PERCENTAGE: 73%

PASS SUCCESS: 87%

TACKLE SUCCESS: 61%

DONOVAN PINES - LCB - DC UNITED

AERIAL DUELS WON: 61

AERIALS WON PERCENTAGE: 73%

AMBIPEDALITY % R-L (PASSING): 66-44

GOALS: 3



DEFENSIVE MIDFIELD

One of the most important positions on the pitch and one which can also provide an indication of how a team want to play. Do they use a double pivot or a lone defensive midfielder? Are they a playmaker, a destroyer, or all-round presence?

For this team, we looked for a dynamic player who wins the ball a lot but is also able to keep it themselves and recycle possession for their team. Being an aerial presence would be a bonus.

Thiago Santos of FC Dallas is impressive aerially, but not enough in the other areas, while Diego Chara of Portland Timbers and Chicago Fire's Álvaro Medrán rank well for progressive passing, but don't quite tike all the other boxes, at least not statistically.

Nashville SC's Anibal Godoy ranks well for a number of our metrics and wins a good percentage of his aerial duels even if he's not involved in lots.

San Jose Earthquakes midfielder Judson seems to tick the boxes most emphatically. He played a big part in his side's revival towards the end of the season and their subsequent playoff qualification.

He's a regular ball-winner, partly due to San Jose's aggressive, pro-active style of defending, but on the flip side, this man-to-man marking also means he is often dribbled past. In our side, Judson's defending will be more zonal, providing insurance behind an advanced full-back or midfield ahead of the centre-backs. His recovery speed will be important, and he has a pass success of 89%.

JUDSON - DM -**SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES**

MIDDLE 3RD PRESSURES: 291 (1st in MLS)

DEFENSIVE 3RD PRESSURES: 267 (1st in MLS)

SUCCESSFUL PRESSURES: 186 (1st in MLS)

PASS SUCCESS: 89%

LONG PASS SUCCESS: 86%

CENTRAL MIDFIELDERS

In the middle of the park, we want a good balance of work rate, ball retention, pressing, and creativity. One of these can be a No. 8, supporting Judson when needed but also breaking to the opposition box. The other can have more licence to roam as a more direct and creative presence behind the forwards. When looking at pressing data we will look at the total numbers for pressures in the final and middle thirds. A high number in this area is also an indication of a players' endurance and tenacity so we will use totals rather than the per 90 option.

As shown above, the midfielder with the most pressures in the middle third just so happens to be Judson, so another tick in the box for him. The next in line is a more attack-minded central midfielder — Brenden Aaronson, with his Philadelphia Union team-mate Jamiro Monteiro just behind. Incidentally, if we wanted a direct dribbler in midfield, Monteiro would be the man for that.

20-year-old American Aaronson is heading to Jesse Marsch's RB Salzburg in January, and his pressing stats — he also leads the way among midfielders for pressing in the final third — show why the Austrian club's scouts were alerted to his talents. The pressing of Aaronson and Judson combined in this team would be something to behold.

Aaronson has seven assists and four goals this season, so he's not just a potential star, he already is one in MLS, and will soon be one in Europe.

Moving slightly further forward in our midfield formation, you would hope the more attacking midfielder picks itself and, thankfully, the stats agree that Alejandro Pozuelo is the best player in the league.

He ranks highest for expected assists, as well



as being the joint leader for actual assists alongside Darwin Quintero and Nicolás Lodeiro on 10. Pozuelo also leads the league for passes into the penalty area, with 82, ahead of Lodeiro's 61.

Lodeiro ranks much higher than Pozuelo when it comes to pressing, and that would fit well with what we're trying to build here, but it's impossible to leave the Spaniard's creativity out of this side, and his nine goals to go with those assists make him the most productive player in the league.

Sometimes you just need someone to pick a lock or produce something from nothing, and Pozuelo is the man for the job.

BRENDEN AARONSON - CM - PHILADELPHIA UNION

FINAL 3RD PRESSURES: 173 (2nd in MLS)

MIDDLE 3RD PRESSURES: 268 (2nd in MLS)

ASSISTS: 7

GOALS: 4

ALEJANDRO POZUELO - AM - TORONTO FC

ASSISTS: 10 (1st in MLS)

GOALS: 9

GOAL CONTRIBUTIONS: 19 (1st)

XA: 8.1 (1st)

PASSES INTO PENALTY AREA: 82 (1st)

SHOT ASSISTS: 66 (1st)

CARRIES: 1378 (1st)

CARRIES (DISTANCE): 8055 yards (1st)

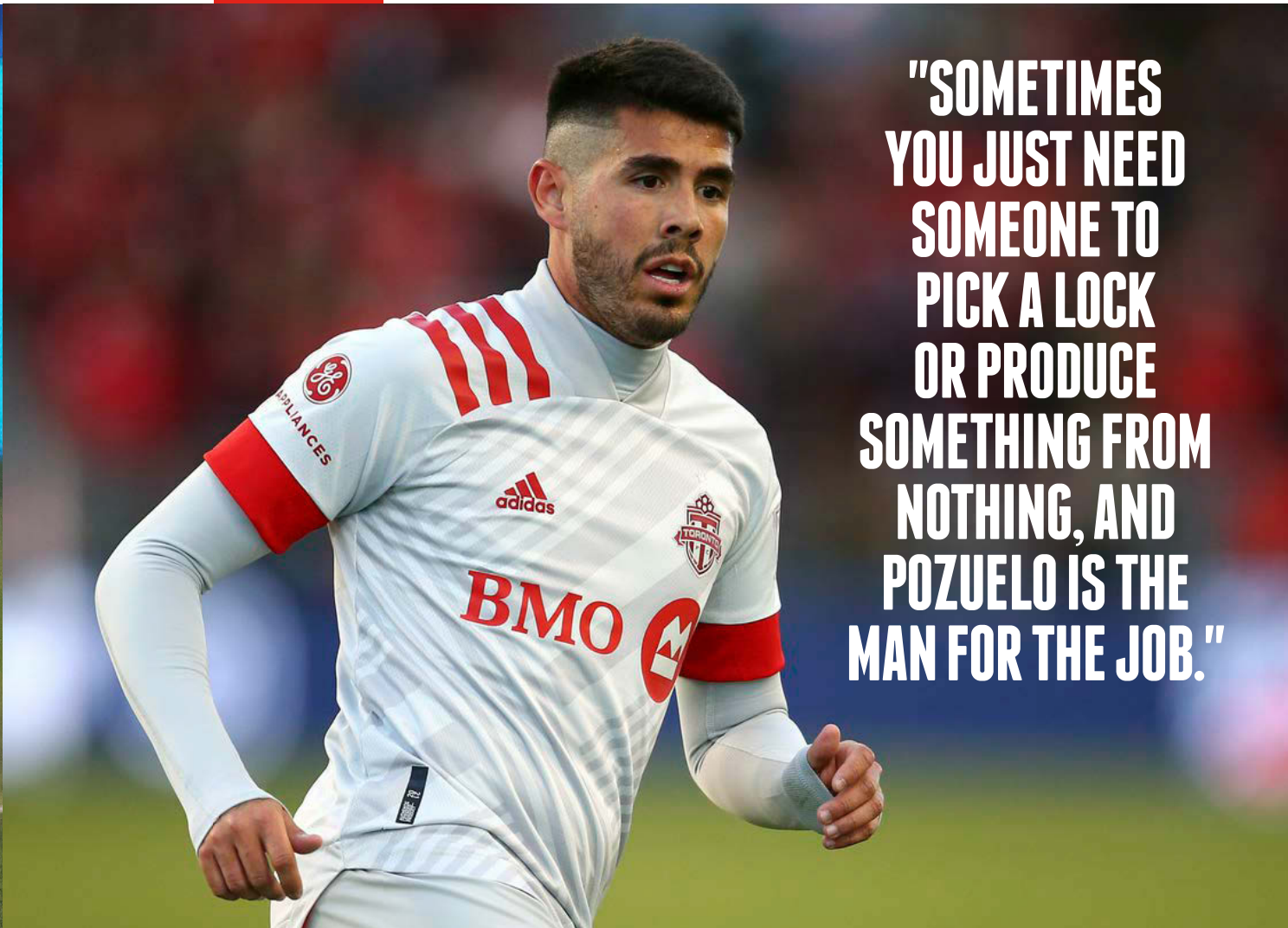
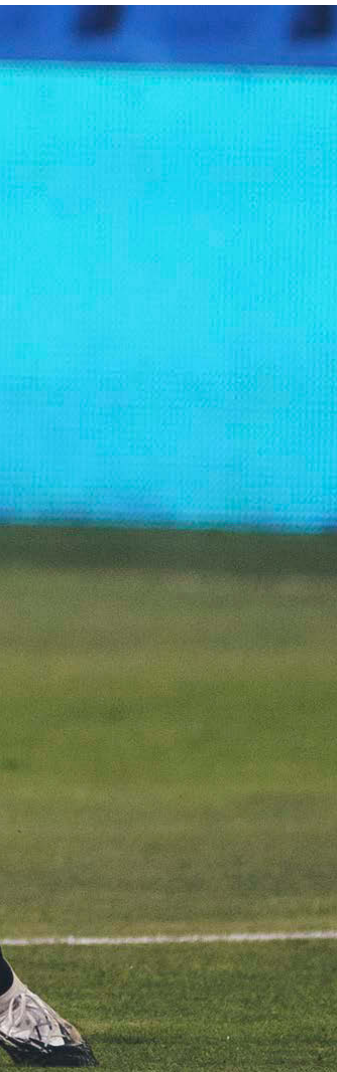
NUTMEGS: 6 (2nd)

WINGERS

Pressing, dribbling, creativity, and raw output in terms of goals and assists are the order of the day when it comes to our wide players. One of the standout dribblers in the league is Colorado Rapids' Younes Namli, who has played a good number of games when taking into account that the Rapids missed much of October due to positive Covid tests within their ranks.

He has a take-on success of 71%, winning 51 of the 72 he attempted. We lack a bit of dribbling down the right, with Tinnerholm more of a midfielder at right-back than a winger, so the





"SOMETIMES YOU JUST NEED SOMEONE TO PICK A LOCK OR PRODUCE SOMETHING FROM NOTHING, AND POZUELO IS THE MAN FOR THE JOB."

two should complement each other well. For sheer volume combined with success, the Dane makes the team and will be dangerous in our XI cutting in from the right onto his stronger left foot.

When it comes to combined goals and assists totals, Seattle Sounders Jordan Morris is second only to Pozuelo's 19, with 10 goals and eight assists, putting him level with Diego Rossi of LAFC.

Jordan Morris season heatmap 2020. Image: Sofascore.

Rossi is the league's leading scorer, playing mostly from the left, and it's difficult to leave the Uruguayan out of our forward line. He's stepped into Carlos Vela's place as the star of LAFC, and even though they haven't been able to repeat their record-breaking 2019 season, the Uruguayan has still stood out. But he doesn't quite make the cut for our team.

Neither Rossi nor Morris are prolific dribblers, but Morris is very good at picking his moments, winning 25 of his 32 attempted take-ons, giving him an impressive 78% success rate. We already have our left-back, Adnan, dribbling down the left, so as is the case with Tinnerholm and Namli on the right, this pair should offer good balance.

Morris's pressing data isn't the best, but Seattle are 16th in the league for pressures in the final third, suggesting it's not something he's being asked to do, while Namli is the best presser on another side not known for this side of their game.

YOUNES NAMLI - RW - COLORADO RAPIDS
SUCCESSFUL TAKE-ONS: 71 (4th in MLS)
TAKE-ON SUCCESS: 71%

JORDAN MORRIS - LW - SEATTLE SOUNDERS
GOALS: 10
ASSISTS: 8
NPXG: 9.2 (2nd in MLS)
TAKE-ON SUCCESS: 78%

ABOVE LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE):
 San Jose's Defensive Midfielder Judson

BOTTOM (OPPOSITE PAGE):
 Brenden Aaronson

ABOVE:
 Alejandro Pozuelo

BOTTOM RIGHT:
 Younes Namli

STRIKER

The most active individual final-third presser in MLS is Chicago Fire's Robert Berić. This on its own wouldn't be enough to get in our team, but the Slovenian is also joint-second in the goalscoring charts with 12.

Not too shabby when playing for a team sitting 22nd in the overall standings, and the ideal player to lead the line in this team. A goalscorer and a presser.

STRIKER - ROBERT BERIĆ - CHICAGO FIRE
GOALS: 12 (2nd in MLS)
FINAL 3RD PRESSURES: 186 (1st)

SOCCER 360'S 2020 TEAM

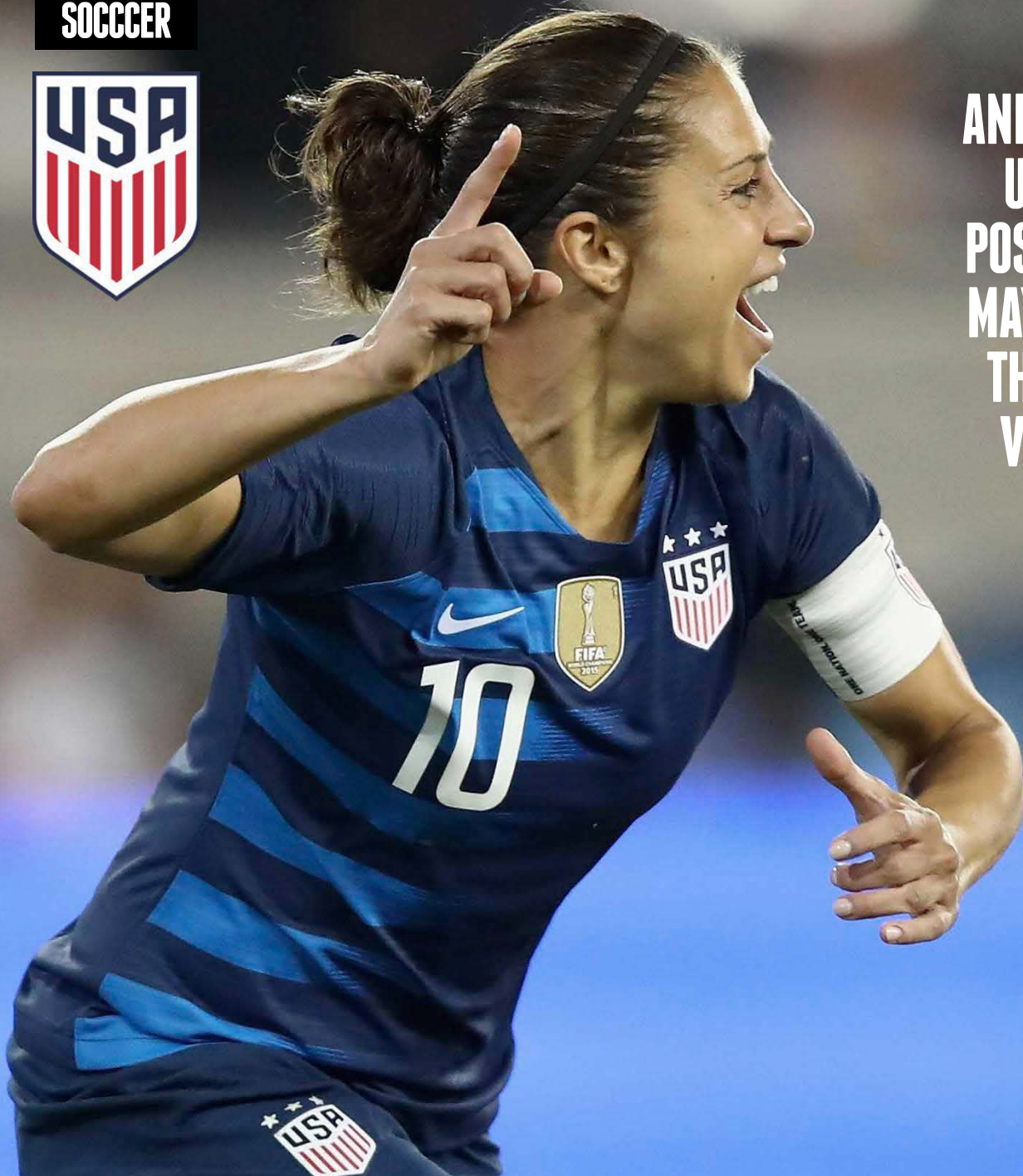
GK: Andre Blake - Philadelphia Union

RB: Anton Tinnerholm - NYC
CB: Jonathan Mensah - Columbus Crew
CB: Mark McKenzie - Philadelphia Union
LB: Ryan Hollingshead - FC Dallas

DM: Diego Chara - Portland Timbers
CM: Jamiro Monteiro - Philadelphia Union
CM: Alejandro Pozuelo - Toronto FC

RW: Lewis Morgan - Inter Miami
LW: Diego Rossi - LAFC
CF: Robert Berić - Chicago Fire





ANDONOVSKI SEEMS TO UNDERSTAND THAT POST-OLYMPICS THERE MAY BE A CHANGING OF THE GUARD WITH HIS VETERAN PLAYERS.



RESET 2021

BY: SEAN MASLIN

20

The Age of Sophia Smith, when she made her first appearance for the US against the Netherlands. Born August 10, 2000 she became the first player ever born in the 2000s to play for the senior National Team

170

The number of caps that Alex Morgan has with the US. She received her first cap in March 2010 in a friendly against Mexico.

After eight long months, the United States Women's National Team was back. When the USWNT took the pitch in Breda it marked the first time since their 3-1 win against Japan on March 17th that the side had actually played a game together. For a team that through the years had grown together primarily because international football was the only game in town that is certainly a marked change from the norm. The good news is that business will certainly be picking up for the USWNT come 2021. With the Olympics still slated to go on in Tokyo and the potential for a changing of a guard there are more than a few interesting storylines to follow in 2021. Here are just a few to keep an eye on:

TWO ROSTERS?

Much like all other facets of life, COVID-19 will undoubtedly have an impact on how the USWNT plays and trains in 2021. 2020 already showed how things may look in the interim with head coach Vlatko Andonovski setting up a training camp in October for players based in the United States and the November friendly largely consisting of players based in Europe. With travel being restricted between Europe and the United States right now, asking players to quarantine for friendlies and training at the expense of their club's might not be equitable. While the National Women's Soccer League in the United States may be willing to release its players for international duty clubs such as Manchester City and Manchester United may



32 Woo Hoo!

With their 2-0 win over the Netherlands in November the USWNT extend their unbeaten run of play to 32 matches! In those 32 matches they have outscored their opponents by two or more goals an astonishing 28 times.



ABOVE LEFT
(OPPOSITE PAGE):
Carli Lloyd

ABOVE:
Alex Morgan and her
version of the art
posters the USWNT
used to display their
players

BELOW LEFT:
New USWNT face
Alana Cook

BELOW RIGHT:
New USWNT face
Jaelin Howell

be more reluctant, especially if international matches fall outside of the international window dates.

So Andonovski will at least in the interim need to continue with a 'two team' model which has been employed in men's soccer through the years but has never really been used in the international game. There is a little more flexibility within women's soccer than the men's game which should create some overlap between the two sides. But it isn't going to be perfect and for a side that has through the years been pretty consistent it will be a challenge that they need to overcome.



NEW FACES

When the initial roster was released for the Netherlands friendly what was interesting to see was how many new faces on the roster. The team featured eight players with less than ten caps and nine players that were 25 and under. Players such as Sophia Smith, the 20 year old forward from the Portland Thorns, Jaelin Howell of the Florida State Seminoles and Alan Cook of Paris Saint Germain each played critical roles in the 2-0 win over the Dutch. They aren't the only players turning heads. Catarino Macario (Stanford), Brianna Pinto (University of North Carolina), Margaret Purce (Sky Blue FC), and Ashley Hatch (Washington Spirit) have also impressed this fall and will be looking for bigger spots within the USWNT going forward.

There are two reasons for why 2021 may see more new faces than previous years for the USWNT. First, as mentioned before, travel restrictions will play a huge role in Andonovski's ability to call in certain players. Players such as Howell, who is still in college, or Cook, who plays in Europe, may get additional call-ups if they have the flexibility to do so. The same can be said for players who play in the NWSL for USWNT friendlies based in the United States. Second, Andonovski seems to understand that post-Olympics there may be a changing of the guard with his veteran players. Players like Carli Lloyd (age: 38), Megan Rapinoe (35), Ali Krieger (36), Alex Morgan (31) and Becky Sauerbrunn (35) are all edging closer to retirement and may want to leave the USWNT on top with a Gold Medal. They have certainly earned it and through the years Andonovski has



RIGHT: The USWNT look to repeat glory

BELOW MIDDLE: Kristie Mewis

BOTTOM RIGHT: 2021 may be the last year we see Rapinoe and Lloyd in the US colors but it should be an exciting ride.

170

The number of caps that Alex Morgan has with the US. She received her first cap in March 2010 in a friendly against Mexico.

41

The minute that Rose LaVelle scored for the US against the Netherlands in November. It was their first goals since Lindsay Horan's strike against Japan in the SheBelieves Cup finale back in March.

8

The number of shut-outs by the US in 2020. They allowed just one goal last year which came from Mana Iwabuchi of Japan in the SheBelieves Cup.

proven himself to be a player's coach. Through the years the USWNT have hit rough patches when veteran players were exiting and the new generation were taking over. This group does seem different though and Andonovski has done an excellent job at blending the two groups together rather than forcing change. That should help in the months to come and hopefully make for a strong side come Tokyo.

RAPINOE AND LLOYD

While this may be a younger team, make no mistake about it: this is still Megan Rapinoe and Carli Lloyd's team. The duo have formed the backbone of the USWNT for the past 15 years and lead the club not just on the pitch but also off of it as well. While Morgan, Sauerbrunn, and Krieger have also been integral to the success of the National Team over that time frame (along with many others as well) Rapinoe and Lloyd are the two main driving factors. The question is now: Where do they go from here with the side? The main motivating factor for both seems to be winning Olympic Gold in Tokyo. Their still seems to be a bad taste in how things finished in Brazil 2016 and that seems to motivate to continue to move forward and do what they can to push the next generation to continue their dominance. 2021 may be the last year we see Rapinoe and Lloyd in the US colors but it should be an exciting ride.

THE SUMMER OLYMPICS

When it comes to women's soccer there are two major tournaments: the World Cup and the Summer Olympics. With the USWNT having won four in the past they are undoubtedly the favorites to get top honors. The competition though will be stiff. Australia, Brazil, Canada, Netherlands, and Sweden have all already qualified along with the hosts Japan. So has Great Britain, which will be represented by England having secured the spot by being the highest ranked side of the four Home Nations. Given that the Olympics are a smaller competition than the World Cup and there are less minnows in the Group Stages that will make for a much bigger challenge for the USWNT to overcome. All of these sides are

KRISTIE MEWIS IS BACK!

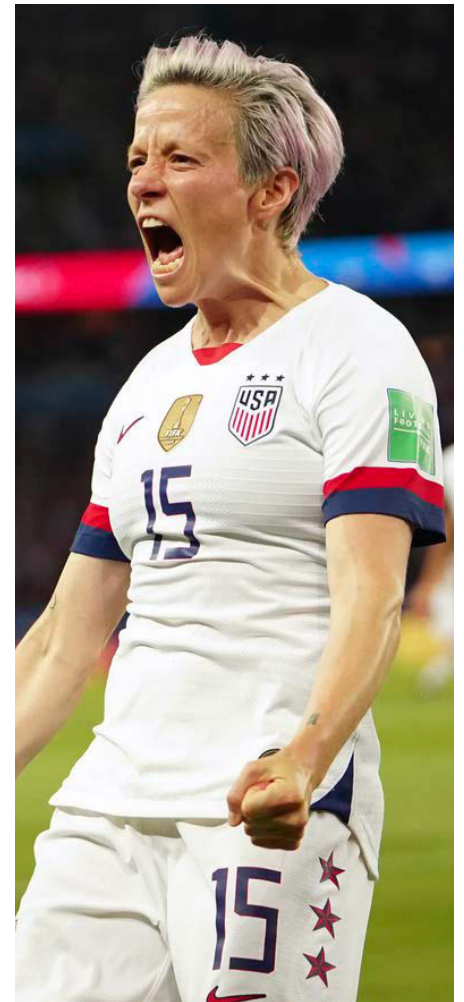
With her substitution in the 61st minute against the Netherlands ended a 2,454 day stretch between caps for the USWNT. It is the second longest gap between appearances just 12 days behind Keri Raygor's mark of 2,466.



DOCTOR DEFENDER

Former USWNT defender Rachel Buehler Van Hollebeke is used to holding the line against difficult opponents. But now as a Doctor she is dealing with the most difficult opponent yet: COVID-19. The two-time Olympic Gold Medalist is now a family medicine resident at a hospital in San Diego battling the virus on the frontlines! Keep up the excellent work, Rachel!

looking to overtake the United States in the global pecking order and may sense a chance in Tokyo. The key for Andonovski's side is to avoid a slow start. At the 2016 games, the USWNT struggled through the group stages, barely defeating New Zealand and France while tying Colombia. That put them against their old rivals in Sweden who beat a disorganized USWNT in penalties. In a tougher tournament they cannot start slow out of the gate. Otherwise, they may find themselves leaving early.



SUPER WOMEN



Despite all of the obstacles thrown their way, women's European club football is stronger than ever. After a tough spring season which saw play shut down due to COVID the European women's club teams have rebounded with a strong summer and an even better fall. With the UEFA Champions League kicking into high gear in December the European sides are looking to finally break through and show the world what they can do. At least initially, it looked as if the league that would benefit most from this extra attention would be England and the FA Women's Super League. After an offseason which saw the likes of Rose LaVelle (Manchester City), Samantha Mewis (Manchester City), Alex Morgan (Tottenham Hotspur), Christen Press (Manchester United), and Tobin Heath (Manchester United) join their league FAWSL drew much bigger attention and more exposure than the league has seen since starting in 2011.

While the Americans have drawn the attention of the world and certainly produced in their own right (as of December 4 Press and Heath's Manchester United sit at the top of the table on 17 points) it is the league's mainstays that have taken the additional exposure and run with it. Nowhere is that more apparent than at Arsenal where Vivianne Miedema (10 goals), Jill Roord (6 goals), and Caitlin Foord (4 goals) have torn up the competition's defenses showing an attacking flair that would make the late Johan Cruyff smile. In their first encounter this season United held off the Gunner attack thanks in part to some tremendous defending from defender/English international Amy Turner and an acrobatic effort put in by goalkeeper Mary Earps. The two sides will meet again on March 18 which will certainly have league ramifications on the line.

Also hot on United's heels are Chelsea, who have already held Manchester United to a 1-1 draw in league play. The Blues have allowed just three goals this year thanks in part to lockdown defending from captain Magdalena Eriksson and Millie Bright. On the attacking end, their campaign for the top of the table will receive a boost with a healthy Sam Kerr back. The Australian international has battled leg injuries throughout her time at Stamford Bridge but seems to finally be fully healthy and ready for a deep run in both league and cup play.

But FAWSL is not the only league where the competition is close and pulling in new fans. In France, Paris St. Germain and Lyon are once again doing battle at the top of the table with the two sides separated by just a point entering into December. The two sides have already once this year with PSG pulling off a 1-0 nail biter at the Parc des Princes. Marie Antoinette-Katoto, as she has done all season, proved to be the difference for PSG scoring the go-ahead goal in the tenth minute. The young French international has already scored 77 goals in 82 matches in her PSG career and should be a major player come Champions League time.

As for Lyon, their lone loss against PSG does little to spoil what has been an exemplary season thus far (it also helps that PSG drew 0-0 against Bordeaux to keep things close). Forward Ada Hegerberg, the 2018 FIFA Women's Player of the Year, is once again lighting up the league with goals having already scored 14 through 8 matches. On the defensive end, captain Wendi Renard, Ellie Carpenter, and Canadian international Kadeisha Buchanan have held opponents to



just three goals. While they are neck-and-neck with PSG for top honors in France history is on their side. Les Lyonnaises have won the last two Division 1 Feminines and have won the top division 14 times.

Things are also rather tight at the top of the table in the Frauen-Bundesliga with Bayern Munich leading the pack. The side has not won the German top division since 2015-2016 but stand in first thanks to goalkeeper Laura Benkarth, who has allowed just one goal in nine matches. On the attacking side, Sydney Lohmann leads the side with six. But in terms of goalscoring prowess Laura Clearance of Eintracht Frankfurt leads the pack with ten. The 22-year-old German international is part of a new generation of German strikers and is primed to turn a strong run for Frankfurt into more appearances for The National Eleven.

ABOVE:
Sam Mewis and Rose Lavelle

BOTTOM LEFT:
Marie Antoinette-Katoto

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Laura Benkarth

Also, keep an eye on Zsanett Jakabfi of VfL Wolfsburg who has six goals already this season for the number two team in the table. The Hungarian international has already won three Bundesliga titles for Wolfsburg and will be looking to add a fourth this season.

Outside of the major three leagues FC Barcelona and Juventus are the two major players to keep an eye on as Champions League play kicks off. Both sides have made major strides in recent years at catching up to the power three leagues and have developed their own unique styles of play. Midfielder Alexia Putellas of Barcelona and defender Sara Gama have each had terrific for their club sides in league play and will be looking to continue their strong form in Champions League competition.





2021 TOP 10 WISH LIST

2020 HAS BEEN A YEAR WHICH MOST OF US WILL BE GLAD TO SEE THE BACK OF. AT THE DAWNING OF 2021, OLI COATES OUTLINES SOME OF THE THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE TO MAKE THE BEAUTIFUL GAME EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN EVER.



1. REAL, TANGIBLE CHANGE

Barely a week seems to go by without another issue of racism, prejudice or perceived shortages of education. From black players regularly receiving racist abuse from the stands and on social media to Millwall fans booing their team taking the knee, and the controversy in the Champions League fixture between Istanbul Basaksehir and Paris Saint-Germain, it's sickening to see these kinds of things in 2020. We hope for real, significant change in 2021. It has to start with authorities like UEFA and FIFA getting tougher with sanctions, but education and inclusion of minorities at club board level and players' unions are also necessary.



2. FULL STADIUMS

Talk about not knowing what you've got 'til it's gone. For many football fans around the world, being starved of seeing our teams live has been like missing a limb. Even watching games on TV feels hollow and empty, either with the canned crowd noise or eerie silence punctuated by shouts from players, managers and coaches. While amateur players will have been pleased to hear the pros using the same fond shouts as them, such as 'away' and 'get out', stadiums getting back to full capacity and bouncing under the weight of supporters cannot come soon enough. As former Manchester United manager Sir Matt Busby said, "football is nothing without fans." Full stadiums are a paradise which we hope will never be paved with parking lots ever again.



3. THE HANDBALL FARCE SORTED OUT

Whatever happened to the concept of hand-to-ball and ball-to-hand? VAR should make spotting obvious handballs far easier, but it's just made it worse. Almost any touch of the ball with the arm is now a penalty, allowing players to effectively hit and hope for the best





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when in or around the box. That's not what the handball rule or indeed the game should be about. It simply has to change, and fast. It's almost as if some of the referees, officials and administrators making up the laws and implementing VAR have never even played the game...

4. THE OFFSIDE FARGE SORTED OUT

For many, the straw that broke the camel's back was seeing Patrick Bamford's goal against Crystal Palace in the Premier League ruled out for offside. The Leeds United striker's whole body is onside apart from an outstretched arm, with the goal ruled out because Bamford points to where he wants the ball playing. This sleeve and armpit nonsense has to stop. There are so many problems with these tight offside calls, including the width of the lines used to make decisions, pinpointing the exact moment the ball's played and the frame-rate of cameras. The pure, unadulterated joy of celebrating a goal has been taken away while officials frantically check for a way they can rule it out.

5. CAN WE JUST SORT OUT VAR IN GENERAL?

On the subject of VAR, it's just a mess, isn't it? One of the issues is the officials in charge of it seem bound to flag up offences which they'd probably let go if they were referring the game out on the pitch themselves. Then the match referee gets a slow motion replay where everything looks worse than it is. Directives appear to change from week to week, consistency is completely lacking from game to game, and most of us are totally fed up with it. You'd be hard-pressed to find a player who actually likes VAR, so why don't we listen to them and just get rid of it altogether? Pretty please!

6. AGENTS BUTTONING IT

Partisan feelings aside, if the sight of Mino Raiola declaring Paul Pogba's Manchester United career done and dusted on the eve of arguably their biggest game of the season doesn't make you despair about the role of agents in football, you must be one yourself. Or you should've been. Agents speaking out to the press in blatant attempts to engineer moves and subsequent pay-outs for themselves is a serious issue which needs to be addressed. From Dimitry Seluk poisoning Yaya Toure's time at Manchester City to Raiola reportedly pocketing more than £40m from Pogba's move to United, would it be so difficult for these people profiting from the talent of others to maintain a measure of decorum while they go about their business?

1. Players react at the end of the UEFA Champions League group H soccer match bet
2. Hopefully we can get back to full stadium capacities and celebrating with friends, family and strangers like we used to in 2021
3. Gianni Infantino looks at a replay from a friendly soccer match in the handball dispute
4. John Stones of Manchester City stands in front of the screen as a goal of Bournemouth is ruled offside
5. Referee Guillermo Guerrero (C) points to the review of a play in the VAR
6. Italian soccer agent Mino Raiola
7. Lionel Messi paid a touching tribute to Diego Maradona in November, but the footballing world wants to him smiling again
8. Was Pele the best football player ever to play the game?
9. Mesut Ozil is currently the biggest name to be linked to a move to the MLS
10. Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been in superb form for Milan this season even as he approaches 40

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7. A HAPPY MESSI

What a sad, sad situation this has become. And as Elton John would say, it's only getting more and more absurd. One of the greatest players of all time, seeing Lionel Messi's time at Barcelona descend into acrimony has been tough to take. Now 33, we should be celebrating this little genius while we can, not second guessing whether he truly wants to leave the club he patently loves due to issues with board members and feeling like he always gets the blame for any of Barca's problems. Messi appears to have the weight of the world on his shoulders, so if it takes a move away from the Nou Camp to release him and see the joy return to his game, it can't come quickly enough.

8. THE ABANDONMENT OF IMMEDIACY

Speaking of Messi, the Argentine falls within this gripe too. Messi or Ronaldo? Messi or Maradona? Maradona or Pele? Football has an issue with immediacy exemplified by the need for people to endlessly argue over who is the best, or greatest, of a certain generation or indeed in history. Can't we just enjoy what we have when we have it? And can't we allow players time to develop and managers to imprint their vision on their team and club? Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's tenure at Manchester United is a prime example, with #OleIn and #OleOut trending from one half of football to the next. Debate is great, hysteria is boring.

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9. OZIL IN MLS

Mesut Ozil is one of the silkiest players you can hope to see. His time at Arsenal has soured beyond the point of comprehension, with his exclusion from the squad particularly bizarre given the Gunners' problems creating chances through the opening months of this season. The German World Cup winner has been paid a not-so-small fortune to sit on the sidelines and do nothing, and his talents would be more than welcome in Major League Soccer. Four-time MLS Cup champions DC United have been heavily linked with bringing the former Real Madrid man stateside, which could prove to be a cathartic move for the 32-year-old playmaker.

10. ZLATAN TO START SHOWING HIS AGE

No, not really. But it's a little disheartening for us mere mortals to see the evergreen Zlatan Ibrahimovic defy the ageing process to such astonishing effect. The mercurial Swede seems to be getting even better as he approaches his 40th birthday next October. Yes, 40th! Ibra is ageing like a fine wine, and after blitzing MLS with LA Galaxy, his goals and leadership have catapulted Milan to the top of Serie A and seen the Rossoneri installed as one of the favourites for the title. Helping his team win the league and deny Juventus their tenth successive Scudetto would rank as one of, if not the, finest achievements of Zlatan's career.

‘ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI NETTED 34 LEAGUE GOALS LAST SEASON AND CONTINUED THAT SPECTACULAR SCORING RATE THIS TERM BY SCORING 12 TIMES IN HIS FIRST NINE BUNDESLIGA GAMES.’



THE 2020 SOCCER 360 AWARDS

AS A BIZARRE YEAR COMES TO A CLOSE, CIRO DI BRITA HANDS OUT THE AWARDS AND HIGHLIGHTS EUROPE'S MOST DANGEROUS STRIKER, MOST IMPRESSIVE TEAM AND A GOAL TO GO OUT YOUR WAY TO SEE...

PLAYER OF THE YEAR: ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI, BAYERN MUNICH AND POLAND

Robert Lewandowski netted 34 league goals last season and continued that spectacular scoring rate this term by scoring 12 times in his first nine Bundesliga games. The 32-year-old found the back of the net on 42 occasions before December was out as Bayern Munich lifted the league title, German Cup, Champions League, European Super Cup and German Super Cup. The Poland international's haul of 42 goals and five trophies this calendar year makes him Player of the Year.

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR: ERLING BRAUT HAALAND, BORUSSIA DORTMUND AND NORWAY

Erling Braut Haaland burst onto the scene in last season's Champions League group stage by scoring in each of his first five games, including goals against both Napoli and Liverpool. The 20-year-old made a big money move to Borussia Dortmund in January and fired in the best part of 40 goals in all competitions for club and country in the months that followed. The Norway international won the Golden Boot at the 2019 U20 World Cup in Poland by scoring nine goals in a 12-0 win over Honduras in the group stage, and hasn't let up since.



ABOVE: Robert Lewandowski's goals helped Bayern Munich to the treble

ABOVE SMALL: Bayern Munich striker Robert Lewandowski of Poland and his wife Anna Lewandowska

LEFT: Erling Braut Haaland has been scoring at a prodigious rate



**TEAM OF THE YEAR:
BAYERN MUNICH**

Bayern Munich went from January to September without losing a game. By the time they finally fell, in a 4-1 defeat by Hoffenheim, they had swept up every trophy before them. It started in November 2019, after a 5-1 hammering at Eintracht Frankfurt and Niko Kovac was replaced as coach by his assistant, Hansi Flick. Bayern never looked back, racking up a 30-game unbeaten run, which included an astonishing 8-2 bashing of Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-final and put them well on the way to winning the treble.

**COACH OF THE YEAR:
JURGEN KLOPP, LIVERPOOL**

By leading Liverpool to their first league title in 30 years – and in brilliant style – Jurgen Klopp wins the coach of the year award. The German arrived at Anfield in 2015 and took a couple of seasons to build a side that could compete for trophies. But over the past three years the Reds have lifted their sixth Champions League title, the Premier League, the FIFA Club World Cup, and the European Super Cup. This season several injuries have attempted to put the brakes on Liverpool's title hopes and Klopp's all-action, high-pressing approach, but it is likely we will see the Reds in the hunt for cups in the spring.

**NAIL-BITER OF THE YEAR:
LIVERPOOL 2-3 ATLETICO MADRID,
MARCH 11**

Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid eliminating holders Liverpool in the quarter-finals of last season's Champions League proved to be the most dramatic game of 2020 – and one of the last played in front of a stadium full of supporters. Atleti had a 1-0 lead from the first leg but Georginio Wijnaldum's goal took the game to extra time. Roberto Firmino looked to have sent Liverpool through when he netted in the 94th minute but two goals – one each for Marcos Llorente and Alvaro Morata – turned the game on its head. Atleti used every trick in the book to maintain their lead and as Liverpool's frustrations rose, Llorente grabbed a second to end a thrilling encounter.

ABOVE LEFT: Liverpool lifted the Premier League under Jurgen Klopp's expert guidance...

ABOVE RIGHT: ...but crashed out of the Champions League in the game of 2020

BOTTOM LEFT: Aston Villa shocked the world, and the Liverpool bend, with their 7-2 victory over Liverpool

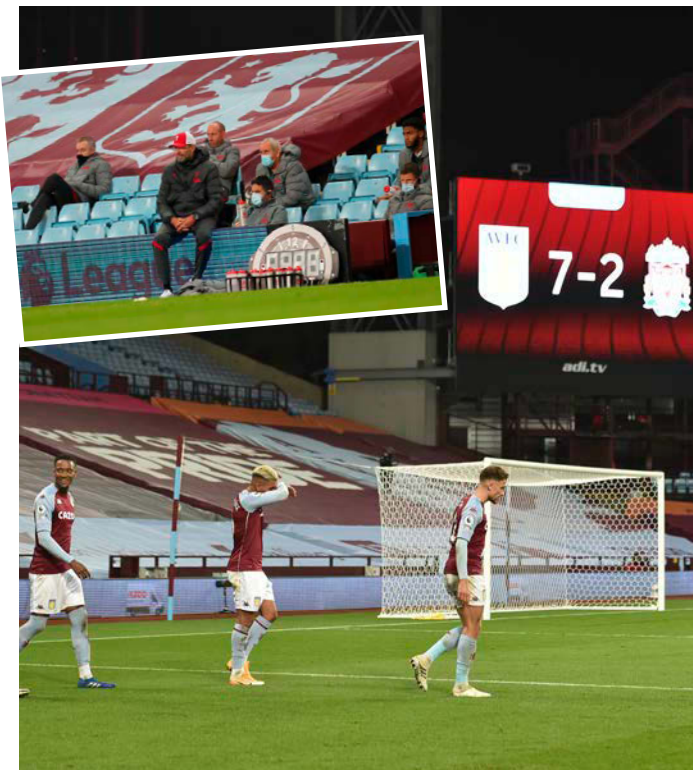
BOTTOM RIGHT: Ozil's season could've been better

**THE 'SORRY, CAN YOU REPEAT THAT?' SCORELINE OF THE YEAR:
ASTON VILLA 7-2 LIVERPOOL,
OCTOBER 4**

Aston Villa putting seven goals past Liverpool wasn't even the biggest margin of victory in a major competition of 2020, but Bayern Munich always has the potential to hammer Barcelona, even if eight goals still raised eyebrows. But Villa routing the defending Premier League champions? Some mistake, surely? But no, Dean Smith's side recorded the most surprising result of the year and began with two goals in 22 minutes. Mohamed Salah pulled one back for the Reds soon after and most onlookers would have expected Liverpool to take charge from there. Instead, the opposite happened. Liverpool capitulated as Villa hit four by half time, and three more after.

**WASTED YEAR...OF THE YEAR:
MESUT OZIL, ARSENAL**

Mesut Ozil hasn't kicked a ball in competitive action since March 7, when he was part of the Arsenal XI that beat West Ham through a Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang goal. The rights and wrongs of his exclusion from the Arsenal first team notwithstanding, the former Germany international turned 32 in October and doesn't have many more years left to waste. He has professed his love for the Gunners – and even offered to pay the salary of mascot Gunnersaurus when Arsenal planned to furlough the giant foam dinosaur – but at some point, he has to accept he has no future under Mikel Arteta, and find a new home.



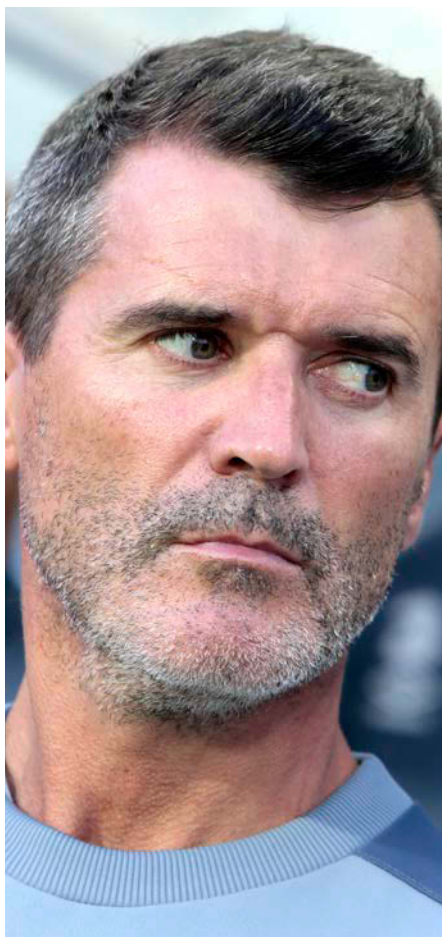


**ANALYST OF THE YEAR:
ROY KEANE**

Roy Keane was famous for being a no-nonsense footballer when he played and as a pundit is hardly renowned for holding his tongue. The former Republic of Ireland and Manchester United captain has enraptured the viewing public since swapping the pitch for the television studio, and his dissection of struggling United goalkeeper David De Gea at half-time in June's 1-1 draw with Tottenham Hotspur was must-see TV. Keane went so far as to say he'd be 'swinging punches' at De Gea if he was his teammate, and wouldn't have let him travel with the rest of the team after the match, such was his disgust at his performance.

**BEST GOAL YOU PROBABLY
DIDN'T SEE OF THE YEAR:
RODRIGO DE PAUL, UDINESE AND
ARGENTINA**

Like most years, 2020 had plenty of jaw-dropping goals. But one that probably flew under the radar was a gem from Udinese's Rodrigo De Paul back in January. The Argentina international got an 88th-minute winner for the Zebrette against Lecce when he played a one-two inside a packed penalty area and controlled the return with his heel, dribbled past a couple of Giallorossi players and stabbed the ball past the goalkeeper. It was a brilliant piece of skill from the 26-year old, who nearly moved to the Premier League with Leeds over the summer, and is surely destined for bigger things.



ABOVE:
Despite lockdown clubs still tried to have their fans at the stadium

LEFT:
Roy Keane was famous for being a no-nonsense footballer when he played and as a pundit is hardly renowned for holding his tongue.

RIGHT:
Rodrigo De Paul for Udinese

**VIRTUAL FANS OF THE YEAR:
GLADBACH'S CARDBOARD CUT-
OUTS**

Supporters have been locked out of stadiums for nine of the 12 months of 2020, but the crisis has at least led to innovation. Clubs have had to find new ways to bring an atmosphere to empty stadiums around the world, and Bundesliga side Borussia Monchengladbach led the way.

Gladbach installed thousands of life-size cardboard cut-outs of actual fans, with supporters paying around €20 to have their faces printed on them and seated around Borussia-Park. And Gladbach declined to make money from the venture, instead donating the proceeds to local causes and COVID-19 relief. It didn't quite replace the noise of actual people, but it was the best attempt of any club.





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Game.



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AWARD SEASON

FIFA HAS RELEASED ITS 2020 AWARD SHORTLIST FOR THE MEN AND WOMEN IN FOOTBALL.

MEN AWARDS

The Football governing body on Wednesday revealed the shortlisted candidates for seven of the individual trophies that will be presented at its annual award ceremony.

Despite the distraction of the COVID-19 pandemic that has seen France Football cancel its annual Ballon D'or ceremony for this year, FIFA has scheduled the award ceremony for December 17th, 2020.

The seven individual prizes selected from the male and female categories include; The Best FIFA Women's and Men's Player, The Best FIFA Women's and Men's Goalkeeper, The Best FIFA Women's and Men's Coach, and The Puskas award. Eleven players were included for the best player award in the men's category, with the Premier League heavily represented.

Sadio Mane, Mohamed Salah, Virgil van Dijk and Thiago Alcantara—formerly of Bayern Munich—are the four Liverpool players to make the list, with Kevin De Bruyne the only other Premier League player included in the list. It also included recent winners Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, while PSG duo Kylian Mbappé and Neymar were also chosen. Real Madrid captain Sergio Ramos is another on the list, while Bayern Munich and Polish striker, who remains favourite for the gong after a stellar season with Bayern Munich, completes the list.

The Best Men's Goalkeeper Award nominations include; Liverpool's Alisson Becker, who won the inaugural version of the award last year, Thibaut Courtois (Belgium and Real Madrid), Kyle Navas (Costa Rica and PSG), Jan Oblak (Slovenia and Atletico Madrid) Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Germany and Barcelona) and Manuel Neuer (Germany and Bayern Munich).

The Bayern Munich's keeper remains favourite for the award after guiding his club to a treble last season.

Elsewhere, The Men's Coach of the Year Award nominations sees Bayern Munich coach Hans-Dieter Flick lock horn with Jurgen Klopp (Liverpool), Julen Lopetegui (Sevilla), Zinedine Zidane (Real Madrid) and Marcelo Bielsa (Leeds United). The Bayern man is bookies favourite for the award after guiding his side to a treble last season.

The Puskas Award which recognises the best goal scored for the calendar year also has 11 nominations. Luis Suarez and Son Heung-min are the only notable men players on the list. The Barcelona's man cheeky strike against RCD Mallorca in December last year was nominated, while Son's solo effort for Tottenham against Burnley in December qualified him for the list.

2019/2020 FIFA FIFPRO MEN'S WORLD 11

GOALKEEPER
Alisson Becker (Liverpool FC, Brazil)

DEFENDERS
T. Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool FC, England)
Alphonso Davies (FC Bayern Munich, Canada)
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool FC, The Netherlands)
Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid, Spain)

MIDFIELDERS
Thiago Alcántara (Liverpool FC, Munich, Spain)
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City, Belgium)
Joshua Kimmich (FC Bayern Munich, Germany)

FORWARDS
R. Lewandowski (FC Bayern Munich, Poland)
Lionel Messi (FC Barcelona, Argentina)
Cristiano Ronaldo (Juventus, Portugal)

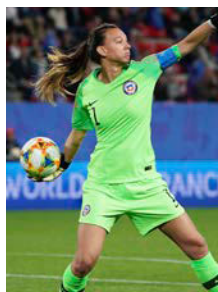
2019/2020 FIFA FIFPRO WOMEN'S WORLD 11

GOALKEEPER
Christiane Endler (Paris St. Germain/Chile)

DEFENDERS
Lucy Bronze (Manchester City/England)
Millie Bright (Chelsea/England)
Wendie Renard (Lyon/France)

MIDFIELDERS
Delphine Cascarino (Lyon/France)
Veronica Boquete (AC Milan/Spain)
Tobin Heath (Man. United/United States)
Barbara Bonansea (Juventus/Italy)

FORWARDS
Megan Rapinoe (OL Reign/United States)
Pernille Harder (Chelsea/Denmark)
Vivianne Miedema (Arsenal/Norway)



WOMEN AWARDS

A good awards announcement is like a good movie: It has to have a lot bit of action, a little bit of drama, and of course a little bit of controversy. This year's FIFA FIFPRO Women's Best XI certainly contained all of these items and giving a really unique blend of interest and excitement to the announcement.

The Best XI is determined by voting from FIFPRO, which is the international players association, and FIFA. This is the fifth year that the two organizations have worked together on their end-of-season awards.

Of the selections the inclusion of Rapinoe seems to be the most curious. She did not participate in the 2020 National Women's Soccer League club season for the Reign and has not featured for the United States Women's National Team since March.

Rapinoe herself expressed her appreciation but also surprise at the announcement on her Twitter feed saying, "I am obviously very honored to have been recognized by my peers around the world who vote for the FIFPRO World XI. At the same time, it did come as a surprise to me that I met the criteria for selection as I haven't played in a match since March (2021, here I come!)."

"We have so many phenomenal female players around the world and all of us need to do what we can to recognise them," she said. "The fact that I was selected once again sheds light on the fact that in order to push our game forward we need continued investment in the women's game to give more female players the opportunity to be seen on TV in their home countries and globally while performing for club and country."

Rapinoe wasn't the only surprise. Despite winning the FIFA Women's Goalkeeper Player of the Year Sarah Bouhaddi (Lyon/France) was beaten by Endler for the Best XI Goalkeeper spot. So too was Dszenifer Marozsan (Lyon/Germany), who led Lyon to a treble. Rapinoe aside, there was also a lack of representation from the NWSL.

RIGHT COLUMN (TOP - BOTTOM)
Alphonso Davies
Christiane Endler
Sergio Ramos
Delphine Cascarino
Kevin De Bruyne

LEFT COLUMN (TOP - BOTTOM)
Barbara Bonansea
Cristiano Ronaldo



RESPECT US

Twitter - Arsenal lost the North London derby to bitter rivals Tottenham and Gunners midfielder Granit Xhaka coming in for some stick from fans. However, when one fan said Xhaka is only good enough for Augsburg, the Bundesliga side replied with this witty tweet.

SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP



FAREWELL MARADONA

Instagram - The world was left stunned when Diego Armando Maradona, arguably the game's greatest ever player, passed away. Napoli, one of the clubs his sheer talent transformed into champions, paid their respect with a video from the archives of the man himself lifting the Scudetto.

HE SAID WHAT?

THE WORLD REMEMBERS MARADONA



"Even if I played for a million years, I'd never come close to Maradona. Not that I'd want to anyway. He's the greatest there's ever been." - **Lionel Messi**.

"In Argentine football there is a before and after Maradona." - **Julio Grondona**.



"What Zidane could do with a ball, Maradona could do with an ORANGE." - **Michel Platini**.

"Diego apologised to me after he scored the second goal against England. He could see me unmarked at the far post the whole way but he couldn't find a gap to get the ball to me. The fact is I felt offended. It was an insult to my profession. I mean, even on a run like that he still has the time to look up and see me. As a player I was nothing compared to him. He was incredible." - **Jorge Valdano**.



"Maradona is a God to the people of Naples. Maradona changed history. In 80 years, we had always suffered, fighting against relegation, yet in seven seasons with him we won two leagues, a UEFA Cup, two Italian Cups. I'm a fan too and to live those years with Maradona was incredible. Being on the pitch when they won the Scudetto was amazing." - **Fabio Cannavaro**.



"Some say Pele was the greatest player of all time, but not me. Maradona will always be the greatest. He won World Cup in 1986, narrowly lost in the final in 1990 and then in 1994 maybe would have won it again had he not been banned. The crucial difference with Pele is that Maradona wasn't surrounded by great players; he had to carry the team himself. If you took Maradona out of Argentina they would not win the World Cup, but I think Brazil without Pele would still have won." - **Eric Cantona**



"He had that magic, that special something that makes you realize you're dealing with something out of this world, the likes of which will never be seen again." - **Luciano de Crescenzo**



"Diego, for all Argentinians, is God. And he always will be." - **Carlos Tevez**.



"In training you could see the real Maradona, and it was quite a spectacle. He never lost a practice match." - **Francesco Romano**



SPONGEBOB, A FAN

Twitter - Ever wondered who SpongeBob Squarepants supports? No? Us neither, but now we know: SpongeBob Squarepants is a Borussia Dortmund fan after helping the club launch a new fashion collection in this hilarious Twitter post.

FAREWELL ROSSI

Facebook - Not only did the sport lose Diego Maradona in November, in December the great Paolo Rossi passed away. The man who almost single-handedly won the 1982 World Cup for Italy also had a stint with Juventus. The Old Lady paid their respects with a video showing the great striker at his best.



SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP

"QUOTES"



"We have to remember VAR was introduced for the first time two years ago, not 20 years ago. VAR is helping football, it's certainly not damaging football. We must not make a confusion between VAR and maybe sometimes wrong decisions which are taken because of the wrong way in which VAR is used, maybe in some places because of the lack of experience of those who are using VAR."

- FIFA President Gianni Infantino responds to growing criticism of VAR, saying that the system is still evolving and that overall it's helping the game more than it is hurting it.



"I think the continued success of young Americans coming to the league and getting opportunities to play is going to attract more young players. Playing in Europe is one thing, but playing and being able to have an opportunity to play in the first team is something more important."

- USA international and RB Leipzig midfielder, Tyler Adams says that the first-team football that the Bundesliga offers makes it attractive for young American players seeking a breakthrough in Europe.



"Alioski deserves an Oscar because he played [it] so well. If I was the Leeds coach I'd be so happy with Alioski. But come on, it looked like he broke his nose."

- Arsenal's Kieran Tierney was not impressed with Ezgjani Alioski's exaggeration to being head-butted by Nicolas Pepe. He even confronted him at full-time to voice his displeasure.

HOMMAGE SHIRT



The Juventus home kit design for the 21/22 season has surfaced on the internet. The kit would be a homage to the Bianconeri's current stadium Allianz Arena's 10 year anniversary. Next year's shirt will see the return of the classic black and white stripes, and will be a crewneck with a small opening, with the sponsor and emblem details that should remain in gold. A customized graphic will then be inserted on the jersey, to celebrate the Stadium and its first 10 years.



A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

Juventus stars Federico Chiesa and Matthijs de Ligt went on a double date with their partners recently and they had a great time talking about football while enjoying some excellent truffles! De Ligt's girlfriend Anneke Molenaar revealed the news as she posted a photo of a truffle and tagged the others.

FAN CAM



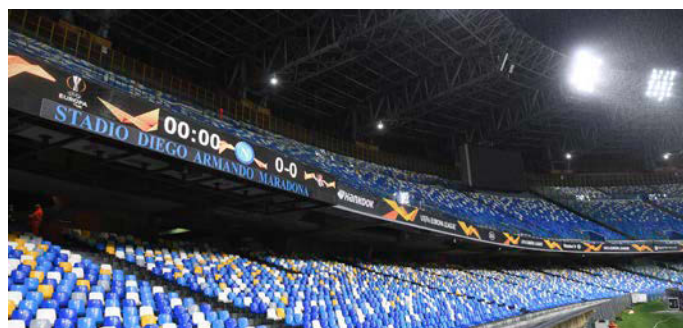
With fans in LaLiga not able to attend matches, the Spanish top-flight league has launched a new initiative called FanCam. FanCam is a camera installed at both ends of the stadium, labelled clearly for the players to see so they can head towards them when they want to celebrate in front of their fans. LaLiga is also hoping that this initiative will bring back some passionate player celebrations, something that has been lacking a bit due to the lack of fans in the stadiums.

THE OLD LADY IS IN TROUBLE AGAIN



Juventus management are currently under investigation following irregularities that were found in Luis Suarez's Italian citizenship test from September. When the initial investigation was announced back in late September, the Italian finance police chief said that Juve were not being looked into, but that has now changed. According to the prosecutor's office, the contents of the test had been communicated in advance to Suarez, in order to achieve an examination score to meet the requests made by Juventus. Suarez (shown wearing cap) had agreed to join the bianconeri in the summer, however because Juventus did not have any non-EU player slots open, the Uruguay international had to obtain Italian citizenship in order to facilitate the transfer and work around the non-EU rule. Suarez eventually ended up signing for Atletico de Madrid.

STADIO DIEGO ARMANDO MARADONA



Napoli have officially renamed their stadium, from Stadio San Paolo to the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona. The name change comes following the sudden passing of Argentina and Napoli legend Diego Maradona. Maradona led Napoli to their only two Serie A titles and the UEFA Cup during his seven years at the club, scoring 115 goals. The city council approved the resolution proposed by the mayor to change the stadium's name to honour the Argentine.



HELP FOR THE LOWLY

The English Football League and the Premier League have wrapped up negotiations regarding a rescue package and distress fund to tackle the immediate financial challenges faced by clubs in the lower divisions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. £50 million in the form of a grant has been agreed for League One and Two clubs while a £200 million interest-free loan will be provided for Championship clubs to use. The pandemic has brought significant financial losses to all football clubs, and while the top division sides are able to withstand the losses at the moment, those in the lower divisions of the football pyramid cannot.

HOLY COMFORTABLE CHAIR!

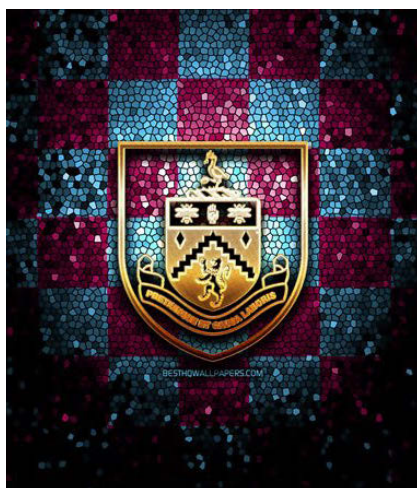


Jose Mourinho showed off his special Secret Labs chair on Instagram. The front of the chair, where Jose's back would normally be, is emblazoned with the Batman logo. And the back is even more over the top. There is a massive yellow backplate, with the Game of Thrones logo and the giant wolf of House Stark.



UNDER THE GUN

Arsenal have had a rough start to the season, so much so that they reportedly held a 'clear-the-air' meeting to address their issues and turn things around. The Gunners haven't started a season this bad since the 1981/82 season. According to reports, there is some tension amongst the players with David Luiz and Dani Ceballos said to have gotten into a physical altercation following a tough tackle during a training session. Arteta brought his players together and invited them to speak frankly. Following the meeting, the first-team players stayed behind and had a heated second meeting.



FIT TO OWN?

According to reports, Burnley are close to being taken over by an American sports investment company in a £200 million deal. ALK Capital are said to be favourites to complete the takeover, but are not the only interested parties in purchasing the Premier League club. Alongside ALK Capital, Egyptian businessman Mohamed El Kashashy and sports lawyer Chris Farnell are also in the running. ALK Capital is fronted by former president of Major League Soccer club Real Salt Lake, Alan Pace. Kashashy and Farnell signed a sale and purchase agreement and also provided proof of funds, but have not heard back from their owners' and directors' test.



THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Dele Alli showed off some impressive cricket skills in an Instagram post. Some Tottenham players were playing cricket in the club's gym when the ball was hit in Alli's direction. The midfielder's great first touch, with the outside of his foot, scooped up the ball, allowing him to make the catch. All of his teammates were impressed with the catch, especially Joe Hart who ran towards Alli with one hand over his mouth. Dele Alli has fell out of favour at the club, struggling to get match time under Jose Mourinho this season. Perhaps a career in cricket is in his future.

LIVERPOOL GO BIG

Liverpool recently opened their new, state-of-the-art, £50 million training centre. The new training complex is about three times bigger than their previous grounds, Melwood. The new development, known as the AXA Training Centre, has three full-size pitches, two gyms, a sports hall, a hydrotherapy complex and more. One thing has caught many people by surprise though, the James Milner door. There are murals around the training centre honouring people like Bill Shankly and Jurgen Klopp, while Milner has his name on a door. The entrance to the first team suite has a door that leads into it and has been named 'The James Milner Door' as a joke by the club after he and Henderson suggested there be a door leading into the suite. Milner is not complaining though, he's happy to have a door at Liverpool, jokingly saying he hopes it's not an exit door they were hinting at as he plans to stay at the club a while longer.

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"QUOTES"



"I want to play with Messi again. It's what I want the most. I want to enjoy being on the pitch with him again. For sure next year we have to do it."

- Neymar wants to team-up with Lionel Messi again after the two spent four seasons together at Barcelona and winning eight trophies. Given the unrest between Messi and Barcelona, is a move to Paris on the cards for the Argentine?



"We've been in awards ceremonies for 12-13 years now and I never saw him as a rival, that's all stirred up in the media. We always got along perfectly well and if you ask Leo, he'll tell you the same thing."

- Cristiano Ronaldo insists that he never saw Lionel Messi as a rival and that the "rivalry" was fueled by the media.

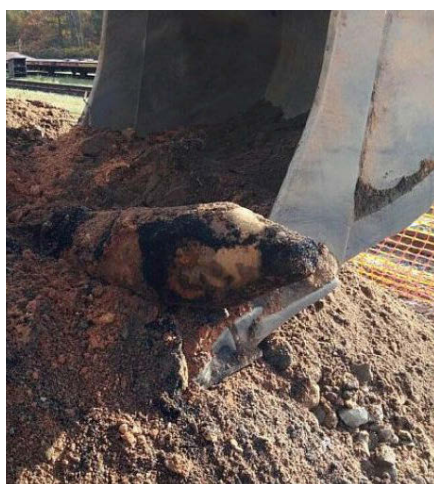


"I would like to experience the Premier League... For me English football is improving now because of there are a lot of foreign trainers. England is now more sophisticated, and more tactical, but is also respecting the tradition of English football."

- Could Max Allegri's next job be in the Premier League? The former Milan and Juventus manager is currently out of work, and has been for a couple of seasons since being let go by Juventus.

HOW MANY?

A Serie B clash between Salernitana and Cosenza saw the home side play temporarily with 12 men before being reduced to 10. Early in the second half, Cosenza coach Roberto Occhiuzzi decided to make three substitutions. Adrian Petre, Ishan Sacko and Abou Ba to replace Luca Bittante, Mirko Bruccini and Mirko Carretta. However, Bruccini didn't realize he had been replaced and remained on the pitch. Somehow neither the ref nor the other officials noticed either and the match went on with 12 men against 11. A few minutes later, and the Salernitana bench made the match official aware of the infraction and he subsequently booked Ba for not waiting for his teammate to leave the pitch. Bruccini walked off and three minutes later, Ba was handed his second yellow card for a foul, thus leaving Cosenza with 10 men.



BOMBS AT TRAINING

There was a bit of a scary moment at Roma's Trigoria training ground, as the army was called in to remove some unexploded World War 2 bombs. According to reports, the bombs were discovered during construction work to build new training pitches, at the heart of the Roma training ground. All activity was suspended as experts were called in to remove the devices. What was first believed to be three unexploded bombs, turned out to be 20. In the end, all the bombs were safely removed in just over an hour.



DIEGO TV SERIES

Napoli President Aurelio De Laurentiis revealed that he has been working on a television series about Diego Maradona's time with the Partenopei. De Laurentiis said that he has been working on the series for over a year, likening it to the story of Michael Jordan in 'The Last Dance'. The club president went on to say that both Maradona and Pele would be remembered as the best ever, but Diego had a personality that went further.

NEW NAPOLI KIT

Napoli have released a new special edition kit to honour Diego Maradona and their bond with the Argentina legend. According to the club and Kappa though, the jersey had been planned for a year and was always meant to be unveiled on matchday nine, during the game against Roma. They were hopeful of inviting Maradona to the match and maybe even have him wear it and celebrate the kit together. It just so happened that Maradona passed away a few days before the kit's launch. A kit that will have an even greater significance than initially intended.



THEY'RE AFTER ME I TELL YOU...



Claudio Lotito, the president of Lazio, has claimed that he is the victim of a conspiracy amidst the coronavirus controversy at the club. According to reports, Lotito spent three hours defending himself in front of prosecutors. Questions were raised after UEFA and Serie A considered many Lazio players positive, but the club's test results came back negative. Because of this, an investigation has been launched into the Futura Diagnostica laboratory, where Lazio's coronavirus swabs are being processed this season. Lotito said that he fears that there may be a plot against him led by his enemies in the Italian football federation and the Serie A offices.

HEY ... YOU CAN'T USE MY FACE



Zlatan Ibrahimovic has attacked EA Sports for using his image without permission in their FIFA video game series. The Milan striker posted a tweet asking EA Sports who gave them permission to use his name and face and also went on to say that he did not allow FIFA or FIFPro to make money using him. Mino Raiola, Zlatan's agent, called for an investigation into FIFA 21 and even went as far as saying that he's working to delete FIFA from existence, suggesting that FIFA and FIFPro are profiting from the image rights. EA Sports responded to the accusations by pointing to an agreement they have in place with AC Milan, but that may not be enough. Zlatan's tweet garnered support amongst his colleagues with more than 300 other players joining the fight against EA Sports' use of player name and image rights including Tottenham star Gareth Bale.

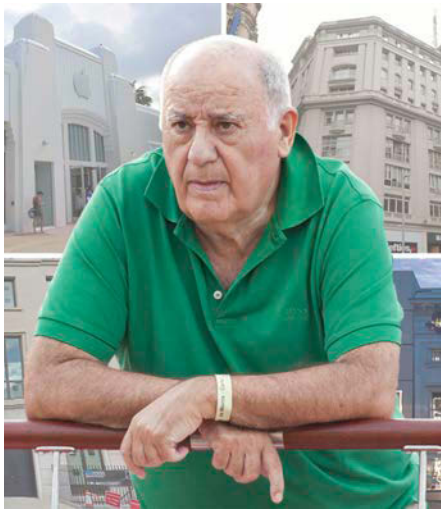


INTENTION IS PLANE TO SEE

Lazio recently invested in a new airplane, something that hasn't gone down well with some of the Lazio players. Midfielder Luis Alberto commented on the incident while streaming on Twitch saying, "very nice, they spend a lot of money, but they don't pay us." Luis Alberto is referring to the missing salaries from last season when a number of clubs opted to cut part of the wages during the lockdown. As more details emerged though it seems that the plane was gifted to Lazio by a Bulgarian firm and is not exclusively for their use. Bulgarian company Tayaranjet will also use the plane for their regular flights, loaning it to Lazio in exchange for advertising.

IT'S MY BALL !!

Owning a sports team requires a lot of money, from keeping fans happy to investing in the club's infrastructure, the costs are substantial. For many owners however, those kinds of bills hardly leave a dent in their bank accounts. Online Betting Guide conducted a study to find the 10 wealthiest sport team owners in the world today and among them are some football club owners. At number 10, is Joseph Tsai, a Taiwanese-Hong Kong-Canadian businessman who is worth around £11.1 billion and is an investor in Major League Soccer side Los Angeles FC. In ninth place is Dietrich Mateschitz, the co-founder and 49 percent owner of Red Bull is worth £21 billion. Red Bull have invested in a number of clubs around the world, including RB Leipzig and New York Red Bulls. Manchester City's owner Sheikh Mansour is eighth on the list, who is worth £23 billion. Francois Pinault is fifth on the list. The founder of luxury group Kering owns Ligue 1 side Stade Rennais and is worth £32 billion. The wealthiest football club owner, and third on the list is Armancio Ortega (shown). The founder of Zara is worth £48 billion and owns his boyhood team Deportivo La Coruna.



MAN. UTD CYBER ATTACK

Manchester United were victims of a cyber-attack after the club's IT systems were hacked in a major breach of security. The attack is believed to have been conducted by organized criminals who demanded a ransom. Manchester United released a statement stating their confidence that fans' personal data was not breached. Following extensive investigations by technical experts, most of the issues seem to have been resolved. There had been real fears that top-secret data may have been stolen or encrypted, but that does not appear to be the case. All the critical systems required for home matches were not affected and remained secure and operational, allowing Manchester United to keep playing their matches.



FAMILY FEUD

According to reports from Argentina, Diego Maradona's relatives are fighting over his £37 million fortune, with at least 16 people trying to get a piece. Maradona is said to have signed a will in 2012, but destroyed it four years later. He had five children, all of which are staking a claim. However, seven more alleged love-children and four of his five sisters are also reportedly trying to get some his fortune. Court papers revealed that Maradona has cash in Switzerland, Dubai and Buenos Aires, as well as property and luxury vehicles around the world. Argentine law bans children from being disinherited and requires all to be given equal shares.



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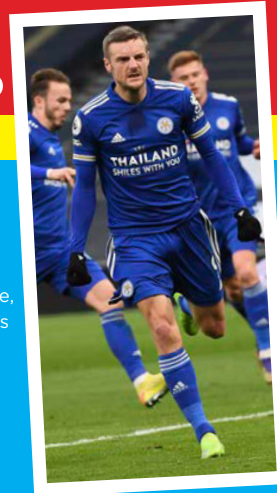
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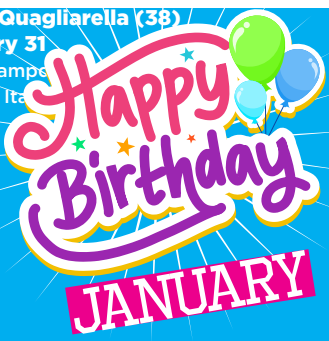
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90TH MINUTE

Vardy launched an academy in 2015 called V9 Academy to help non-league players receive coaching and guidance and showcase talent.



bio Quagliarella (38)
January 31
Club: Sampdoria
Nation: Italy



Georgia Stanway (22)
January 3
Club: Manchester City
Nation: England
• PFA Women's Young Player of the Year 2019.
• Last February, she held a free football clinic for ten-to-14 year-olds in her hometown.

Jamie Vardy (34)
January 11
Club: Leicester City
Nation: England
• While playing for Stocksbridge, Vardy also worked 12-hour shifts at a carbon fiber splint factory.

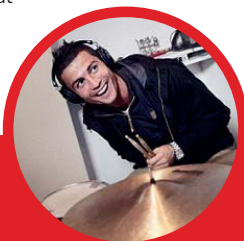
Marco Asensio (25)
January 21
Club: Real Madrid
Nation: Spain

Svenja Huth (30)
January 25
Club: Wolfsburg
Nation: Germany

THE NEW NORMAL NOT

BY SEAN MASLIN

Arrigo Sacchi once said that, "Football is the most important of the least important things in life." While he didn't make this quote in 2020 it certainly applies to the current state of affairs. With our world still coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and the possibility of a vaccine on the horizon, football fans are starting to think ahead. After watching games for months on television the possibility of returning to games is on the horizon. But the big question that has yet to be answered is just what sporting events will look like. While football is certainly not the only industry that has suffered during this pandemic it has definitely taken a hit. Despite the major television contracts, sponsorship deals, and partnerships football clubs across the world are struggling to make up revenue this year. The main reason for this is simple: clubs are not getting the gameday revenue that they would normally receive. Tickets are obviously one source of revenue but so too are T-Shirts, Hats, Food, and of course alcohol. In a report conducted by the European Club Association in September it was found that the top 20 European leagues would lose a combined 4 billion Euros from the loss of gameday revenue during the 2019-2020 season and the 2020-2021 season. This loss of revenue in particular hurts smaller clubs. In a recent report conducted by the UK Government titled State of Play it was found that Non-League clubs had lost 46% of their revenue and that 10% of grassroots soccer clubs face closure due to the financial impact of the pandemic. Teams across the world have to cut costs across the board, including furloughing staff and requiring employees to take pay cuts. So for clubs getting fans back into the stadiums as soon as possible is the big goal of 2021. But how it can be done relies on two things: 1.) If there is a vaccine and 2.) If there isn't a vaccine what sort of risk mitigation plan does the club and their league have in place. While the first point depends upon factors outside of football's control, the second point can certainly be explored. Leagues such as Major League Soccer, the United Soccer Leagues, and the Bundesliga have already begun to allow fans back into stadiums in limited numbers. Safety regulations vary but usually include a mask mandate and contactless food and alcohol purchases. Fans are also spread out and are allowed to leave their seats at staggered times. The odds are that restrictions at stadiums



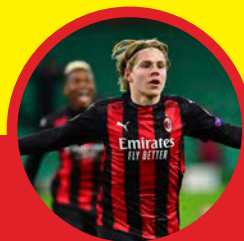
\$100 MILLION



"THE CANADIAN IS NINTH IN POSITION, WITH A VALUE OF \$133.5 MILLION"

On 3 November, the CIES Football Observatory released its biannual transfer value list and ranked Alphonso Davies in the top 10. The Canadian is ninth in position, with a value of €133.5 million. And he was the youngest footballer in the top 20 ahead of Erling Haaland, who is in No. 15. Alphonso's brilliant year for Bayern Munich culminated in a series of personal awards

and milestones including being included in the UEFA Champions League squad for the 2020 season. The youngster introduced himself truly to the world in Lisbon, leading to big names in the industry to label him as the best left-back in the world. He was also the recipient of the Lou Marsh Trophy for 2020, which he co-won with Laurent Duvernay-Tardif. The award is given to the best Canadian Athlete for the year. In winning the



SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP

WHAT CAN'T RONALDO DO?

Instagram - It seems being one of the greatest footballers of all time isn't enough for Cristiano Ronaldo and a career in music could be on the cards once he hangs up his boots - that is if this Instagram post is anything to go by.

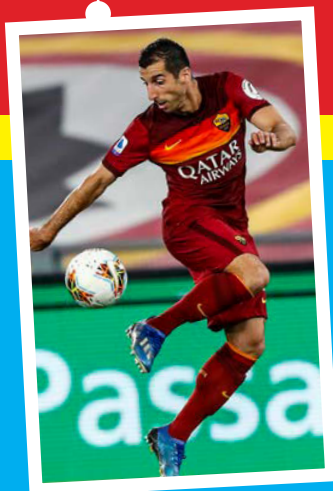
THE STATS SAY IT ALL

Twitter - Milan winger Jens Petter Hauge had the game of his life against Sparta Prague. Just check out these incredible stats - the 21-year-old is a big talent for the future. Oh, and spot the mistake in the Tweet too!

BORUSSIA PARK HAS EYES

Instagram - If you're a football team with the name Borussia in it, chances are you're pretty handy at social media. As well as nailing the jokes, Borussia Monchengladbach are also masters with the camera, capturing this stunning shot of Borussia Park staring right back at you.

Henrikh has a postage stamp dedicated to him.



Henrikh Mkhitaryan (32)

January 21

Club: Roma

Nation: Armenia

• Was the first Armenian player to win an international trophy at the highest level (Europa League).

Allysha's nickname is "Chappy"



Allysha Chapman (32)

January 25

Club: Houston Dash

Nation: Canada

• Graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Science in Biology.

Adama Traoré (25)

January 25

Club: Wolverhampton

Nation: Spain

Fabio Quagliarella (38)

January 31

Club: Sampdoria

Nation: Italy

FOOTBALLER



FAR LEFT: Davies keeps obtaining accolades and hardware

LEFT: Christine Sinclair has also won the Lou Marsh Trophy

award Davies joins an illustrious list of Athletes and sports personalities which include; Christine Sinclair, Jon Cornish, Kaillie Humphries, Bobsleigh, Carey Price, Penny Oleksiak, Joey Votto, Mikaël Kingsbury and most recently, Bianca Andreescu. He was also on Thursday night announced in the FIFA FIFPro World XI 2020, beating Liverpool left-back Andy Robertson to the award. The Canadian's brilliance has surely

increased in 2020, and more is expected in the years to come. Of course, he will have that odd game and suffer that slight dip in form—as is the case presently, after he returned from an injury. But the youngster is primed to be at the very top in years to come. Hopefully, when we Google Canada in years to come, Alphonso Davies should be the name that appears on our screen.

will not be released all at once, that there will be a slow, gradual reduction in restrictions.

While it is certainly great to see fans inside of the stadium there are still some obvious problems. First, clubs have to do a cost-benefit analysis of allowing in less than 10-25% capacity versus paying for alcohol and food vendors, security, and the various positions that come with hosting a match. If a club only allows in two thousand people for a twenty thousand seat stadium they may actually lose more money from the game than hosting it. This is also highly dependent upon the size of the club (a non-League English side may only be used to hosting a small number of fans so their overhead would be low).

Clubs and leagues are also going to have to step up their enforcement on COVID-19 safety policies. Even if a vaccine is made readily available, the roll out is going to take months. Large scale events may start to re-open for spectators but with the risk of exposing people who are not vaccinated masks are still going to be required. It would be prudent for an organization like FIFA to provide requirements that all leagues must follow to curtail the virus with strong consequences should they be ignored. A top-down approach should help provide some consistency in handling the problem as fans begin to re-enter.

There are also small issues to be worked out as well. In North America, fans typically had the option of either purchasing food or drinks from a vendor near their seat or they could walk to the terraces and stand in line. To keep the mass congregation of people to a minimum one could more vendors and less restaurants in stadiums. There is also the question of whether supporters will be able to bring in items like drums, smoke bombs, flags, and tifos in the interim.

There is also a question of fear and whether people will want to come back to stadiums. To think that people will shift immediately from staying at home to picking things up right where they left off in March 2020 is a bit of a stretch. The toll that this virus has taken on society cannot be understated. For the last year people have been instructed and rightfully so to avoid large crowds and maintain social distance in public for a year. While there will certainly be some relief once a vaccine is administered and a desire to pick-up the things that we have missed there will also be trepidation. Expecting 40,000 at a football match anytime soon may be a bit of wishful thinking.

With a vaccine coming soon there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel and a hope that things can get back to some level of normal. While things may look a little different for football fans when they get back to the stadiums at least having them coming back will be a start.

RIGHT: Fans returning to stadiums is a big goal in 2021



REAL PAIN, BALE JOY

Twitter - After Real Madrid lost to Shakhtar Donetsk in the Champions League, ESPNUK couldn't resist a pop at the Gareth Bale's former club with this hilarious Twitter post.



A BIRD, A PLANE, A MASCOT?

Facebook - Real Sociedad are riding high in La Liga this season and one lucky fan won a shirt from star man David Silva. However, it wasn't Silva who presented the shirt, rather Sociedad's mascot that - we think - is a ball with a crown on, as seen in their club crest. We're still not sure though!



KLOPP VS. WILDER

Twitter - Jurgen Klopp was not a happy man after his side drew with Brighton in the Premier League and in true manager style went around blaming everyone else. The target for the German's ire were Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder, continuing a long-running spat between the bosses.

SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP

"QUOTES"



"How do the British say it? You have to show it on a windy night in Stoke. Today is not windy and Stuttgart is not Stoke but Stuttgart is a team that plays very well in the last weeks."

- Thomas Müller makes an interesting comparison between Stoke and Stuttgart during a post-match interview.



"I relax by watching other managers suffer. And think 'it's your turn my friend'."

- Arsene Wenger cheekily claimed he finds comfort when other managers suffer like he did during his managerial days.



"I feel like I've been here in different generations. I played against Paolo Maldini and now I'm playing with his son, Daniel. Hopefully I can play with Daniel's son also, that would be a miracle."

- Zlatan Ibrahimovic has no intentions of retiring any time soon by the sound of it. The 39-year-old is still scoring goals, leading the line of a young Milan team.



ZANTA CLAUS

While most people are constantly refreshing pages as they look to get their hands on the new Playstation 5, the Milan players didn't have to worry about it. Zlatan Ibrahimovic gifted his teammates a Playstation 5 on the console's launch day in Europe. A number of Milan players took to Instagram to thank the 39-year-old for the gift. Many fans reacted to the gesture and coined the term 'Zanta Claus' as the holiday season approached.



TATTOO YOU

Real Madrid are continuing to work on finding a way to extend Sergio Ramos' contract with the club, yet in his off-time away from the game, the central-defender has taken up tattoo design as a new hobby. With his body already adorned in some quite magnificent ink, the Spanish international has now taken to learning how to use the pen himself, as a picture on his Instagram page showed.

NEW GLOVES FOR OLD

Arjen Robben left Bayern Munich in 2019 after a trophy-laden 10 year spell with the Bavarians. But, the former Netherland international still holds Bayern close to his hearts and was seen recently wearing a pair of Bayern gloves while watching his current team Groningen cruising to a 2-0 victory over Waalwijk. "Fox Sports" tweeted a video of Robben and his "old" gloves and wrote: "Arjen Robben needs new gloves, FC Groningen."



BIG FAN MARKUS GETS POSTER

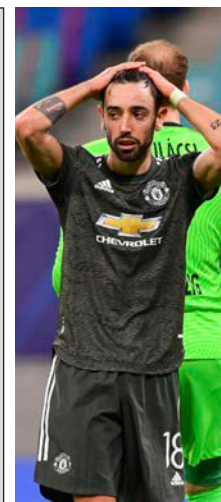
A fan received a signed poster from Mario Gomez after playing 2000 games with him on FIFA 20. Loyal Stuttgart supporter Markus Kilzheimer is a big Gomez fan, having the 76-rated striker lead the line of his Ultimate Team. After reaching the milestone, Markus posted a photo of the stats on social media, tagging the former German international and it blew up online so much that Markus became known as 'the Gomez guy'. When Mario Gomez became aware of this, he sent Markus a signed poster.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bruno Fernandes (right) is just the third player to win the Premier League's Player of the Month award three times in a single calendar year, following Ashley Young in 2008 and Harry Kane in 2017.

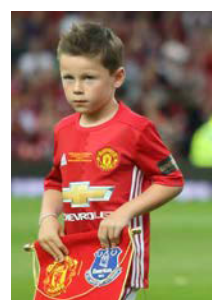
Seattle Sounders are the first team to come back from 2 goals down to win a playoff match in 90 minutes since Real Salt Lake did it against Columbus in 2009.

Los Angeles FC are the first team in Major League Soccer history to have Golden Boot winners in consecutive seasons, Carlos Vela in 2019 and Diego Rossi in 2020.



RASHFORD READERS

Marcus Rashford launched a book club to get young people to read. The Manchester United forward teamed up with Macmillan Children's Books (MCB) for the new project, with the aim of getting young people reading and delivering books to underprivileged kids. The first book to be published under the link-up will be in May 2021. The story will draw inspiration from Rashford's real life rags to riches story, focusing on education, positivity, female role models and culture.



NEW ROONEY #10

Wayne Rooney's eldest son Kai has joined Manchester United. Kai, 11, was pictured signing a contract alongside his beaming dad and mum Coleen. He was also seen holding up a shirt with No10 on the back - the same number Wayne sported during a glittering career at Old Trafford.

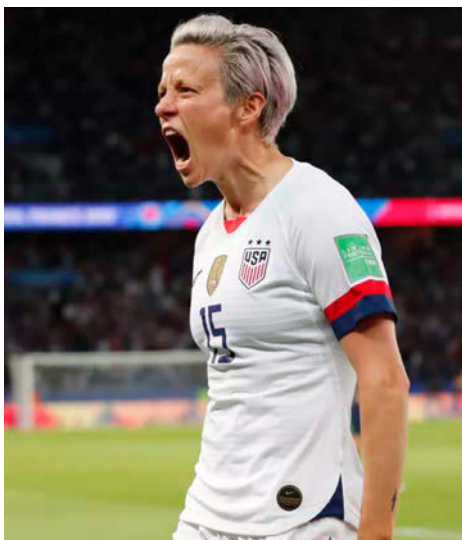


YORK9 FC IS NO MORE

The Canadian Premier League launched over two years ago and already one of its founding clubs decided it was time for a rebrand. York9 FC is no more. They will now go by York United Football Club. The York Region based club recently launched its newly-designed identity which also included a new colour scheme and crest. The crest is inspired by local history, including the old City of York crest and the Queen's York Rangers Canadian Army Regiment. The new identity is intended to help connect the club with fans across York Region and Toronto.

HELL HAS NO FURY...

The US women's national team has settled a lawsuit it filed against US Soccer Federation last year, resolving their claim on unequal working conditions. Under the settlement, the US Soccer Federation agreed to adopt and enforce several policies including, providing charter flight resources, hotel accommodations, playing venues, field surfaces, and support services that are equal to what the men's team receive. The agreement doesn't resolve the unequal pay claim, a claim that was dismissed back in May when a judge ruled that the players didn't have enough evidence to bring the main part of their lawsuit to trial. The players plan to appeal this decision.



WOMEN'S NATIONS LEAGUE



CONCACAF is launching a Women's Nations League that will serve as qualifying for the 2023 World Cup. The United States and Canada will have a bye to the final round, where they will be joined by the six group winners. From there, the eight teams will be split into two groups of four where everyone will play each other once and the two group winners will advance. As for how many teams will advance to the expanded 24-nation World Cup, FIFA has not yet decided.

INTER MIAMI UNIVERSITY

Inter Miami CF are partnering with Global Institute of Sport (GIS) to open a North American campus at Inter Miami Stadium starting in June. It will be the first stadium in the western hemisphere to serve as a permanent university campus, offering sports business and management degrees for professionals in the industry. The first program to be taught at the new campus will be the MSc Sports Directorship, an executive master's degree program designed to prepare professionals for the role of Sporting Director.



CAZOO'S AN IDIOT?

Aston Villa's captain, Jack Grealish, has been banned from driving for nine months and fined £82,499 after crashing his high-powered £80,000 Range Rover during the Covid-19 lockdown in March. Grealish was sentenced at Birmingham magistrate's court, after previously pleading guilty to two charges, including one linked to the incident in which the England international's 4x4 hit two parked vehicles in Dickens Heath, Solihull, West Midlands.



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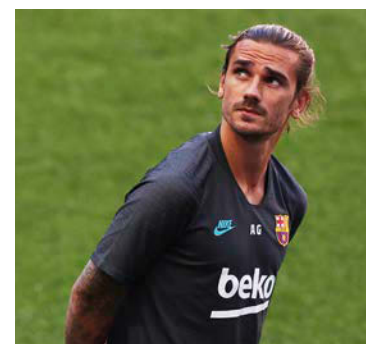
EVERYBODY HAS TO DO IT



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was fined £7500 by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) for undermining the game. The Arsenal striker was not happy after he and his Gabon teammates were held overnight at Gambia's Banjul International Airport ahead of a qualifier for the Africa Cup of Nations. They arrived just before midnight on the day before the match and were made to wait for hours while their passports were seized. Aubameyang documented the night on social media, including a photo he posted of his teammates sleeping on the airport floor. CAF were not happy with Aubameyang's actions, saying he posted material that 'dents the image of the African football ruling body'.

GRIEZMANN HANGS UP ON CHINESE

Antoine Griezmann has terminated his commercial relationship with Huawei stating there are strong suspicions the Chinese tech giant has contributed to the repression of Uighur Muslims. The Barcelona forward announced his decision after reports in the media came out of Huawei allegedly testing facial recognition software intended to help China's surveillance of the minority group. China has repeatedly denied mistreating Muslims despite the United Nations and human rights groups saying that more than one million people, mostly Uighurs, have been detained in harsh conditions. Griezmann was a global brand ambassador for Huawei, appearing in a number of advertisements promoting the company's smartphones.



GOOD IDEA FOR GAME DAY?



Casemiro shared a video of himself practicing his touch while wearing blacked-out glasses, kicking footballs and other small balls back using his other senses. Neymar was impressed by his Brazil teammate and commented on the midfielder's post. "Cyclops?" Neymar asked in a comment on Instagram.

THE THREE AMIGOS

Mario Balotelli has signed for Serie B side Monza. The former Milan striker, who was a free agent after leaving Brescia in the summer, signed a one-year contract with the Lombard side as he looks to rejuvenate his career once more. Balotelli will be joining his former teammate Kevin-Prince Boateng as the club. Monza have high ambitions under Silvio Berlusconi, who bought the club in 2018, a year after selling Milan. With Adriano Galliani joining him at the club, the duo will be hoping to achieve similar successes they enjoyed during their time at Milan.



MAMA MIA INDEED

Georgina Rodriguez's reputation as a lingerie model almost transcends her fame as Cristiano Ronaldo's lover. The Argentine model recently took part in a Christmas themed photo shoot and Ronaldo didn't hide his appreciation for it. Stuck by her beauty, the Juventus star commented "Mamma Mia" on her Instagram post.

MATERNITY PAY FOR FIFA LADIES



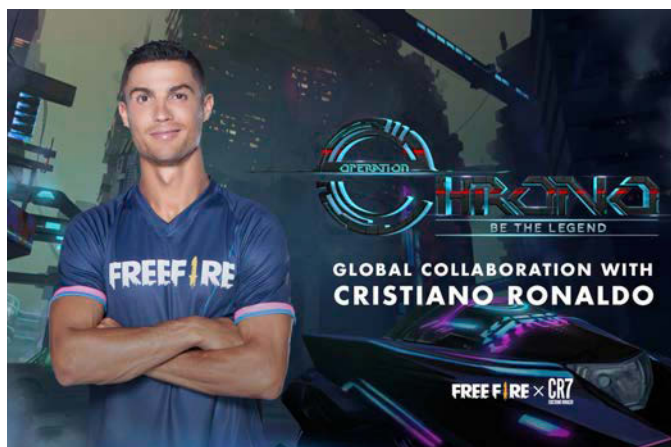
FIFA has approved the introduction of 14-week maternity leave in the women's game. Players will be paid at least two-thirds of their salary during their maternity leave. Clubs can sign temporary replacements, but must reintegrate players when they return and provide adequate medical support. In addition, clubs are not allowed to terminate the contract of a player because they are pregnant. Failure to follow this rule will result in an order to pay the player compensation as well as sporting sanctions, and potentially a fine.



POZUELO - MVP 2020

Toronto FC's Alejandro Pozuelo was named Major League Soccer's 2020 Most Valuable Player - finishing the season with nine goals and 10 assists, helping the club finish second in the Supporter's Shield race. His 10 assists were tied for the league lead with Houston's Darwin Quintero and Seattle's Nicolas Lodeiro. Pozuelo is the second Toronto FC player to win the MVP award, with Sebastian Giovinco winning it back in 2015. Golden Boot winner Diego Rossi of Los Angeles FC was runner-up with Lodeiro finishing in third. The winner is decided by a poll of players, technical staffs and select members of the media.

FREE FIRE - CR7



Cristiano Ronaldo was announced as a character in the updated "Operation Chrono" mobile game by Garena - Free Fire. The Portugal captain joined the mobile game creators Garena as their global ambassador. Ronaldo's character is a futuristic hero soldier in a slum world, wearing a black suit and has a robotic arm. "Free Fire" is a battle royale game that is available for free on the Playstore for Android and on the App Store for IOS. It was the most downloaded mobile game in the world in 2019.

DID YOU KNOW?

Youssef Moukoko (right) is the youngest player to have played in the UEFA Champions League. At 16 years and 18 days, the Borussia Dortmund teen came off the bench and featured for 32 minutes in the matchday 6 encounter with Zenit St. Petersburg. The previous title holder was Celestine Babayaro who was 16 years and 87 days when he started for Anderlecht in 1994.

Neymar is one of seven players to have scored three hat-tricks in the Champions League, joining Lewandowski, Filippo Inzaghi and others. Remarkably, he is now 5 hat-tricks behind leaders Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.



IDIOT COMMENTS

Bayern Munich star Alphonso Davies posted a photo of himself wearing a 'Red Against Racism' shirt on Twitter, supporting his club's #NoToRacism campaign. Racially abusive comments were left on a holiday photo of him and his girlfriend Jordyn Huitema, who is also a footballer and represents Paris Saint-Germain, a few days earlier. Davies - whose parents are from Liberia - shared the image from the summer with his 3.2million followers and said: "These are the type of comments that are being put under my girlfriend's pictures, also in her DMs and mine. This is absolutely disgusting."



THE 2021 HAIRCUT OF CHOICE

Initiations have been a long-standing tradition in many circles. Football is no different. In England, Italy and other European countries, new signings are required to sing as initiation. In South America and Mexico, it's very different. For youth players who have made their way into the first-team, tradition often sees experienced first-team players cut the youngsters hair, and you can imagine, it's not a good haircut. There have been some interesting, or ugly, looks and styles as a result. Diego Simeone's son Giovanni probably had one of the worst haircuts when he was at River Plate. They shaved almost all of his hair off, leaving just the side and back untouched as well as a small piece at the upper-back of his head.



WHY YOU LITTLE ...

Chelsea star Reece James has slammed thieves that stole goods intended for charity from his car. The England international has been doing admirable charity work with The Felix Project in London. The organization seek to prevent surplus food going to waste, helping to feed the needy, including hungry children. James, 21, had been due to donate some gifts to the charity. But he was dismayed to find that they had been stolen from his car.



WHAT LEG INJURY?

Former Leicester City defender Marcin Wasilewski may be moving to MMA following his retirement from football. The Polish defender was part of Leicester's fairy-tale Premier League winning squad in 2015/16 and later moved to Wisla Krakow where he recently retired. While his football career is over, his sporting career may still continue, as the big MMA fan is looking to step into the octagon. It would be a remarkable feat for Wasilewski who suffered a serious leg injury earlier in his career.



PLUNKETT KA-CHING

Dean Henderson's uncle, Martin Plunkett, was confident that the Manchester United goalkeeper would play for England one day. So much so, that when Dean was 14 years old and playing in the Carlisle United youth academy, he made a £25 bet on it. Now all these years later, Martin won £12,500 on 500/1 odds from William Hill after Henderson won his first cap against Republic of Ireland. His uncle wasn't the only one to collect on the bet. Henderson's mom and grandmother also made a bet when the odds fell to 50/1 following his move to Manchester United.



GENNADY JABBIN' WITH RONALDO

Ahead of his return to the ring this week, world champion fighter Gennady Golovkin has been spending some time with Cristiano Ronaldo - and suggested that the football icon might well have had a handy career in the boxing ring. The duo recently met in a DAZN promotion, where Golovkin showed the five time Ballon d'Or winner how to pull off some basic boxing moves.



MASKING YOU NICELY

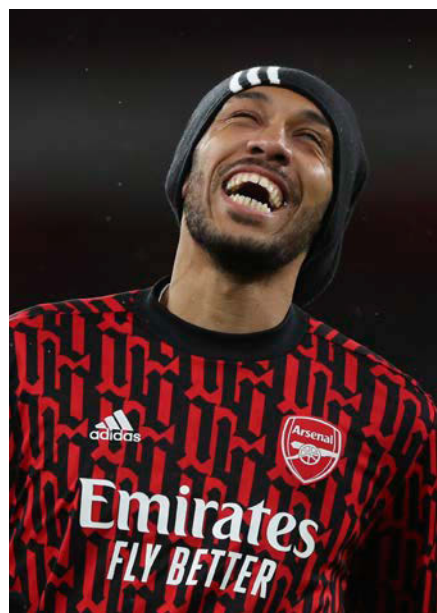
Walter Gargano (shown in 2014) has left his Napoli days behind, but he still flaunts the blue shirt of Napoli regularly. Gargano's wife Miska Hamsik recently posted a clip on Instagram that shows her husband wearing a Napoli shirt, but with his brother in law and former colleague Marek's name on the back. Miska didn't pass up the opportunity to make fun of him: "Marek, let's take a picture". Amused Gargano replies: "Later later, now I have to go!"



2020 GOLDEN BOY



Erling Haaland was named the 2020 Golden Boy for the best Under-21 player in Europe. The Norway international finished ahead of Barcelona's Ansu Fati and Canadian left-back Alphonso Davies. Haaland scored 44 goals in all competitions last season, including 16 in 18 appearances for Borussia Dortmund after signing from RB Salzburg during the January transfer market. The 20-year-old is now the third Bundesliga-based player to win the award following Mario Gotze in 2011 and Renato Sanches in 2016. What's the best way to celebrate such an achievement as a striker? By scoring of course. Haaland scored four goals in his first game after receiving the award, including a 17-minute hat-trick.



MASK YOUR TRUE INTENTIONS

A short war of words sparked between Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Toni Kroos after the Real Madrid midfielder criticized the Arsenal forwards famous mask celebration. Kroos, on the podcast he hosts, said Aubameyang is being a bad role model for his 'nonsense' celebrations involving superhero masks. Aubameyang, who at first didn't believe those comments really came from Kroos, responded by asking if he had children of his own stating that the mask celebration he does is for his son. The Gabon international then ended his tweet by reminding Kroos to wear a mask after a video emerged of the German international failing to follow protocol and wear a mask while on duty with Madrid. Kroos responded by saying he has three kids, and Aubameyang replied back with a retweet of a photo of him and Reus dressed as Batman and Robin congratulating Kroos for his three kids. Mesut Ozil then weighed in tweeting a gif of Aubameyang's Black Panther celebration at Arsenal, captioning it with "the best goal celebration!"

GUNNERS GO GREEN

Arsenal have joined the United Nations Sports for Climate Action Framework, becoming the first Premier League club to do so. The club believes they can inspire fans across the world to be more sustainable. By joining the cause, Arsenal have pledged to help fight climate change and help others do the same, committing to five key principles aimed at reducing their climate impact. These principles include, promoting greater environmental responsibility, reducing overall climate impact, educating on climate action, promoting sustainable and responsible consumption, and advocating for climate action through communication. Arsenal are no strangers to environmentally friendly initiatives having undertaken a number of them in the past including planting more than 29,000 trees at their training centre, becoming the first Premier League club to switch to 100% green electricity and implementing a reusable cup scheme at home games.



ST. LOUIS BEAMING

St. Louis City SC celebrated a major milestone in the construction of its in-progress new stadium, with the placement of the first steel beam as the club churns on in preparation for its scheduled MLS launch in 2023. To commemorate the milestone, St. Louis City and city officials randomly selected a "starting XI" made up of fans that participated in a steel beam signing ceremony. The club has released renderings for the soccer-specific venue in downtown St. Louis, which is expected to have a capacity of 22,500.

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ON AGAIN...OFF AGAIN

The Spanish Supercup may be moved away from Saudi Arabia according to reports. Under covid-19 restrictions, the public aren't allowed into stadiums in Saudi Arabia which means significant economic consequences which would defeat the whole purpose of playing it abroad. The format of the competition changed last season, where four clubs now compete for the Supercup. This year's edition will feature Real Madrid, Barcelona (league champions and runner's up), Athletic Club and Real Sociedad (Copa del Rey finalists). Real Madrid won the cup last season, defeating city rivals Atletico in penalties.



100 TIMES #10 EQUALS \$1000



A proposal has been presented in the Argentinean Senate for Maradona to be put on the \$1000 notes. Maradona became a national hero after leading the Albiceleste to the 1986 World Cup, scoring two famous goals along the way in a quarter-final matchup with England. Following the death of the legend, the Argentinean government has put forward a formal motion in the Senate to immortalize the second of the two goals, along with Maradona's face on the country's currency. According to the proposal, the idea is for the Bank of Argentina to print at least 50 percent of the total number of \$1000 notes with the Maradona tribute during 2021.



FOR THE FANS

The 2020 Copa del Rey final was postponed by the Spanish football association, and in agreement by both clubs, in order to play the match in front of fans. Both Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad were offered the opportunity to play the match behind closed doors back when the season resumed in August, however, the Basque rivals declined, opting to play with fans in attendance. Now, this match may be the first Spanish match to be played with fans in attendance in over 12 months. The rescheduled final currently has a provisional date of April 4, 2021 to be played at the Estadio La Cartuja in Sevilla.

PAID ... EVENTUALLY

Barcelona have confirmed that they reached an agreement in principle with their playing staff to implement wage cuts in order to save the club €122 million. The agreement follows weeks of negotiations where several of the previous deadlines set by the club were not reached. While the €122 million is a significant amount, the club were hoping to save €190 million by these measures. On top of the immediate savings, the club have also deferred €50 million of variable payments over a three-year period. Barcelona have also extended the contracts of a number of players that include temporary salary adjustments, likely meaning that they agreed to reduced salaries in the short-term but will be reimbursed with an improved deal in the long-term.



YOU KNOW IT MAKES SENSE

Tenerife are conducting an internal investigation into an off-pitch incident involving two of their players, Alberto Jimenez and Javi Alonso. Local police ejected the pair of Tenerife players alongside 24 other people from the premises of a gentleman's club for not complying with acceptable preventative health regulations against Covid-19. The club announced they will apply the unified protocol for LaLiga Training and Competition as well as the disciplinary regulations of the club's internal rules.



BIO-DEGRADABLE KIT ?

Real Betis are looking to become a totally ecological club. The move is being spear-headed by President Angel Haro, an industrial engineer by trade who arrived at the club in 2016. Haro wants the club to be a benchmark in the fight against climate change and to protect the planet. The objective set is for Real Betis to become the most sustainable club in the world and with 30% of the club's members under the age of 18, they believe it can be achieved. Betis joined the United Nation initiative Climate Neutral Now back in 2019 designed on measuring and reducing carbon footprint. There are a number of projects the club are currently running to help offset their carbon footprint including reforestation, planting urban gardens and cleaning up the Guadalquivir River. On top of that, Betis will use their stadium to help educate their supporters and employees about recycling and ecological living.



DID YOU KNOW?

Stephanie Frappart (right) became the first female referee to take charge of a Champions League match when Juventus hosted Dynamo Kiev at the beginning of December.

Harry Kane's goal in the latest Premier League meeting between Tottenham and Arsenal made him the all-time top scorer in north London derbies, sitting at 11 goals.

Hector Bellerin is struggling with throw-ins this season, committing over five foul throws already. That's more than any other player in Europe's top five leagues.

Antonio Conte has won just three of his last 15 games in the UEFA Champions League, failing to get Inter into the Round of 16 for the second straight season.



Kean was the youngest player in Juventus history to feature in a game, he was 16 years and 9 months old.



Érika (33)
February 4
Club: Corinthians
Nation: Brazil

Hakan Çalhanoğlu (27)
February 8
Club: AC Milan
Nation: Turkey

Moise Kean (21)
February 28
Club: Manchester City
Nation: England
• Scored his first goal for the Azzurri on his first start.
• He joined Juventus at the age of 10, signing his first professional contract at 17.

Nichelle Prince (26)
February 19
Club: Houston Dash
• She spent four seasons at Ohio State University scoring 27 goals and earning 74 points.

SUPER AGENT ANTICS

WE'VE DECIDED TO REVISIT SOME OF MINO RAIOLA'S MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS & CONTROVERSIAL QUOTES... SO FAR.

"Pogba's problem is Manchester United. It's a club out of touch with reality and without a sporting project. I wouldn't take anyone there. They would even ruin [Diego] Maradona, Pele and [Paolo] Maldini." – *It's fair to say there's previous between club and agent.*

"I'm not trying to judge him as a coach – although, for me, he's not a good coach – but he didn't understand that Balotelli is, whatever else, a person. Mario has been exemplary. He never complained about training alone. To say that it was wrong of Klopp would be an understatement. He was a piece of s*** about it." – *Solskjaer is not the only Premier League manager to have come under-fire, Jurgen Klopp previously facing Raiola's wrath.*

"Pep Guardiola, the coach, is fantastic. As a person he's an absolute zero. He's a coward, a dog." – *Not a fan of Pep either then, Mino?*

"I think Cruyff and Guardiola can go to a mental hospital together, shut up, sit there and play cards together. They would do football and Barcelona a great service." *Raiola and client Zlatan Ibrahimovic would endure a long running feud with Guardiola and Johan Cruyff, with the agent never afraid to engage in verbal warfare with the Catalan club legends.*

"He's a classic priest. 'Do as I tell you – don't do what I do...'. If Manchester City win the Champions League this season it will emphasise what a good coach he is – but I'll hate it. I went for him that night in the corridors at Wembley [after Barcelona beat Manchester United in the Champions League final in 2011] – only Adriano Galliani,



AC Milan's chairman, stopped me. Lucky for Guardiola." *It's safe to say Pep isn't on Mino's Christmas card list.*

"I argue with Real Madrid, if it's necessary. I told Florentino Perez once that he uses players like gloves. If he doesn't like them, he'll get a different pair. He didn't like that, but I told him nonetheless." – *Sounds fair enough.*

"Some people need to talk for fear of being forgotten. Paul Scholes wouldn't recognise a leader is he was in front of Sir Winston Churchill" – *An interesting take on Scholes following his criticism of Paul Pogba's apparent lack of leadership.*

"Sepp Blatter is a demented dictator." – *Rarer than rocking horse's*t, a Raiola quote we actually agree with.*

"It's incomprehensible that some FAs still vote for Blatter. If people vote Blatter, they are voting North Korea, if they vote me, they are voting South Korea." – *Mino Raiola, man of the people.*

"If Mario Balotelli had Zlatan Ibrahimovic's head, Lionel Messi would have fewer Ballon d'Or awards." – *We're not quite sure what to make of this one, to be honest.*



SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP



IT'S FAKE NEWS

Instagram - Paul Pogba pulled no punches as he called out a British newspaper and insisted they were printing unfounded stories about him. His agent waded in too, and went on to say Pogba will never play for Manchester United again. A day later Pogba played for United.

THE HAM

Twitter - Jose Mourinho is quietly one of the most entertaining Instagram accounts going. A recent highlight was the strange sight of the Tottenham manager with summer signing Sergio Reguilon and a £500 ham that was reward for the left-back's performance against Manchester City

Jessica never played high school soccer.



Jessica McDonald (33)
February 28
Club: North Carolina Courage
Nation: USA
• Was a two-time Arizona state high school basketball champion.

Edinson Cavani (34)
February 14
Club: Manchester United
Nation: Uruguay
• He spent time at Uruguay's National Ballet School learning how to dance over the summer.

Sara Däbritz (26)
February 15
Club: Paris Saint-Germain
Nation: Germany



DIEGO MARADONA

WORD SEARCH

P R O F E S S I O N A L R S B Y K H
P Z X N H F Q W D D O E F P U D U C
C E A J F C M U J K K L E V B B K
A E R B T C A D O I U A F C D R F K
T Q G F A P L O R Y N K R I G K R Q
O S T R O P S T C O U X E A Z K T R
U X E V C R S A I F G V E L W R Y V
V E B I I P M T E Y T Y K I R U W C
R V N M Z B A A O G I Q I S F W Z R
C J B Y G N F B N M N S C T M E H K
Z D Y C R H N N I C I I K I N G D D
F F S E E E K D A F E J L A O G L U
C O T K D G F N N A N M K B B F E V
G N O L I I I W I N D F A J B E I T
I N O T E L H X T S N N N D F I F O
B G I L B C L T N R E G A N A M R J
Z L D S T A E S E W O R L D C U P D
Y E U A S A L W G J O R O M D T C Q
R A M E M A V L R L U K R X Z C A T
V G W Y P P P Q A P C F T A D M G L
O U P W U A U P V L F P N K H H B M
F E P O Z N L P D O M L O C Q R A W
P I H S R E D A E L X Y C M K R T L
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U J O J C F T X O X T V H D P M K E
B X Z F Y I P Y G D G F O A O E E F
Y I R Z E K P C C R U N F I L M S U
S T A D I U M R N X A L W Z X Y F J

360 FUNNIES

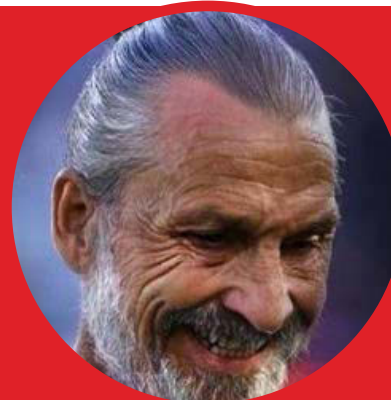


FIFA'S KIND WORDS

Facebook - FIFA president Gianni Infantino made a heartfelt eulogy following Diego Maradona's passing, which goes to show the impact the Argentine had on everyone in the game.

ZLATAN AGREES WITH ZLATAN

Instagram - Zlatan Ibrahimovic never lacks confidence, does he? The great man - who could start a row in an empty room - has taken to agreeing with himself on Instagram. This time he posted a mocked-up picture of a grey, wrinkled Ibra, saying he could play to 50 - and agreed with himself in the comments.



SOCIAL MEDIA ROUND-UP

WORD BANK

- | | | |
|-----------|---------------|--------------|
| ARGENTINA | FREEKICK | PASSING |
| BLUE | GOAL | PERFORMANCE |
| CAREER | GOLDENBOY | PROFESSIONAL |
| COACH | INTERNATIONAL | SKILLS |
| CONTROL | LEADERSHIP | SPECIALIST |
| DRIBBLING | LEAGUE | SPORTS |
| FANS | MANAGER | STADIUM |
| FIELD | MARADONA | STRIKER |
| FILMS | MATCH | TEAM |
| FOOTBALL | MIDFIELDER | WORLD CUP |

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Age creeps up on you and nothing dates you more than your love of the beautiful game. Who were your heroes growing up? Which players or teams first really got you hooked on watching football, made you realise this was the sport that would define your life? What it also does is mark milestones in your existence, seeing goals that bring back a Proustian rush of memory, returning you to the elated state you were in at that very moment when you first saw the ball travel towards the net. Don't fight the emotion, embrace it. The first thing to make you realise time is passing rapidly is when your heroes hang up their boots. Inevitable, of course, but still emotional seeing Francesco Totti or Alessandro Del Piero wave goodbye to their fans after decades, especially if you - like me - remember when they made their debuts.



TOP: Diego Armando Maradona was already a deity in Naples when alive

ABOVE: Put GOAT debates aside and just enjoy watching Cristiano Ronaldo and Leo Messi at their peak

BOTTOM RIGHT: Nothing ages you more than seeing the sons of your favourite players take to the field

The next I'll be truly weeping at will be Gianluigi Buffon's swansong. He made his bow against my beloved Milan for Parma and I was watching that game live, thinking who is this kid the coach decided to use out of nowhere? He's good... Think how you felt when Gianluigi Donnarumma made his unexpected bow for the Rossoneri. Now fast forward over 20 years. Will he still be pulling on the gloves, getting down remarkably quickly for a man in his 40s and denying the best in the business at Camp Nou? The next stepping stone in the ageing process is when you see the sons of players you watched suddenly taking to the field. Nothing makes you feel quite as old as realising you remember when he was born and now he's scoring goals in the Champions League. Oh, it sends a cold chill down the spine, I can assure you. Imagine how it must feel for Buffon, who has not only faced the sons of his former teammates and opponents - including Marcus Thuram, Timothy Weah and Federico Chiesa - but is now in the same squad as one of them.

Federico Chiesa was born in October 1997, when Enrico and Gigi were teammates at Parma. That means on the day he was born, little Federico was given a welcome to the world gift by his Dad's colleague. And now that baby is your equal in the dressing room. Buffon laughs it off, saying he's used to it by now, but the first time had to be pretty strange making that realisation. I just saw the sons of Obafemi Martins and Dejan Stankovic are playing for Inter's youth team. That time is coming for you too, dear readers, when you see the sons of your favourite players take to the field and suddenly feel desperately old. We've already got the third generation of Maldini running out in the Rossoneri jersey.

The final stage of football making you understand the passing of time is the worst: seeing your heroes die. Those of my generation got to experience that twice in the space of two horrible weeks when Diego Armando Maradona was followed into the great stadium in the sky by Paolo Rossi. They were 60 and 64, no age at all

to go, but in Diego's case not all that shocking. We knew he was never going to live a long and healthy life, that wasn't his style. He was a man of excesses in everything he did and that's also precisely why he was the greatest football player of all time. I am not going to argue with you, just trust me, he was. If he hadn't been so outlandish a personality, he wouldn't have been able to even think of those moves, let alone enact them with ease. That dance he did in the warm-up for Napoli was Maradona in a nutshell. The sport wasn't work to him, he barely trained at all. It was natural, filled with joy and passion, unconstrained.

Seeing the news break, grown men were openly breaking down on television in Italy and Argentina. Just because we knew it was going to happen didn't make it any less painful. Maradona was not just the greatest we'll ever see, but the definition of an era in football, particularly in Italy. He was treated as a deity in Naples while alive, so naming the stadium after him was inevitable and absolutely the right thing to do.

We cry for his loss, but also at the loss of our childhood, at realising those memories still feel so fresh every time we see him begin that run at the entire England team. We realise we'll feel the same way in many years to come when our current stars of the sport go through that process. Dear reader, soon enough we'll have little Cristiano Ronaldo Junior and Thiago Messi swapping shirts on the field, and you'll start to worry about when it's time to say goodbye. So put all these stupid social media GOAT arguments aside and just enjoy the fact you were here to witness these players at their peak. I can assure you, it goes by so fast. Relish every moment.



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