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April 2018

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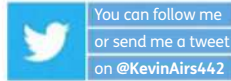


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# AUSTRALIAN FourFourTwo

## Straight from the stands



**As another A-League season draws to a close, despite Sydney's runaway win and a Lazarus-like revival of football fortunes (and crowds) in Newcastle, many would say this season has been a flop with freefalling metrics across the league. But regardless of what some might try to persuade us, football in Australia is not just the A-League...**

With the promotion-relegation row rumbling on – and the ongoing interest in the FFA Cup (and FFA reform) – there feels like there is a much keener awareness of lower league football in Australia than at any other time in the last decade or more. With the A-League feeling stale, many fans are turning their attention back to the local teams playing at local venues with local players for local fans.

But on the bigger stage, the Matildas are the flagbearers for football in Australia right now. They are not just the most exciting team in the country: on their current run of form, they are one of the most exciting teams in the world. No, really.

They go into next month's Women's Asian Cup as favorites but with a hell of a group to qualify from, coming up against reigning Asian champions Japan and South Korea. In such a tight group it may come down to the number of goals they can score against what should be the group's cannon fodder side Vietnam. We may need to do better than the 2-0 wins that we've had against them in every previous Asian Cup clash where we've faced them... but with Sam Kerr in her current form, you'd hope that might not be too big an ask. And if we don't get done over by goal difference, we will be in the box seat to avenge the last tournament's final heartbreak and bring home the trophy once more. Hopefully this time round it will be more widely appreciated than it was in 2010.

And later this month we finally get to see what Bert van Marwijk has planned for the Socceroos at the World Cup. We caught up with him on the day of his appointment and his biggest worry then – back in January – was the lack of game time for most of our key players... a situation which hasn't improved much in the couple of months since. He vowed to play his own style, so expect a return to a back four – but will we press and pass or be strong, physical and counter? We'll find out soon...

**Kevin Airts**  
Editor

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THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

## UNLEASH THE DOGS OF WAR

There's no fixture in world football with as much loathing as Bucharest's Eternal Derby between Dinamo and Steaua. The February 18 edition was no different, the home side's fans unfurling a series of banners depicting the Red Dogs' nickname, badge and the Grim Reaper to ensure Steaua would face an intimidating atmosphere. For 83 minutes, it worked as Dinamo led 2-0, but Filipe Teixeira's injury-time equaliser – after Dennis Man had pulled one back – earned Steaua a point. Their bark must be worse than their bite.

Picture Alex Nicodim/NurPhoto/Getty





**BIBLICAL** The World Cup may be plagued by locusts, a Russian agriculture official has warned. "Football fields are green, and locusts love it where there's green," he stated. Sounds logical...

# UPFRONT

## ONE-ON-ONE RAFAEL VAN DER VAART

Interview Arthur Renard Photography Kasper Sveistrup Povlsen

**WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP ON A TRAILER PARK?  
WHY DID HE FALL OUT WITH ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC?  
HOW DID HE END UP KISSING AN OLD LADY AT SPURS?**

He is now a 35-year-old veteran of big-money moves, Champions League campaigns and World Cup finals, but Rafael van der Vaart could still give the young bucks in this issue of *FFT* some sage advice on coping with the strain of being a highly-rated youth.

In 2003 he was the first ever Golden Boy, an award given by European sports journalists, and the field was especially competitive. "If I remember correctly, Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo came second and third that year," Van der Vaart tells us, with a cheeky smirk.

Even as a senior pro, the Dutchman hasn't lost his sense of fun – he gleefully juggles oranges using both hands and feet during our photo shoot, much to the delight of his watching son Damien – or his passion for football. "Whenever I drive past an amateur game," he says, "I am always tempted to pull over and have a quick look."

With all the citrus fruit fun out of the way, Rafa settles down to answer your questions on comparisons with Cruyff, moving to Real Madrid and playing for 'father figure' Harry Redknapp at Spurs.

**You grew up on a trailer park, didn't you? What was that life like?**

*Jon Sharpe, via Twitter*

I was raised there so to me it was just the normal life, but every time I have moved to a different country it's been something I've been asked about, as it is considered quite unusual. I had a wonderful time growing up. Many people think it's linked to poverty but that's not the case at all. It was very sociable, with other relatives living very close. My parents are not there any more, because after I signed my first contract at Ajax I bought them a house. But other family members are still on the park, so I still go back.

**Is it true that you pretended to be Romario when you played as a kid? Why him? Were you a big PSV fan?**

*Tom Poke, via Twitter*

Yes, Romario was my favourite player! Because of him I liked to watch PSV Eindhoven a lot, but naturally I was an Ajax fan, especially when I got drafted into their academy. What I really liked about him was that sometimes you'd barely see him for the whole match, but then at the very last minute he'd suddenly pop up with a moment of genius that would win PSV the game.

**You were hailed as 'the new Johan Cruyff' very early in your career, so just how good were you? And how did you feel about the comparisons?**

*Seb Newton, via Facebook*

Other people making those comparisons was all right, but personally I've never

really liked to make them myself. I did not want to be the next version of any player – I wanted to establish my own name. When I was younger, I always knew I was a pretty good player, but it was impossible to foresee how far I'd go. I had a left foot and vision like no one else, but I wasn't the quickest and my right foot wasn't so great, so there were things I needed to work on.

I've always said the one change that would've been nice is if I'd been a bit faster – like fast enough to be able to run past people instead of just being overtaken all the time! [Laughs] I think speed can make a huge difference, to the extent that if I had been quicker, I believe I could have won the Ballon d'Or at some point during my career.

**What was your best moment at Ajax?**

*Tyler Stokes, via Facebook*

There were several highlights. When I was young, the best moment came when I was 10 and I got invited to the academy. I remember getting all this Ajax training gear and suddenly I was able to call myself an Ajax player. From then on, my goal every season was to remain at the club and then make my debut in the first team. I managed to do it when I was 17. I can clearly recall the phone call I made to my dad to tell him that I'd been picked for the senior squad. Once I established myself in the first team, my best ever moment came when I scored with a backheel against Feyenoord. When you've scored a goal like that, you realise you are unlikely to experience a more unique moment. ▶





**CLUBS**

- 2000-05 Ajax
- 2005-08 Hamburg
- 2008-10 Real Madrid
- 2010-12 Tottenham
- 2012-15 Hamburg
- 2015-16 Real Betis
- 2016- Midtjylland

**COUNTRY**

- 2001-13 Netherlands

"I HAD A LEFT FOOT AND VISION LIKE NO ONE ELSE, BUT I WASN'T THE QUICKEST. IF I'D BEEN FASTER, I MAY HAVE WON THE BALLON D'OR"

**What's the truth regarding you and Zlatan Ibrahimovic? Did he really threaten to break your legs? How did your relationship turn so sour?**

Morgan Allen, via Facebook

Yes, he did say that, but Zlatan said it to everyone. It's also true that around that time things just weren't working between the two of us, but I would rather be in a team with people who are honest, like him, even if it means there are a few arguments. But there wasn't a specific moment we fell out – we generally didn't get along well.

**At Ajax you were stripped of the club captaincy by Ronald Koeman, after it was reported that you refused to play on the wing in a Champions League game. Is that what happened? What were your feelings towards Koeman?**

Archie Raynor, via Facebook

Yeah, that one is true. One day, before a game against Bayern Munich, Ronald came to me and said: "At this moment, you are not good enough to play for us as a midfielder but we want you to play as a left-winger." I was not happy with that, because if I wasn't good enough to play in my natural role, how could I be considered good enough to play out of position? In the end, I asked to be on the bench, which eventually led to me being stripped of the captaincy. Later on, after we'd both left Ajax, we recognised the mistakes we had made. I'm the first to admit when my actions aren't the smartest, and that incident showed a lack of respect to Koeman.

**How did you feel when Johan Cruyff used his column in De Telegraaf to criticise your transfer to Hamburg? Why did you move there when so many other clubs were interested?**

Farah van Milligen, via Facebook

I'm never that bothered by someone giving his opinion in a column. But in regards to my Hamburg move, I can remember I wasn't really keen when they first approached me. I agreed to visit the club and the reception I got was incredible. I spoke with manager Thomas Doll and the directors Bernd Hoffmann and Dietmar Beiersdorfer, and their vision was really impressive. I got to see the stadium, which was phenomenal, and soon I realised that this was the club I wanted to sign for.

**Describe what it was like playing for Real Madrid? How intense was the experience? Could you go anywhere in Madrid without fans everywhere asking for autographs and pictures?**

Hugo Barreto, via Twitter

Overall I had a really good time there, but yeah, it was very difficult to go out



somewhere in Madrid without getting noticed all the time. In London it was less of an issue, and here in Denmark it's even quieter. But generally it's nice when people come up to you or have a little chat, although I am not overly keen on crowds. I'm not complaining about it though, because if you don't really want that lifestyle, you should just remain as an amateur footballer.

**There were rumours of a falling out between you and Real Madrid boss Juande Ramos when you were often deployed as a substitute. Did you get frustrated about that, and what was your relationship with the manager?**

Lewis Posada Mercado, via Facebook

There was no falling out, but he wasn't my favourite coach in the world. There was no mutual 'click', and the type of football he played wasn't the style that I associated with Real Madrid – and it didn't really suit my own style, either.

**You were linked with Arsenal during your time in Madrid. Was there ever a possibility of that move happening?**

Alan Woodford, via email

Yeah, it did get mentioned. I had several conversations with Robin van Persie, my team-mate with the Dutch side, and he had spoken to Arsenal about me a few times, but I never heard anything. I did not regret it – joining Spurs was the best thing that happened to me.

I actually had the chance to move to the Premier League a lot earlier. When I was about 19, Gerard Houllier wanted to take me to Liverpool. I was flattered, of course, but at the time I wasn't that interested in moving abroad. However, my agent said it would be a good idea to give Houllier a call. He explained that he had talked about me with Michael Owen, who had said he would be very



**Top left** Savouring one of his five goals in five games against Arsenal – in 2006 for Hamburg **Top** Eredivisie glory in 2003-04 was Van der Vaart's last title **Above** Floored by Andres Iniesta's winner in the 2010 World Cup Final **Right** "At least I've got a number..."





**"ON DEADLINE DAY, I WAS TOLD I HAD TWO HOURS TO DECIDE WHETHER TO JOIN TOTTENHAM, AND I FELL ASLEEP!"**

happy to play with me at Liverpool. It was amazing to hear that, but I was still sure I wanted to remain at Ajax.

**Were you upset that you initially weren't given a squad number in your second season with Madrid?**

*Fernando Garcia, via Facebook*

It wasn't easy, but I was able to pull through. The coach [Manuel Pellegrini] told me at the start of the season that I was his fifth choice in my preferred position, behind Guti, Kaka, [Esteban] Granero and Raul. I remember I had to train separately from the rest of the squad, like running alone around the training ground. But once the transfer window closed, I was reintegrated into the group. In the end, I was a regular starter in my position and put in some very good performances. People might argue that my time with Real Madrid was unsuccessful, but look at the stats and you will see that I played a lot of games and scored quite a lot of goals. When I look back on my Real Madrid career, I do so with a lot of fondness.

**In 109 games for the Netherlands, what was the most special moment?**

*Jory Ruijter, via Facebook*

The Euro 2008 group matches against Italy and France. It was pure pleasure to be on the pitch in those two games – I could've played for about six hours and not got tired. Both Euro 2008 and

the 2010 World Cup were brilliant to be a part of. In 2008 we were all thinking, 'Wow, we are really good', but it wasn't like we were expecting to go and win the tournament. In 2010, it was more or less the opposite. We had a feeling like, 'We don't play that impressively, but no one is going to beat us.' That's probably the best feeling you can have as a team during a major tournament.

**The Netherlands looked brilliant in the group stage at Euro 2008 – were you the favourites to win it ahead of Spain at that point? What happened against Russia in the quarter-finals?**

*Ralf Seiler, via Facebook*

At that point I think we were probably the favourites along with Spain. I think we were unlucky in the match against Russia. I took several free-kicks which went just wide and we had some other chances as well. We equalised near the end of normal time, but in extra time the Russians were still unbelievably fit. It was 40 degrees and they kept going.

**What are your thoughts on referee Howard Webb over his handling of the 2010 World Cup Final? Having come on as a sub during extra time, what went through your mind as Andres Iniesta scored the winner?**

*Leann Kooreman, via Twitter*

The referee had a difficult game. You know, with about a minute or two to

play in extra time, we got a free-kick and Wesley Sneijder's shot definitely took a deflection, but somehow Spain were awarded a goal-kick – we could not believe that decision. Soon after, Spain got the ball into our box. We did not get rid of it properly, and I tried to save the situation but was too late. I don't want to say the moment we should have had a corner decided it, but we thought: 'How is it possible?'

**Your switch to Tottenham Hotspur seemed to come out of nowhere – how long before transfer deadline day did you find out about it?**

**Was it a surprise even to you? Did you wake up that day with no idea where you'd go?**

*Sophia Ashton, via Facebook*

[Laughs] It was very last minute. Jose Mourinho had been honest about my chances at Real Madrid, telling me they had bought Mesut Özil to play in my position. He said I could stay, but that I wasn't in his starting XI.

At that point I was still keen to stay at Real for another season, so I headed to a training camp with the national team. But at around 4pm on deadline day, my lawyer called me to say Spurs were interested in signing me. I asked him if I could think about it. He replied that I had to decide within two hours! I started to evaluate everything, then took a little nap. Suddenly I was jolted awake by the phone going off. It was about 5.40pm and my lawyer was on the phone again, telling me that I had to decide there and then. I thought for a split second, then said, "Yeah, let's do it!" I had no time to overthink it or discuss it with anybody – it was pure intuition. Very soon I realised how happy I was with the decision. From the moment I arrived at Spurs Lodge, the club's former training ground, I felt at home.

**How did Harry Redknapp at Spurs (left) compare to your previous managers? He must have been pretty different...**

*Josh Hodgson, via Twitter*

He was a magical guy – a father figure – but Harry could also be rock-hard. He was very much an old-school type of coach. During a team talk, he'd pull out a little piece of paper on which he had written down the starting XI and would





"I TRY TO IMMERSE MYSELF IN THE EMOTION OF THE FANS. AGAINST ARSENAL, I WANTED TO GIVE THE SPURS FANS SOME PRIDE BACK"

say things to us like, "Just give the ball to Luka [Modric], then Luka can try to find Rafa, and you will win the game." Then, if we had played a really good first half, he would openly praise you, saying things like, "F\*\*king hell, Rafa, what a player!" He gave you a boost – you would run faster for someone like him. Redknapp's style suited my own very well, and it all fitted in perfectly with my overall positive image of the English game while I was at the club.

**Why did you kiss that old woman after you scored in Tottenham's 2-1 victory against Aston Villa in October 2010? Was she shocked?**

*Will Farmer, via Facebook*

I remember that! After scoring, I ran into a corner of fans and actually fell into her arms. [Laughs] It was more like a hug. It seemed like a lady of 80 years old – I don't know who she was.

**In your short career with Tottenham you managed to score a lot of goals against Arsenal and gave their fans some stick, too. Do you still hate the Gooners? How did the North London Derby compare to your other derbies?**

*Michael Kay, via email*

I never had anything against Arsenal, but when I joined Spurs I tried to learn about the club's traditions and I soon found out about the magnitude of the match. I always try to immerse myself in the emotions of the fans, and in the derbies against Arsenal I tried to give Spurs fans a little bit of their pride back. I wanted them to have something to cheer about at work the next morning.

Other derbies I played in were really special, too. Real against Atletico was a good atmosphere, and I played in El Clasico. That is not strictly a derby, but it's seen globally as the biggest game of the year – you can definitely feel it.

All over the world, people are talking about it, and it almost feels as if you are going to play the World Cup final.

**Did Jack Wilshere say anything to you after you'd utterly humiliated the Arsenal man by nutmegging him twice in the space of a few seconds?**

*Alex Fuller, via Facebook*

I don't remember him saying anything to me. All I remember is what I said to him afterwards: "Close your legs next time!" I still regard that Spurs-Arsenal game [in April 2011] as my best day in football. It was on a warm spring night, with a little evening sun and a brilliant atmosphere in the stadium – just the perfect footballing conditions. I had one of my best games that night. We went 1-0 down, I scored the equaliser, but then we let in two before pulling it back to 3-3, with me scoring another goal. Luka Modric missed a big chance





**Left** "Madrid? I wouldn't bother if I were you, Gaz"  
**Below** Gran van der Vaart gives Rafa a good smacker  
**Bottom** A stint with Real Betis proved short-lived  
**Bottom left** Hamburg is really where the heart is



a little bit strange considering what I'd achieved over the previous two years. I started the first match of the season on the subs' bench, so when Hamburg approached me, I thought it was a nice opportunity to go back. But I shouldn't have left Tottenham, though it's always easy to say that with hindsight. I had some brilliant times during my second spell in Hamburg, but the fact that we were in the relegation play-off in the second and third seasons wasn't good.

Estavana Polman, plays handball in Esbjerg. She's got a long, successful career ahead of her, so I was hoping that I could live quite close to her. At the same time, I wasn't playing a lot for Betis and Midtjylland showed an interest, so it was a win-win situation. Also, I'm still not that far away from Hamburg, where my 11-year-old son from a previous marriage lives. [FFT: Have you ever played handball?] No, she hasn't taught me anything yet!

**Where has it all gone wrong for Hamburg since your first spell there? They were Champions League regulars back then, but now they seem to be struggling at the bottom every season...**

*Marko Weisz, via Twitter*  
 I don't know. To be honest, when I moved back to Hamburg I was underwhelmed with the quality of their squad, especially as I'd come from such a good team at Spurs. Still, we managed to go from bottom of the table up to seventh place. That was a big achievement.

**What would say was the biggest mistake in your football career?**

*Luka Moran, via email*  
 Leaving Tottenham was not my best choice, but apart from that, there haven't been too many big regrets during my career.

## HIGHS & LOWS

**HIGH: 1993**

Joins the academy of his boyhood club Ajax, aged 10

**LOW: 2002**

Suffers knee injury and misses Ajax's first title win in four years

**HIGH: 2008**

Secures \$25 million switch from Hamburg to Real Madrid

**LOW: 2010**

Part of the Dutch side that loses the World Cup final to Spain

**HIGH: 2011**

Scores in third successive North London Derby for Tottenham

**LOW: 2012**

Leaves Spurs after Andre Villas-Boas' arrival as manager

**HIGH: 2013**

Named Hamburg club captain and helps them avoid relegation

**Be honest – do you ever wish that you'd been able to play in a different era when attacking midfielders and playmakers got appreciated by managers more, rather than now when they are asked to track back and do as much defensive work as the rest of the team?**

*Christine Venema, via Facebook*  
 I've experienced some good times,

**You took your grandmother along to your unveiling at Real Betis – what was the story behind that? There is a picture (left) where she was kissing you and you looked a bit embarrassed!**

*Michael Bachmeier, via Facebook*  
 Not at all – it was great that she was able to be there. My grandparents on my mother's side are from Spain and live not too far from Seville, so they came over to see my unveiling, as they did when I went to Real Madrid, too. It was great that they could attend.

**How did your move to Midtjylland happen? Did you pick a team in Denmark because your partner currently plays handball there for Esbjerg?**

*David Hicks, via Facebook*  
 There were a few factors in my decision. Firstly, my girlfriend,

but yeah, we seem to have experienced a tipping point. Nowadays, there's a lot more emphasis on pace and power in teams, and technically refined players seem to have less of a chance to shine. I experienced that at Betis, three years ago. I started off pretty well, but then I picked up an injury and couldn't get back in the team. The manager [Pepe Mel] told me that I was the best player on the ball but that he needed another kind of player in midfield. When I saw the team, I couldn't believe it – these players would kick the ball straight out of the stadium, but still get applauded as they were running around and doing lots of slide tackles. That's not the kind of player I wanted to be.

I hope the times when playmakers were appreciated more will come back again. Andres Iniesta, David Silva, Isco – those are the players that you want to go and watch week in, week out. ●

to make it 4-3 towards the end, which was a pity because we needed to win. I don't think the supporters had often experienced a derby quite as good as that one – it was an incredible match.

**Why did Spurs fall away in 2011-12, having looked like being right in the title race? Did the England rumours around Harry Redknapp distract the players? Spurs were amazing in the opening six months of that season...**

*Thomas Kemp, via Facebook*  
 I remember in the January we played a big match against Manchester City, who were five points ahead of us at that point. We were 2-0 down, before coming back to 2-2. In stoppage time we got this big chance, where Gareth Bale raced away, only to play the ball just too far in front of Jermain Defoe, who poked it wide. Moments later we gave away a penalty. Mario Balotelli

scored it, we lost the game and the gap became eight points, which was a huge blow to our title aspirations. Until then, we had been in such good form that it felt as if we had a genuine opportunity to win the Premier League title.

**You've gone on record as saying how much you regret leaving Spurs, so how exactly did that exit come about? Did you not really see eye to eye with AVB?**

*Ella Spencer, via Facebook*  
 Andre Villas-Boas wasn't the ideal coach for me. He bought Gylfi Sigurdsson and then told me he would be his new No.10. I found that





**"DON'T PUT ME ON THE SUBS' BENCH AGAIN!"** The gaffer of Argentine side Escuela Presidente Roca resigned after one of his players pulled a gun on him and demanded game time

# AROUND THE WORLD IN 12 STORIES

Neymar frolics in the French snow, an Italian pornstar helps out her local team and Partick's Conor Sammon is irked by pizza – it's been a month of weird deliveries

## 1 GOODNESS GRACIOUS, MEE England Burnley

There have been lots of iconic movie posters in the past: *Jaws*, *Pulp Fiction*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Saving Bernardo Silva*. Hang on, *Saving Bernardo Silva*?

When Ben Mee rugby-tackled Silva during Burnley's clash with Man City, he was pictured virtually carrying his opponent over his shoulder, as if the ex-Monaco ace had been wounded in battle. Burnley mocked it up into their own version of the *Saving Private Ryan* poster, with boss Sean Dyche peeking at the back. Next: Jack Cork cycles to the moon mid-match to recreate *ET*.

## 2 CHEVRON BONANZA Nigeria Lagos

Nigeria have launched their snazzy new kit range ahead of the World Cup – we haven't seen so much zig and zag since the days of *The Big Breakfast*.

The home jersey features chevrons – with black-and-white sleeves – and is a throwback to Nigeria's '94 World Cup kit. Here's hoping the homage doesn't end there, and Victor Moses celebrates scoring in Russia by pretending to wee on the corner flag, Finidi George-style.

## 3 "IT'S CHRISTMAS!" France Paris

You know that song *I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday*? That's basically Neymar's life, and to prove it, the Brazil star randomly donned a Christmas hat in February and dashed outside to take pictures of himself in the French snow.

Neymar didn't see many blizzards in Brazil or Spain, so perhaps Christmas films have conned him into thinking everyone puts on a Santa hat as soon as it snows. He then dashed inside to pull a cracker and watch some *Only Fools and Horses* Christmas specials for the 4,000th evening in succession.

## 4 THE REAL THEATRE OF DREAMS Japan Matsumoto

Don't expect a boring picture of a bloke holding up a shirt when J2 League side Matsumoto Yamaga announce a new signing. Instead the club hired a local theatre, lined their new players up on the stage and got scarf-twirling fans to serenade them in song.

The players had to sit and look polite for an uncomfortably long time. "OK, cheers guys, thanks for the welcome. Er, can we go to training now?"

## 5 "SAY MOZZARELLA, CONOR!" Scotland Partick

Conor Sammon had just come off the field after Partick Thistle's home loss to Dundee when somebody handed him a pizza and asked him to pose for the cameras. Result: the angriest product placement picture ever taken.

"Conor Sammon received his FREE pizza from Pizza Express after full-time on Saturday," the club tweeted, with a picture of the forward looking livid, as if he was ready to shove the pizza where the sun doesn't shine. Maybe he'd asked for pepperoni?

## 6 EVIL EYES Serbia Belgrade

There are few scarier places than Red Star Belgrade's Rajko Mitic Stadium, and it was no different for the Europa League visit of CSKA Moscow.

Before kick-off, ultras unveiled a tifo of a massive, menacing pair of eyes, staring down on the opposition in an attempt to frighten the life out of the players. The eyes seemed familiar – maybe they based the tifo on Conor Sammon after receiving that pizza...

## 7 WHO KNEW SPIDER-MAN WAS A MASSIVE FLAMENGO FAN? Brazil Rio de Janeiro

It's not every day that *FFT* gets a photo of Spider-Man wearing full Flamengo kit pretending to cry his eyes out, so we thought we'd share it with the world.

The superhero tweeted after Vinicius Jr angered Botafogo with a 'cry baby' goal celebration – referring to a press conference when Botafogo's players cried while whingeing about referees. Angry about the celebration, Botafogo cancelled plans for Flamengo to use their home stadium for the state final. Spider-Man didn't look too concerned.

## 8 "VIRGIL, IS THAT YOU?" England Southampton

When Liverpool took on Southampton, a few chaps dressed as dragons turned up outside the ground pre-match.

No, it wasn't Virgil van Dijk and Dejan Lovren arriving in disguise – the dragons were enjoying Chinese New Year. With huge white gnashers and a constant wide smile, Jurgen Klopp marked the dragons' presence with a 2-0 away win.

## 9 NO ONE MESSES WITH MARCUS RASHFORD'S DOG England Manchester

Alexis Sanchez's dogs usually take the headlines, but Atom and Humber would cower in fear if they ever suffered the misfortune of meeting Saint, Marcus Rashford's terrifying new pup.

Rashford unveiled the canine in full Man United grab – we look forward to the arrival of his second dog, Greavsie.

## 10 PORNSTAR TO THE RESCUE Italy Vicenza

The Serie C side Vicenza were declared bankrupt recently, but help may be at hand. Pornstar Amanda Fox, aka 'The Polish Venus', will donate 10 per cent of the profits from her calendar sale. She wants to assist because she often hosts at a lap dance club in the city.

She said the team's woes saddened her 'because the bankruptcy's 40 years since they finished in second place in Serie A'. Ah, the era of Vito Callioni and Giovanni Lorini, she remembers it well.

## 11 "JUST CALL ME KHABIB" Spain Madrid

Remember the name... Khabib Abdulmanapovich Nurmagomedov.

Actually, the 29-year-old Russian is pretty well known in UFC circles, and met up with Cristiano Ronaldo during a trip to Spain. He even got Ronnie to pose in a daft Russian hat – although given that Khabib has literally wrestled a bear, you'd probably just do what he says. "What's that, scary fighter man, you want me to put on the hat? OK!"

## 12 LOVE IS NOT IN THE AIR USA Atlanta

When the MLS got players from various clubs to pose for Valentine's Day, they thought it'd be a bit of fun. But Atlanta United's Josef Martinez had a different view, demanding that the MLS website remove a jaunty image of him posing with a rose between his teeth.

"That photo was when we were just joking around – they never told me it was going to go out," the Venezuelan fumed after the picture went viral. If Martinez and Conor Sammon one day unite and rock the world with a 'No to Stupid Promotional Pictures' campaign, remember how this all started.

## SIX OF THE BEST FIXTURES

**Adelaide United vs Newcastle Jets**  
Given first and second almost always face off in the GF, beating the Jets is now all-important.

**Newcastle Jets vs Melbourne City**  
So, yeah – everyone has them in their crosshairs in a bid to make up the lost ground.

**Melbourne Victory vs WSW**  
At the other end of the top six, it's Western Sydney Wanderers who can't afford to lose

# 127

**D'OH!** A Turkish fan lost 127 tickets for Bayern Munich's clash with Besiktas after putting them on his car roof while he filled the boot – only to forget, then drive off



**Norway vs Australia**  
Our very first glimpse of what lies in store from Bert van Marwijk and the Socceroos.

**Colombia vs Australia**  
Will it be defensive and aggressive, or pick up Ange's pass and press? Three or four at the back?

**LA Galaxy vs LAFC**  
The first ever MLS game between LA Galaxy and new franchise LAFC, part-owned by Will Ferrell

# GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

## JAAP STAM



"WHEN SOMEONE MENTIONS A CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL, I'LL THINK OF 2005 BEFORE '99. THE PAIN STAYS WITH YOU LONGER"

### Netherlands 0-1 Germany

April 24, 1996 Friendly

"When I received my first call from the national coach, Guus Hiddink, I thought it was a friend playing a joke, but it was a proud moment. I was a sub and spent the second half wondering if I was going to play. With 10 minutes left I came on to replace John Veldman – I was full of nerves but did well. We lost, but at least Germany didn't score while I was on!"

### Man United 2-1 B Munich

May 26, 1999 Champions League final

"I couldn't have wished for a better first season in England, winning the Premier League, the FA Cup and then the climax to it all. I remember looking at the Camp Nou clock as the minutes counted down. It looked bad but Teddy Sheringham and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer scored in the best two minutes of my whole career. We had a brilliant party that night to celebrate."

### Italy 0-0 Netherlands (3-1p)

June 29, 2000 European Championship

"We were hosting the Euros and should have won it, but lost to Italy in the semis. We missed two penalties during normal time, then it went to a penalty shootout. I hadn't been on the original list to take one but the pressure got to some of the players, so they asked me to go forward. My technique was always to smash it as hard as I could, but it flew over the bar. There's still a hole in the stadium roof..."

### Milan 3-3 Liverpool 3 (2-3p)

May 25, 2005 Champions League final

"When someone mentions a Champions League final, I always think of this before 1999 – the pain of that defeat stays with you for longer. When the first Liverpool goal went in, we lost all our organisation and focus. When it got to penalties, we were down; they were lifted. But forget the rumours we celebrated at half-time: we had too much experience to do that."





**HE JUST HAD TO TAKE IT TOO FAR** A Norwegian Liverpool fan has called his new baby girl 'YNWA' after anthem *You'll Never Walk Alone*. It's pronounced 'Unn-wah', apparently...

**REQUIRED READING**



**The Illustrated History of Football: Hall of Fame**  
David Squires  
(Century, \$37.99)

The admired illustrator released his first book just over 12 months ago and, such was its success, has followed it up with another.

In his latest effort, the Australia-based Swindon fan, known for his sketchings in *The Guardian*, looks at the legends of the game (and Jan Aage Fjortoft). He's able to combine his brilliant illustration skills with jokes about the stars and amusing cultural references about the likes of Donald Trump and Nigel Farage.

There's something for all ages – legends featured range from Liverpool manager Bill Shankly and Brazilian winger Garrincha to Cristiano Ronaldo and John Terry.

Be astonished by Zlatan Ibrahimovic karate-chopping an orca, Darren Peacock getting his kit off for a magazine shoot and Johan Cruyff puzzling a cat with philosophical ideas about the game.

It's perfect to dip in and out of, and will keep you chuckling.

# ONE QUESTION QUIZ WHO'S THE GOALKEEPER?

Name the shot-stoppers from these images created by goalkeeper-turned-illustrator Doug Nash

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20

**Answers** 1) Gianluigi Buffon; 2) Jose Luis Chilavert; 3) Petr Cech; 4) Neville Southall; 5) Manuel Neuer; 6) Jorge Campos; 7) David Seaman; 8) Karen Bardley; 9) David de Gea; 10) Fabien Barthez; 11) Gabor Kiraly; 12) Steve Ogrizovic; 13) Tim Howard; 14) Bruce Grobbelaar; 15) Harald 'Toni' Schumacher; 16) Rene Higuita; 17) Iker Casillas; 18) Kasper Schmeichel; 19) Peter Schmeichel; 20) Jens Martin Knudsen

TALENTSPOTTER

LAUTARO MARTINEZ



**COMPARED TO:** Gabriel Batistuta – at least that’s how Argentina boss Jorge Sampaoli sees him. Martinez begs to differ: “No, no, I want to be like Radamel Falcao.”

**THE STORY SO FAR:** A natural No.9 and a lethal finisher. His goal record shows that when deployed centrally. Made his debut aged 15 at Liniers, moving to Racing Club a year later. In contention to make Argentina’s World Cup squad, he turned down a loan move to Real Madrid Castilla in 2016 and then looked set to join Atletico Madrid. He is now bound for Serie A side Inter this summer, having hit a hat-trick when one of the Nerazzurri’s directors went to see him. Arsenal were also linked.

**NICKNAME:** El Toro (‘The Bull’), because of his strength. Celebrates goals by emulating the horns of a bull with his fingers.



**SOCIAL MEDIA:**

Not into it any more.

“I used to spend a lot of time on it, but most things I read were not doing me any good,” he said. “If you score three goals you are the best. If you miss, the fans ask what you are doing at Racing!”

**DID YOU KNOW?** Sent off against England at last year’s U20 World Cup, for elbowing Fikayo Tomori...

**HE SAID:** “I would rather watch a basketball game than football”, although he gave up a potential basketball career when he was 15.

CLUB RACING CLUB POSITION FORWARD

VALUE	FOOT	HEIGHT	NATION	AGE
\$35m	R	1.75m	ARG	20

WOULD YOU BUY THIS?

WOLVES’ WOLF HEAD SCULPTURE

Concerned about burglars in your neighbourhood? If so, scare them off with the most frightening club shop item that FFT has ever seen. Plonk this in your front window and the would-be thieves will soon go running for the hills. The ceramic polystone wolf bust, described as ‘a piece of contemporary sporting art’, is 36cm high and available to buy from Wolverhampton Wanderers’ online store for... \$360.



TATT'S JUST THE TICKET

Football clubs get under your skin – like Pauline Hanson.

But while no one with their marbles intact would get Hanson inked onto their arm, Hertha Berlin are hoping the promise of a lifetime entry to the Olympiastadion will tempt one of their fans to make the skin sacrifice.

Last month, the club announced a competition like no other. A tattoo of the club’s crest, complete with QR code that can act as a never-ending season ticket, will go to the fan who best demonstrates their devotion to Hertha. It sounds like lunacy, but the locals are loving it.

“We’ve had more than 800 applicants with lyrics, photos and videos,” club spokesman Daniel Schmid tells FFT. “Hertha is a club full of emotion. We’re looking for somebody who’ll show his passion for the club with a lifetime symbol.”

Waiting with his kit is one of Berlin’s most noted tattoo artists known as, er, ‘Love is Pain’.

Hertha will hope the QR code does its job, or he might have to lay low. Possibly forever.

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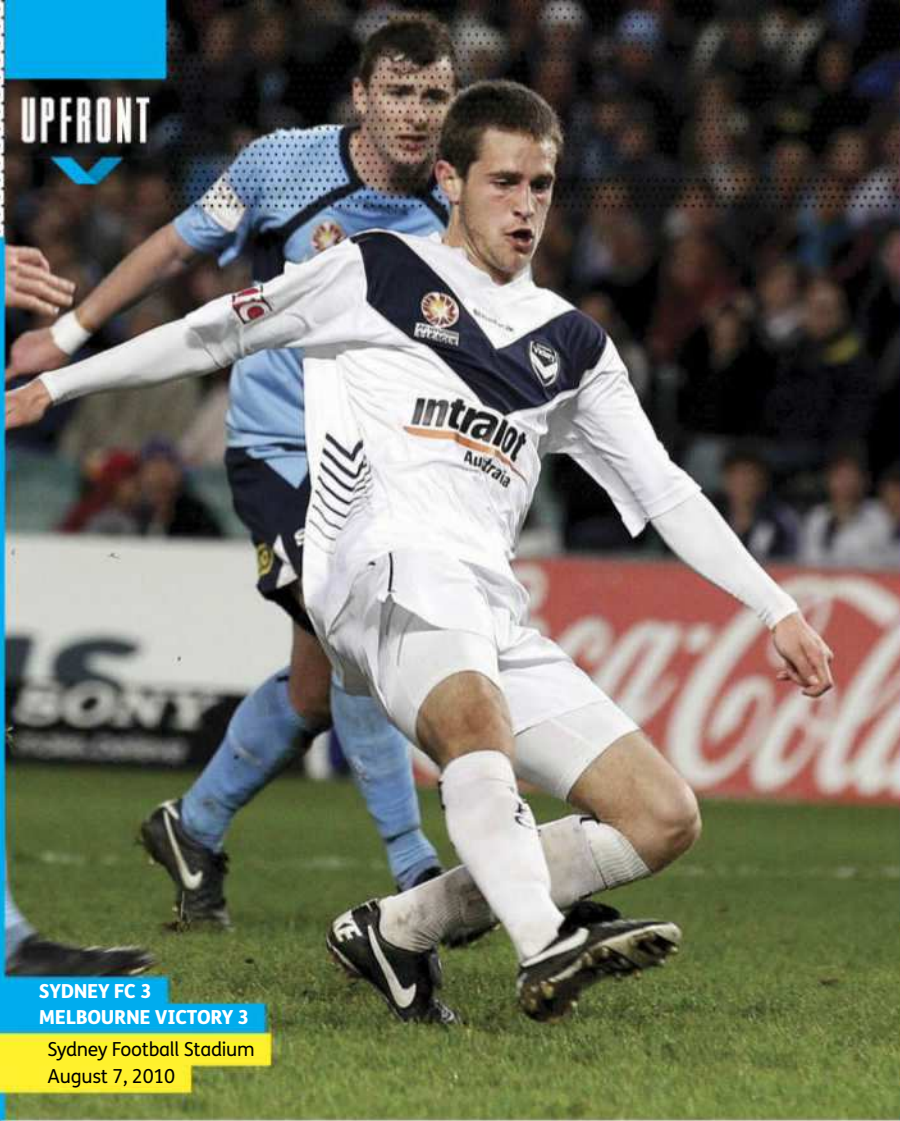
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SYDNEY FC 3  
MELBOURNE VICTORY 3

Sydney Football Stadium  
August 7, 2010

# MY GREATEST GOAL

## MATE DUGANDZIC

### THE LEAD UP

It was Round 1 of the 2010/11 season and it was a grand final rematch. We had lost the big dance to Sydney FC. Archie Thompson and Robbie Kruse were out injured and Ney Fabiano and Danny Allsopp had left the club. We had no one else to play up top, so I was a makeshift striker for the game and just remember having to come up against the likes of Hayden Foxe and Stephan Keller. They were a really experienced team and everyone was buzzing because it was the first game. I had only played a handful of senior games at that point and it was good for my confidence, as bad as it was for Archie and Krusey to be out.

### THE MATCH

We were under the pump and found ourselves 2-0 down. They could've been up by a lot more before we started to mount a little comeback. I remember Kevin Muscat was caught out for the first goal and the second goal was a long ball and Terry McFlynn and it looped over Michael Petkovic to make it 2-0. We were struggling and coach Ernie Merrick made a change. Tommy Pondeljak went out wide and Leigh Broxham scored his first A-League goal.

### THE GOAL

After Broxy scored the goal, it took about two minutes, Tomi whipped in a ball and it went just behind me. It magically fell to me, I just took a touch and I thought 'I'm going to get under a bit of pressure here, I'm just going to turn and shoot straight away.' I've taken a touch to try to get one-on-one and it worked out really well because I was in between a couple of defenders and I just slotted it through. I didn't have much of a celebration, we just tried to get it back to the centre-circle looking for the winner. It was more because we had a bit of momentum after that, we were buzzing, but we wanted to keep it going.

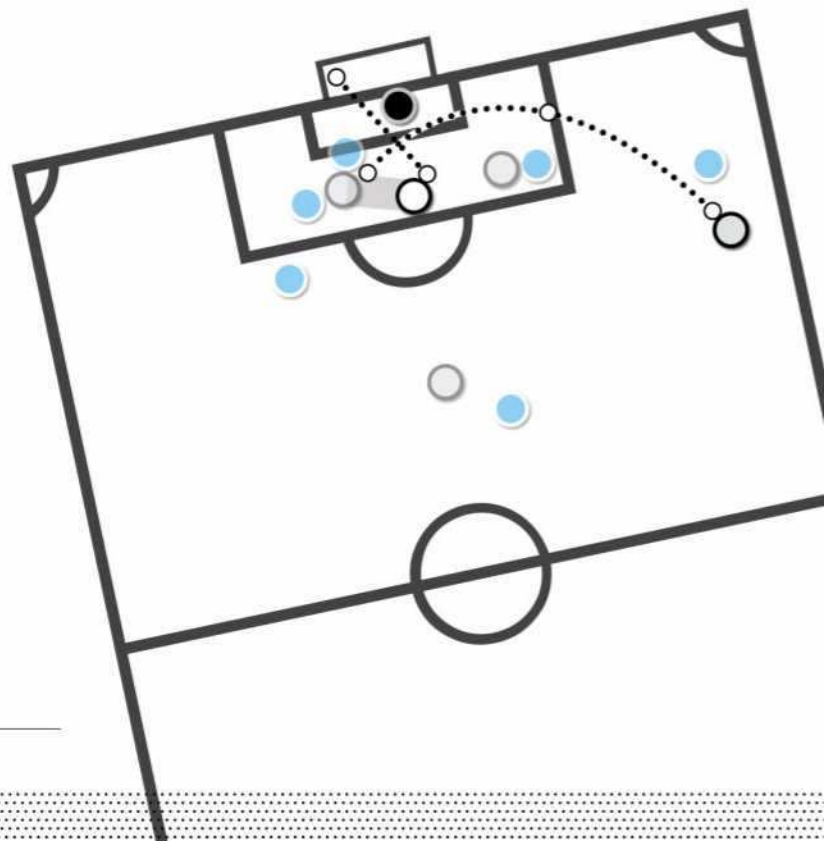
### THE AFTERMATH

We were burning after the penalty loss last year and to go there without Archie and Krusey. We came back from 2-0 down to go up 3-2 as Billy Celeski got the third goal, in his first game back from a while. It was a bit of sour ending as we ended up drawing 3-3. We then came back to play our first ever home game at AAMI Park the week after. I started, we struggled, Perth Glory downed us 2-0 and it wasn't my best game from memory.

### THE CONTENDERS

It would have to be my first goal against Adelaide United in the 2009/10 season. I made my starting debut and we won 3-1 and I got a brace and I was up against Scott Jamieson who was

having a top year. I just remember Sutee Suksomkit took on some players and the ball fell to me and my shot took a slight deflection and went into the bottom corner. That would have to be a close second.



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**LEAVE IT, GRANDAD** Sao Paulo's U20 game with Botafogo was delayed when a middle-aged ball boy quarrelled with players and kicked a sub as fans chanted 'Ball boy, ball boy'



**ANTONIO CONTE'S MONTH IN MUSIC**

**Oh! Oh! Antonio**

Florrie Forde

**Under Attack**

ABBA

**Don't Call Me**

The Swon Brothers

**Clown**

Emeli Sande

**No Way Jose**

Ray Kennedy

**You Are**

Pearl Jam

**Senile**

Young Money

**Here Comes Revenge**

Metallica

**Can We Fix It?**

Bob The Builder

**Little Man, What Now**

Morrissey

**Don't Go There**

Giggs vs B.o.B.

**Not Guilty**

The Beatles



**WIN A TRIP TO THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP™ WITH HISENSE!**

Look, sometimes you have to admit defeat: Not EVERYONE is going to make it to Russia this year... (Yeah, sorry to rub salt into those wounds again Italy, Holland, Chile and Scotland fans.)

And with the best will in the world, sometimes savings just won't stretch all the way to Moscow.

But Socceroo stalwart Mile Jedinak is here to try to help get you sipping vodka in Sochi or eating caviar in Kazan...

Hisense, the official television of the 2018 FIFA World Cup™, is celebrating its new partnership with Jedi as local brand ambassador by launching a nationwide competition to take two lucky Hisense customers to the 2018 FIFA World Cup™ in Russia – and it could be you (so long as you buy one of their TVs, of course!)

But you'll have to be quick...

Anyone who snaps up a Hisense product before April 15 from a participating authorised Hisense Australia retailer will be eligible to enter.

Entrants simply fill out an online registration form, and come up with their best answer to the question: "Why do you want to go to Russia?"

Runners up have a chance to win one of 175 Hisense FIFA World Cup™ Premium Prize Packs.

Hisense recently announced a new range of ULED televisions, and, for the first time, an OLED television at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. The new models will be launched locally in the coming months.

Worst case scenario? You get a great new TV to watch the action on! Everyone's a winner!

For more information on the Hisense competition go to [www.hisense.com.au/worldcup-competition](http://www.hisense.com.au/worldcup-competition)



**ISN'T THAT DEON BURTON?**

Think of footballers who have conquered the modelling world, and Deon Burton's name isn't the first that comes to mind.

A member of the Jamaica World Cup squad at France 98, the ex-Derby striker has been starring in several advertising campaigns since he hung up his boots – but don't expect to see him in his pants on a poster.

Instead he's doing shoots with Iceland, Tesco and the Hilton Hotels – most clients don't know about his past. "Unless we get talking, most people have no idea that I'm an ex-footballer," the 41-year-old tells FFT. "I did an Iceland ad with Peter Andre and they didn't know until people started to put stuff on social media."

Burton got into the modelling lark when he was spotted during a shoot for which his son was auditioning. All of the Burton clan now do it – except his wife, who is replaced by another woman in family pictures (top).

"I do have a model wife," chuckles Deon. "She's a friend of my real wife, so it can be quite odd to pretend otherwise when we're shooting together in a hot tub."

It's a hard life...



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#SBSFootball

# AT THE END OF THE DAY RODDY VARGAS

## “Defenders have forgotten how to defend. It’s about winning tackles and headers...”

Melbourne Victory’s backline hero RODDY VARGAS has opinions on modern football. Just don’t pull his hair...

**I knew I made it as a player** when I signed for Melbourne Knights. I was lucky enough to play in the Victorian Premier League at 16 for Springvale City back in the day. When I signed in the old NSL for the Knights, it hit home that I was doing what I liked and it was my profession. It was my first real professional contract.

**I was happiest when** I won Championships - they were the best times, looking back. I won two with Melbourne Victory. Accomplishing something as a group is really hard to do at any level. When I think about football, it’s all about winning trophies.

**My hero growing up** was Paul Trimboli. I followed South Melbourne because they were the closest team to us. I looked up to a lot of guys from that team.

**The funniest thing** was when I had my hair pulled against Wollongong Wolves. I had a really long ponytail and one of the strikers pulled my hair, I was shocked because it had never happened before. It was very strange.

**The day football broke my heart** was when I retired from professional football. When my time was up with Melbourne Victory, I was shattered.



**My proudest moment** was winning the 2007 Championship. We thrashed Adelaide United 6-0. But also to represent my country was another big highlight.

**If I could change one thing**, it would be to force defenders to defend. We’ve lost the essence in the game. I’m a defender and I look at defenders really closely in games and their ability to pass and play. I think a lot of us think defenders have forgotten how to defend. It’s about winning tackles and headers. I think we’re losing a lot of the basics with all the new curriculums coming around.

**If it wasn’t for football** I would’ve played AFL. I loved footy growing up and I was a mad Carlton supporter. We grew up watching footy games at the MCG and playing on the field. Throughout my whole high school I mostly played AFL.

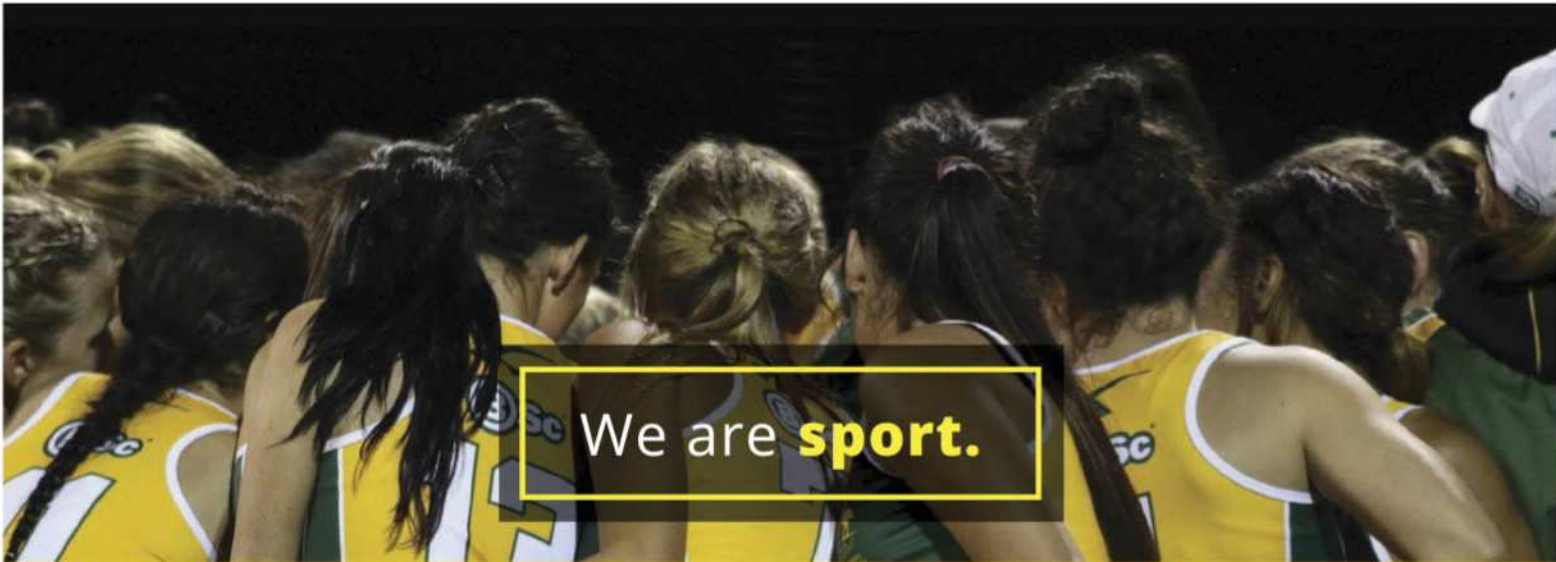
**Three words that sum me up** humble, compassionate and a fighter.

**If you could have one wish** just to be healthy and happy. I had a pretty good career and life. I had two healthy kids and a beautiful wife. Just to remain happy and to have another child.

**Right now** I’m lucky enough to be involved in the game I love and I’m working with the U20s at Melbourne Victory with Grant Brebner and I’m also coaching at two schools running football academy programs.







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UPFRONT



# MY BEST MATE'S A FOOTBALL STAR

Mitch Austin and Martin Ross



They're the very definition of an odd couple: The reserved Melbourne Victory winger known for his lightning speed v the high-flying real estate agent dealing in Sydney trophy homes. But it's a friendship that's stood the test of time and distance...

Austin spent six years playing in England until 2015 when he signed with Central Coast Mariners. In November last year he tore his anterior cruciate ligament in a training ground collision with Victory goalkeeper Lawrence Thomas.

The season-ending injury has been a bruising test of character for the 26-year-old. And when your best plans go up in smoke, it helps to have a mate who "doesn't give two shits" about the game...

INTERVIEW Kathy Stone

**How did you break the news of your injury?**

**Mitch:** It took me a while to tell most people really. I was so devastated when it happened, and that the knee injury was as bad as it was. So it took me two or three days. Obviously I told my mum and dad first. It was hard to sort of tell people about it... then I sort of put it on social media just to let everyone else know I wasn't going to be playing again this season.

**Was Martin any help?**

**Mitch:** Well I feel you've got to keep yourself around positive people, people who care about you.

**Martin:** Having a strong support network is really important.

**Mitch:** And someone who's not talking to me like I'm crippled. Which is good because obviously when I'm at training, like everyone was just asking, 'How's your injury? How's your knee?' - that kind of stuff.

**You took a step back from football?**

**Mitch:** Yeah, just over Christmas for a week or so - just to get away really, because it's sort of a lonely place. I'm doing everything on my own down there. I need a little help really so it was good to come home for a bit. And when I'm hanging out with Martin it's not all about the knee, we're talking about other stuff. It take's my mind off it, which is one of the main things.



**Martin:** My work's got nothing to do with sport. I couldn't care two shits about it, which is good because I hate talking about my job when I'm not working and I guess the last thing Mitch sort of wants to talk about is a game. It's a bit Ying and Yang. Because we're polar opposites it just makes for a relaxing friendship.

**Have you ever watched any of Mitch's games?**

**Martin:** Yeah, even though I hate... well I don't hate the sport I just don't have much interest in it.

**Mitch:** He always came to my home games on the Central Coast.

**Martin:** I even came to Melbourne.

**How did you guys meet?**

**Mitch:** I've got a twin sister Brittany. They were working at Beaconsfield McDonalds - Martin was the manager. They were friends and we just sort of became friends as well.

**Martin:** We just started hanging out - clubbing, things like that - and the friendship grew from there.

**Mitch:** I was playing for Rotherham (England) at the time and it was in the offseason when I came back and we just sort of hit it off in the two months I was back. That was years and years ago.

**Was it tough keeping in contact with people back home?**

**Mitch:** Yeah. I left school when I was 16 and lost touch with most of my friends because I was away for so long. Martin was really the only one I kept talking to when I was over there. Even now most of the other friends that I've got are in England.

**So it's not a friendship based on sport?**

**Martin:** There was this time we went to pitch and putt at Terrey Hills which was like a three par golf course. So I rock up with these golf clubs and these amazing golf shoes and Mitchell was concerned that I was going to be really good.

**Mitch:** When I saw all his golfing gear I thought, here we go - this is going to be good. And it was probably the worst golf I've ever seen.

**Martin:** I turned out to be really shit.

**Best place to get away from it all?**

**Martin:** Port Douglas was pretty good.

**Mitch:** Yeah we went in July last year.



**Where to next?**

**Martin:** Well, I want to do Hamilton Island. I reckon that'll be good.

**Mitch:** That's the plan. We didn't get to get to do the snorkelling at Port Douglas because the weather wasn't great.

**Martin:** Yeah visibility was shit.

**Mitch:** So we're hoping to do that, snorkelling, and see the reef and the fish and all that kind of stuff.

**Martin:** Maybe introduce you to sailing too mate.





SO WHO'S THE  
BEST  
YOUNG  
PLAYER  
IN THE WORLD?

This time last year, Kylian Mbappe had started just 19 senior matches for Monaco, was uncapped by France and largely unknown – now he's a superstar who has Champions League and World Cup glory in his sights

Words James Eastham Photography Cyril Masson



“HIAAAAAAGO!”

It's a sunny afternoon over at Paris Saint-Germain's Camp des Loges training facility, nestled in woodland to the north of the chic residential district of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, around 30 minutes west of Paris. Long-limbed and lithe, Kylian Mbappe has come bounding into the room and now he's standing with his nose pressed up against the window, gazing out onto the first-team training pitches. They appear in pristine condition thanks to the sterling work of two groundskeepers, who have only just finished pushing a pair of industrial-strength lawnmowers across the turf in perfect straight lines.

Thiago Motta is doing some one-on-one fitness work with a member of PSG's coaching team on the far side of the pitches. It was Mbappe who'd shouted out the name of the Brazil-born Italy international, in that way excitable teenagers do when they spot one of their favourite players at close quarters.

But Mbappe is no ordinary teenager. Rather than merely being a fan, of course, he's Motta's team-mate, and provisionally the second-most expensive player in the world behind Neymar. Increasingly, he is also the poster boy for PSG's oil-powered project, and the French game in general. On top of all that, he's widely regarded as the most naturally brilliant footballer under the age of 21 alive and kicking anywhere on the planet right now.

Yet standing here on this sunny afternoon – wearing a camouflage tracksuit and trainers, bristling with youthful energy, chattering away about how PSG often train after lunch these days and wondering aloud when Motta will be fit and ready for first-team action again – he looks and sounds just like any other football-mad 19-year-old boy, eager to gossip about his favourite team before shooting outside for a kickabout with his best friends.

“Shall we sit down?” he asks *FFT* in perfect English, approaching the chairs in one of many first-floor rooms set aside for player interviews. Ah, *tres bien!* He then explains that he speaks a bit of English having learnt it in school, but finds it quite tough. Sounds like modesty – the ease with which he delivered his ‘shall we’ suggested he's got a little more *anglais* in his locker than he's letting on.

Whether or not he gets to use his English in the Premier League at some stage in his career, 2016-17 will always be the campaign where Mbappe broke through in sensational style. He's now such an instantly recognisable name on the international football scene, it's very easy to forget how fast he's gone from being just another dazzlingly talented teen off the never-ending French *centre de formation* (youth academy) production line, to a possible heir to Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as the world's best player.

The rise has been suitably rapid – and he's nowhere near done yet...

### CHELSEA, REAL MADRID... AS BONDY?!

Mbappe was born and raised in Bondy, 11km north-east of the centre of Paris. His father played football to a decent amateur level and then became a coach at the local club AS Bondy, while his mother played handball in the French first division – Kylian clearly had the appropriate pedigree. “My family having a sporting background definitely helped me because it meant they understood what I wanted to do with my life,” explains Mbappe. “It's something they had already lived through themselves, so their experiences meant I had their support and was able to avoid making certain mistakes.”

His older brother, Jires Kembo Ekoko, is a professional footballer as well. Now 30, he plays for the Turkish outfit Bursaspor after starting out with Rennes, with whom he racked up 110 appearances in France's top flight, primarily as a winger, and scored 16 goals.

Talking about his sibling, Mbappe's eyes light up. “When I was younger, Jires was my idol and he used to inspire me,” beams Kylian. “I don't think I'm unusual in that respect, because I think there are lots of younger brothers out there that look up to their older brothers and want to do the same thing as them. I used to try to watch all of

“AT BONDY MY FATHER WAS MY COACH AND HE PROBABLY SHOUTED AT ALL THE OTHER PLAYERS A BIT MORE THAN HE DID AT ME”

his games. We often went to watch him play live in the stadium when he was at Rennes. Having him as my brother definitely made me even more keen to become a footballer.”

The more Mbappe talks, the more apparent it becomes that part of the reason – perhaps the primary reason – he has dealt with his rapid ascension so level-headedly is that he's essentially been preparing for life as a professional footballer since he was at primary school.

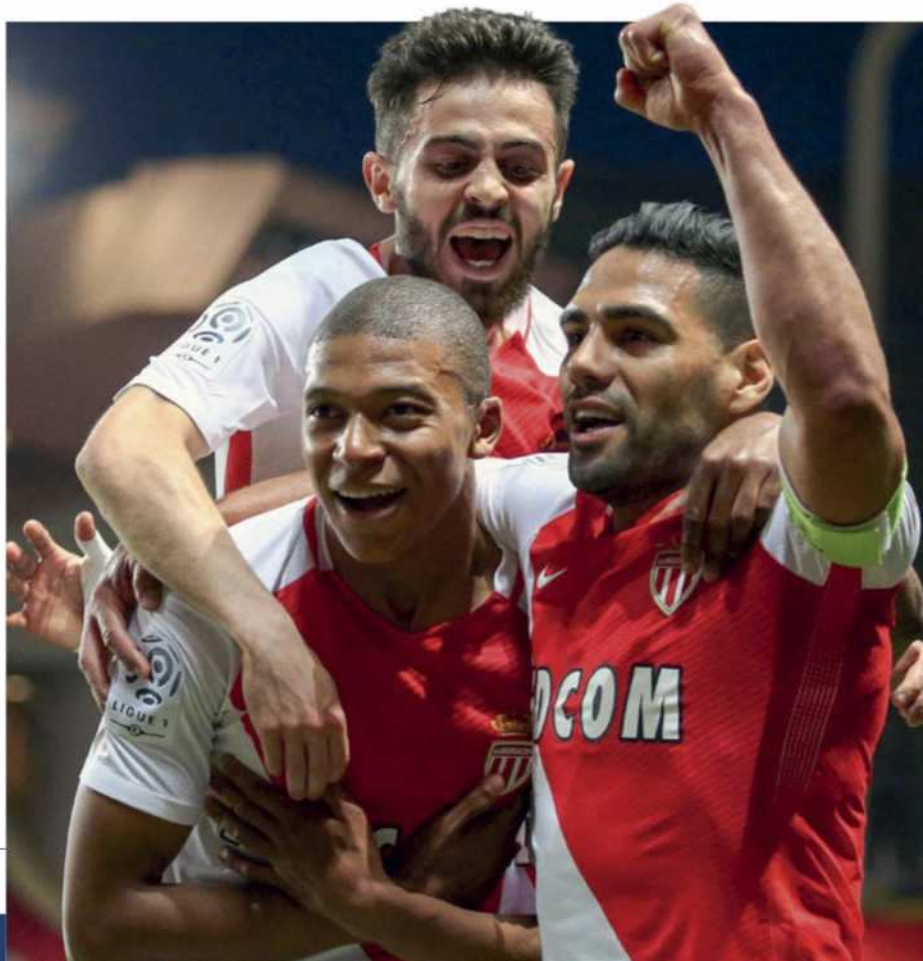
Chelsea, Clairefontaine, Real Madrid, Monaco – he talks through the moments and milestones that marked out his childhood the way the rest of us might recall the day we went to big school. Yet he recounts his singular adolescence without a hint of arrogance or ego. This was, quite simply, his reality.

“I started out with local team AS Bondy when I was only four or five years old,” he says. “I played for them all the way up until I signed for Monaco, because while at Clairefontaine I played for AS Bondy on the weekends. My father was my coach. At the football, we definitely had a player-coach relationship, though he probably shouted at the other players a bit more than he did at me!”

Even at this early stage, news had got out that the boy from Bondy might be something a bit special. Chelsea had become aware of the youngster's potential and invited him to London for a trial. It was his first taste of the big time.

“I was still young back then, maybe 10 or 11,” he continues. “I went to London and spent just under a week over there. I trained at Chelsea and we played a friendly match against Charlton. We won 6-0 or 7-0.”

Below Mbappe celebrates with Monaco pals Bernardo Silva and Radamel Falcao. Below left Best. Birthday. Ever! Kylian trialed at Real Madrid when he turned 14





I played upfront, but I don't think I scored any goals. It was great – it was my first experience abroad and a chance for me to see what the game was like in England.”

Then it was back to Bondy before, at 13, Mbappe was invited to join France's prestigious national training academy at Clairefontaine. The best boys from the Paris region live and train there from 13 to 15, with Thierry Henry and Nicolas Anelka among the famous alumni.

“Clairefontaine was great,” says Kylian. “It's mainly about preparing you step by step for joining a professional team's youth academy, so that the shock's not too dramatic when you finally do that. You start to learn about what football will be like as a job as well. Even though the game at that age is mainly about having fun, you want it to end up as your full-time career.

“We all lived together during the week and then went home to our families at the weekends. For me it was easy because Clairefontaine's just one hour from the family home.”

While there, he was invited to train with Real Madrid, and you get the impression that, for Mbappe, this was even more exciting than going to England to play for Chelsea.

“It was a dream because it was the week of my 14th birthday,” he reveals. “I celebrated my birthday there with the Real Madrid players. It was during the holidays and Clairefontaine gave me permission to travel. I played in a friendly match while I was there but it was against a local amateur team, not a professional side. Overall the trip was an amazing experience for me.”

After two years training at the academy, the time had come to join a professional club. There were plenty of offers, but rather than taking the obvious choice and staying closer to home, he and his family opted for Monaco. With a billionaire owner in Russian Dmitry Rybolovlev and a history of royal patronage, Les Monegasques may be seen as a rich man's plaything, but their centre of excellence has always maintained a terrific reputation, providing four graduates for France's 1998 World Cup-winning squad (Lilian Thuram, Emmanuel Petit, Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet). Taking himself out of his comfort zone, a 15-year-old Mbappe decided to make the 1,000km move down south and installed himself on the French Riviera.

“At that point in time Monaco were just starting to put together an exciting new playing project, signing people like Radamel Falcao,” he says. “I was searching for a big challenge from a football point of view, but the school side of things was also important. Taking all factors into account, Monaco was the best opportunity for me to develop both as a footballer and also as a teenager. It was a long way from home, but during that first year my father moved down with me to help me settle in. After that, my family also came to Monaco to visit me frequently, so I didn't get homesick.”

The youngster then tells *FFT* something that offers an insight into his astonishing maturity. It proves that his ability to assess a situation and identify how to quickly turn it into a positive exists off the pitch as well as on it, too.

“Being at a youth academy's really difficult – you go on such a long journey and, at the end of it, there's absolutely no guarantee that you will make it,” he says. “There are a lot of you in an academy – 40 or 50 boys, I think – and by the end perhaps only one or two of you will make it. But then, life's all about taking risks.”

It's rare to hear a young player so succinctly and accurately analyse how hard it is to make the grade as a professional, while also realising that taking risks is inevitable if you want to achieve your dream. Some players' downfall is that they think they've made the grade before it's a reality, while others are overwhelmed by the odds being stacked so heavily against them from the start, and fade from view. In contrast, Mbappe understood exactly what was required and set about acting on that information, highlighting the focus, drive, determination and brains, as well as talent, that have got him where he is today.

#### FROM SUBSTITUTES' BENCH TO GOLDEN BOY

It's hard to believe now, but at times during the first half of last season Mbappe ranked as low as fourth or fifth-choice striker for Monaco. So concerned was his father, Wilfried, that at one point he took the step of speaking to the press, telling the media he was unhappy at his son's



“MONACO WAS THE BEST PLACE TO DEVELOP BOTH AS A FOOTBALLER AND AS A TEENAGER”

lack of game time at the Stade Louis II, and querying whether he had done the right thing in advising his son – who has no agent – to reject overtures from abroad and agree to pen his first professional contract at Monaco in March 2016.

Within weeks of his father's comments, Mbappe found himself in the first team. On December 14 – a week shy of his 18th birthday – Kylian made what was his sixth start of the season in a Coupe de la Ligue tie at home to Rennes. He scored a hat-trick in the Principality side's 7-0 thrashing, and never looked back.

The higher the stakes, the better Mbappe played. As Monaco chased domestic and continental prizes in the spring he upped his game, and from February onwards he scored 18 goals in 21 starts. The fact he'd begun the season as a rookie, playing for Monaco's under-19 team in





**Above** Rampaging against Rennes: Kylian scored two goals in PSG's 6-1 cup rout at the beginning of January

front of a few parents at the club's La Turbie training facility, made his impact all the more remarkable. He ended 2016-17 as a Ligue 1 title winner, Champions League semi-finalist and Ligue 1 Young Player of the Year with 26 goals and 11 assists in all competitions, including six Champions League strikes converted at a rate of one every 89 minutes. Among Europe's elite strikers, only Barcelona genius Lionel Messi boasted a better goals-per-minute ratio in the continent's premier knockout tournament.

The prizes and plaudits have kept coming ever since. His trademark jet-heeled accelerations that leave defenders eating dirt have drawn comparisons with the original Ronaldo and Thierry Henry, while his sniper-like finishing is reminiscent of a fearless, teenage Michael Owen. In October 2017, Mbappe won Italian sports daily *Tuttosport's* 'Golden Boy' trophy, awarded to the top U21 player in Europe. He collected almost twice as many votes as his second-placed compatriot Ousmane Dembele (right) and was way ahead of other contenders like Marcus Rashford (3rd) and Gabriel Jesus (4th).

The attention and almost impossible expectations would surely have floored a less grounded, well-rounded player. Impressively mature on and off the pitch, the French sensation has taken the acclamation as he does through-balls from Neymar, Thomas Lemar and others lucky enough to line up alongside him – in his stride.

"After growing up anonymously in Paris, it's not weird to be so well-known – no, no, no," he tells *FFT*.

"I have a normal life. I live with my family, I go to training, I come back again. I don't have any problems. It's also been much easier for me to adapt to a move like this [to PSG] than I might have done with a move abroad, because there's no language barrier.

"Plus I grew up living in Paris when I was younger, so I know what the weather is like here," he laughs.

"OK, it's a bit cold. It's definitely colder than in Monaco, no contest, but then you can't have everything, right?"

Looking back on his breakthrough season on the south coast, Mbappe acknowledges that the club charmed fans across the continent, but says he and his team-mates only recognised what they had all accomplished when it was over. ▶



"The truth is we didn't realise what we'd done was *that* special," he says with a shrug. "It only really dawned on us when the season had finished. We were caught up in our own little world. We were playing, winning and putting together a run of results, but no one understood quite how well we were actually doing. It was a bit like being locked in your own room; we didn't see what was happening outside."

Mbappe explains the moment that Monaco's players truly believed they could achieve what many had said was impossible – wresting the Ligue 1 title away from a seemingly untouchable Paris Saint-Germain team, four-times winners from 2013 to 2016 – came on matchday 26 of the 38-game campaign.

"I remember it very well," he says. "It was the weekend just before our Champions League last 16 first leg game against Manchester City. We were at Bastia and only drew 1-1. It was a disappointing result. The same weekend PSG were hosting Toulouse. A few days earlier they had thrashed Barcelona 4-0 in their Champions League last 16 first leg. We knew that if they beat Toulouse, they'd move to within one point of us and would be difficult to hold off. But they drew 0-0. They slipped up as well. It kept us three points ahead of them at the top of the table. From that point onwards the players really felt as though we could go on and win the league title."

Monaco then headed straight into their Champions League match against Man City, one of the most exciting and memorable knockout phase clashes in recent history. Mbappe officially announced himself to an English audience in breathtaking fashion, smashing a powerful strike high into the net after breaking behind the City defence. Erratic defending meant Les Monegasques lost 5-3 at the Etihad Stadium, but Mbappe stood out in the second leg as well. He set the Principality side on their way to a 3-1 win on the night – and away goals triumph – with an instinctive close-range toe-poke, giving Monaco the lead only eight minutes into the Stade Louis II showdown.

Listening to him reflect on those two gripping encounters now, you sense that, from Monaco's point of view, there was almost a sense of destiny about the way the tie turned out.

"The nearer the second leg drew, the more we started to believe we could go through," he remembers. "When we stepped onto the pitch we felt confident that we were going to do it. Nobody thought it was possible that we would come off at the end of that game having been dumped out of the competition."

"Everyone knows that Pep Guardiola's Manchester City are all about attacking football. They were two terrific contests – end-to-end. Even though Manchester City lost, I imagine their players were pretty happy to have taken part in such fantastic games."

Monaco were eventually knocked out by Juventus at the semi-final stage but they'd gone further than anybody expected. Against all odds, they also captured the Ligue 1 crown for the first time since 1999-00, finishing eight points ahead of favourites PSG.

Mbappe believes the key to Monaco's success was that the players genuinely liked each other. "We had a young squad," he explains. "We were more like a bunch of friends than anything else. We all got along with each other really well and there was a lot of quality in the squad, too. When you look at the players that left at the end of last season – Benjamin Mendy, Tiemoue Bakayoko, Bernardo Silva – they all joined big clubs. I think we had the perfect mix to achieve things together. It was the right year, the right time, and we had the right players."

He reserves particular praise for Colombian forward Radamel Falcao, with whom he formed one of Europe's deadliest strike duos.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again – starting out my career with a striker like Radamel Falcao was one of the best things that could have ever happened to me," insists the 19-year-old. "Everyone knows Falcao the player and what a fantastic goalscorer he is, but he's a great man as well. As a person he was truly sensational with me, and he guided me through the season."

"He wasn't slow to put me in my place at times, either, but you need a telling-off now and again. I was 17 years old at the time. It was my apprenticeship. That's absolutely the way it should be. He was a terrific influence on me and I'll always be thankful."

With the help of Falcao and his Monaco team-mates, Mbappe was quickly destined for the very top.

## "FALCAO WAS A TERRIFIC INFLUENCE ON ME AND WASN'T SLOW TO PUT ME IN MY PLACE"

### MBAPPE TO PSG: A MOVE EIGHT YEARS IN THE MAKING

Even at Monaco, PSG were never too far from Mbappe's thoughts. Last summer's transfer didn't come out of nowhere. Quite the opposite, in fact – it was part of a long-term flirtation that meant Kylian appeared destined to play for his hometown team one day.

After just one full season at Monaco, some felt the move came too soon, especially given the additional pressure of the \$300 million fee PSG will pay when his 12-month loan comes to an end in the summer. Yet Mbappe was on closer terms with PSG than many people realised, and as a teenager he already innately understood something that can take others years to work out: opportunities often pick you, rather than the other way around.

"For me, it felt like the right moment, and the right choice," he says. "PSG are a huge club and they want to win every trophy. I want to win every trophy as well, so it felt like we both had a common goal and an opportunity to develop together."

"I've been in contact with PSG since I was about 10 or 11 years old. They had been interested in signing me when I joined Monaco's youth ▶

**Below** Mbappe has hit the ground running alongside Neymar this season. They ran riot in a 5-0 mauling of Celtic last September







academy. Over the years I've visited the training ground and facilities on several occasions. I'd met the previous owners and also the current owners, so signing for PSG wasn't a big step into the unknown for me. I knew plenty of people at the club without having played here – PSG were always in a corner of my mind, I think."

He's one-third of what is now the most famous attacking trident in world football alongside Edinson Cavani and Neymar, or 'MCN' as the French media occasionally like to call them. Between them, the front three contributed 63 goals in PSG's first 35 matches of the season, and their opponents will be disappointed to hear that Mbappe believes the trio can become even more lethal.

"We've been playing together for only five months, so we don't read each other's games by heart yet," he reveals. "We keep improving and I think we can get even better. During training, we're not always on the same side in matches, but the coach often gets us to line up alongside one another so we can work on improving our understanding."

Much has been made of the so-called special treatment Neymar has received since his record-breaking \$350m switch from Barcelona last summer – occasional days off, an extravagant 26th birthday party in the French capital – and there was an embarrassing clash of egos with Cavani earlier in the campaign over who takes penalties. But Mbappe insists that Neymar has been misunderstood, and says he has a great relationship with the Brazilian.

"When you get to know Neymar, he is completely different from the image that he has on the television," claims Kylian. "He loves laughing

and making loads of jokes. He's got a real *joie de vivre* and gets along with everybody in the squad.

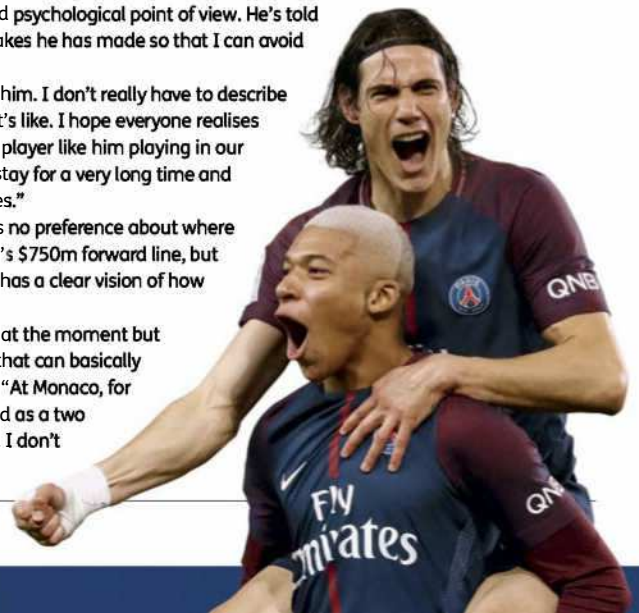
"I really appreciate the relationship we have. He's like a big brother to me. When the star player welcomes you as warmly as he welcomed me, it makes it easier for you to adapt to your new team. We are a bit different in terms of how we play, so he has not given me much advice from a footballing point of view. But he's given me lots of advice about the game from a mental and psychological point of view. He's told me about some of the mistakes he has made so that I can avoid making the same ones.

"It's amazing to play with him. I don't really have to describe it – everyone can see what it's like. I hope everyone realises how lucky we are to have a player like him playing in our league. We all hope he will stay for a very long time and help us to win lots of trophies."

Mbappe's adamant he has no preference about where he specifically slots into PSG's \$750m forward line, but says PSG coach Unai Emery has a clear vision of how he wants the team to play.

"I play on the right at PSG at the moment but I see myself as an attacker that can basically fit in anywhere," he reveals. "At Monaco, for example, Falcao and I played as a two upfront and I liked that, too. I don't really have a preference. As

**Top** Monaco players party after sealing a first league title since 1999-00 **Bottom** Kylian and Cavani make up two-thirds of PSG's 'MCN'



## “I WATCHED THE FINAL OF EURO 2016 ON TV – IT’S WEIRD HOW QUICKLY THINGS HAVE CHANGED. I’M READY FOR THE WORLD CUP”



he was left out of the France squad that won the 2015 European U17 Championship in Bulgaria, and never once represented his country at either U16 or U18 level.

Other attackers born in 1998 were selected ahead of him: Odsonne Edouard, on loan from PSG at Celtic this season, was the generation's favoured centre-forward, while wingers Jonathan Ikone (another PSG starlet, on loan at Montpellier) and Arsenal's Jeff Reine-Adelaide (on loan at Angers) were picked ahead of Mbappe almost every time the squad got together.

Mbappe dealt with the situation the same way that he deals with all positive and negative circumstances that come his way – with unerring composure – and when he talks about it now, Kylian's inner confidence comes to the fore.

“It was purely a footballing decision to leave me out,” he explains to *FFT*. “I knew the FFF [French FA] were following me but they made their choices. Football's a question of choices, so you must never question decisions like that. But I knew all of the other players in my generation. It wasn't a problem for me.”

He'd soon caught up with and overtaken his peers. Mbappe was one of two under-age players (Faitout Maouassa of Nancy, now at Rennes, being the other) named in France's squad for the 2016 European U19 Championship in Germany. Kylian proved a key member of the side as France beat Italy 4-0 in the final, and was the tournament's five-goal second-highest scorer behind team-mate Jean-Kevin Augustin (who was at PSG at the time and is now at RB Leipzig).

That summer, France came within a whisker of winning Euro 2016 on home soil, only to lose 1-0 after extra time to Portugal in the final. And that's the latest indication of just how rapid Mbappe's rise to fame has been. As a 17-year-old kid he watched Eder score the extra-time winner that left Didier Deschamps' players crestfallen at the Stade de France. And now here he is just two years later, heading into the World Cup as potentially Les Bleus' most important player.

“I watched the Euro 2016 final on the television with other members of the U19 squad as were already out in Germany for our tournament,” says Mbappe. “We were supporting France, the same as everyone else. It's weird how quickly things have turned around, and it's great to be a part of the squad now.”

“Do I feel under pressure heading into the World Cup? No, not at all. Pressure comes from other people, not from us. For me, football is all about pleasure. A World Cup comes along only once every four years. You can't afford to let it pass you by because of pressure. You have to play it when it happens – right now, straight away. I'm ready.”

Then on goes the PSG jersey and he's following the photographer's instructions, looking this way and that, then pointing and grinning as his mother pulls faces behind the camera. “I know how to make him laugh,” she giggles. He shakes hands with everyone in the room before heading down the corridor and turning the corner, out of sight.

A couple of minutes later, there he is, out on the manicured training pitches, laughing and joking with his mates like any other 19-year-old would on a sunny afternoon. In an instant, Mbappe is dazzling them – not to mention everybody watching through the glass – with the kind of flicks and tricks most lads his age would be restricted to pulling off at home on their Playstation.

This isn't an everyday teenager – this is a superstar-in-waiting. ◊

a youngster, I played in all three attacking positions across the pitch, so I'm used to performing in different roles. For me, stability's the main thing: it's better to have a run of matches in one position, as changing position frequently isn't easy.

“The manager looks for us to switch roles during games in order to confuse the opposition. He's very precise in what he asks us to do. He wants us to press high up the pitch, press quickly, combine well on the ball and launch quick counter-attacks. He has a very clear view of how he wants us to play and gets that across to us. He loves his job.”

### GEARING UP FOR A RIP-ROARING WORLD CUP

Once the club season's over, Mbappe will have a few weeks to gear up for the next big challenge of his career: the 2018 World Cup. He is yet to study France's group stage opponents in any detail, but admits he's already thinking about the extravaganza in Russia.

“Of course I am – you're bound to, especially if you haven't played in a World Cup before,” he says with tempered enthusiasm. “I've got so many objectives with my club first, so I'm not thinking about it all the time. We will have two to three weeks between the end of the season and the tournament to look at the teams we'll be facing. During that period I will be eating and drinking Australia, Denmark and Peru every single day. But I'm already looking forward to the tournament starting and can't wait for it to arrive.”

The only minor setback in Mbappe's career so far is that the striker was frequently overlooked by France at age-group level. For example,

RYAN  
SESSEGNON





# FOOTBALL LEAGUE'S FIRST

# \$100M PLAYER?!!

Words Alec Fenn

Ryan Sessegnon hasn't even played in the Premier League yet but some big clubs are fighting to pay that fee. That's no surprise, given the Fulham flyer was taking the Championship by storm months after sitting his GCSEs...

**I**t's rare that a teenager plying his trade in the Football League can be deemed a 'sure thing' – a player so likely to make a splash at the very highest level, that the biggest clubs in Europe are already salivating at the prospect of securing the starlet's signature.

*FourFourTwo* is in a warehouse-turned-football-showroom to not only witness the launch of England's new kit for this summer's World Cup, but also to meet Ryan Sessegnon, a player who just so happens to match the above description.

Hordes of journalists and selfie-stick wielding YouTubers are hovering around Marcus Rashford, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Jack Butland, but while all this madness is unfolding around him, Fulham's teenage sensation sits calmly on a stool in the corner of the room. He may not be able to keep such a low-profile for much longer. Having made his debut last season aged 16 years and 83 days, he posted a further 29 first-team appearances, scoring seven goals from left-back and sealing a place in the Championship Team of the Year. These award-winning performances came all of two years after he had helped Coombe Boys to win the PlayStation Schools' Cup.

If you thought that was pretty good, 2017-18 has been even better. Fulham manager Slavisa Jokanovic has transformed this threatening left-back into an even more threatening left-winger, with Sessegnon hitting 12 league goals for the promotion-chasing Cottagers. There's still three months of the season to play.

It's not a bad resumé for a humble London lad who is not even 18 until May. Scarier still, Ryan has a twin brother, Steven, who played his first game for Fulham in a Carabao Cup tie earlier this term. It's time to find out what all the fuss is about... ▶



**Who were your football idols when you were growing up?**

I've always been an attacking left-back so I really admired Luke Shaw, particularly when he was at Southampton. He's got a lot of attacking qualities and creates chances, which is something I like to do myself. His ability to get up and down the pitch is incredible.

**Your cousin, Stephane, played for Sunderland and West Bromwich Albion – was he an inspiration for you at that time?**

He is definitely someone I have looked up to. I wasn't personally that close to him, but my father is. I've seen him on TV a lot, but he hasn't chatted to me or given me advice or anything like that. If I can enjoy the career he's having, then I won't have done too badly!

**Your brother, Steven, also plays for Fulham's academy. What was it like, growing up and playing together?**

We always played in the back garden together and shared the same dream of becoming a professional footballer. It was quite competitive at times because we both wanted to be the best, but looking back now, I think that was a good thing. We support each other but we also push ourselves to be better. We are quite relaxed and humble, but we keep each other in check as well – we won't get carried away. We know that success and hype can quickly disappear.

**Is it strange to have such a different life to your old schoolfriends?**

It's different, but I've been playing football all the way through school so I think we've all got used to it now. I have managed to balance my school and football pretty well. My parents really pushed me to do well in my education, so I've always taken my studies seriously. My parents have guided me well. My favourite subject at school? Probably French. I really enjoyed it and I can still speak a bit, too.

**What were your aims at the start of last season?**

My target was to be a bit-part player and get a few matches under my belt, but since I made my debut [against Leyton Orient in the League Cup in August 2016] I've been in the team a lot. I'm just thankful that the manager has given me this opportunity.

**Did it feel like a huge step up, going straight from academy level to playing in the Championship?**

I haven't felt that. I think the physical demands of the Championship are pretty similar to what they were for me when I was playing in the under-23s, so I have been able to adapt pretty smoothly. It hasn't felt like a big shock to the system.

**Did your manager give you any advice before your debut?**

Not really – he just treated me like any other first-team player. One of the other senior players, Scott Parker, was very good with me. He told me to relax and make sure that I enjoyed it. And I did.

Some of England's biggest and most experienced superstars of recent decades have fallen short when it's come to transferring their stellar club form to the international stage in big tournaments.

The good news is that Ryan Sessegnon doesn't seem to have fallen foul of this unfortunate precedent. He has looked as snug as a bug in his country's colours so far, and not just during his chat with FFT while modelling the new Nike jersey (above) that the senior side will wear at this summer's World Cup in Russia.

In 2016, Sessegnon was promoted to the England U17 team a year ahead of schedule so he could play in the European Championship in Azerbaijan. Aged only 15, he appeared alongside fellow prodigies such as Chelsea defender Dujon Sterling and Arsenal wideman Reiss Nelson. Although England were knocked out in the last 16 by eventual finalists Spain (including Brahim Diaz of Manchester City), the experience was not lost on the youngest member of the squad.

After featuring in every match of that tournament, Sessegnon was selected for the U19 team's Euro 2017 campaign in Georgia last July. He scored three goals, two of them coming in a 4-1 win over Germany, as England went on to win the competition. The only player in any of the squads to have a 21st-century birthdate finished as the joint-top scorer and named in the team of the tournament.

However, all of this success came as no real surprise to Fulham fans – nor Championship defenders – and Sessegnon's summer showings prompted Cottagers manager Jovanovic to back his youngster to play for England's senior side in the not-too-distant future.

So, how much longer will it be before Ryan is banging down Gareth Southgate's door? Is he leading a new breed of technically proficient players? And, with the U20, U19 and Toulon squads all winning major tournaments while the U17s reached two finals, what was behind the success of England's youth teams last year?

**Ryan, you've played regularly for England at youth level, but what are your earliest memories of watching the senior team?**

I just about remember watching the 2006 World Cup in Germany. That was a really good England team. I always admired Steven Gerrard, as he had great leadership skills.

**You won the European U19 Championship with England last year. What was that experience like?**

It was brilliant – winning the tournament was a massive achievement. I think 2017 was a great year for England's young teams. There have always been talented players in England, but for whatever reason we haven't had success in major tournaments.

**Top right** Ryan attempts to increase his goal tally at home to Middlesbrough in September **Bottom right** Sessegnon has excelled in England's various youth teams







**“GROWING UP, I REALLY ADMIRED LUKE SHAW, ESPECIALLY AT SOUTHAMPTON. HE CREATES CHANCES AND THE WAY HE GETS UP AND DOWN THE PITCH IS INCREDIBLE”**

**Is England now producing a different breed of player? Did you grow up playing cage football, for instance?**

I played a lot of street football and cage football from a young age, and playing five-a-side in tight areas really helped me to hone my skills. Once you are on an 11-a-side pitch, the game becomes easier, as you have bigger spaces to play in.

**How important is it for young players to experience the pressure of tournament football?**

I think it helps you a lot. Winning these tournaments and beating some big teams is invaluable experience. Learning to handle the pressure is great for the future, because now I have already been there and done it. There's huge pressure at those tournaments. If you get beat at a World Cup, people will remember it, and you have to wait another four years to correct it. With your club, you often have two matches a week, so you can quickly put things right.

**What were your highlights of the U19 tournament?**

Well, that would have to be the two goals I scored in the 4-1 win over Germany. That victory put Germany out of the competition and gave us a lot of belief, because they are always strong opponents.

**Was it difficult, being away from home for so long?**

I think I'm quite used to it now. It's not the first time I've been abroad to play in that kind of tournament, and it was the same for most of my team-mates, too. I think we all adapted well to that.

**Who should we look out for from that England U19 team?**

The team is really packed with talent, but if I had to pick a few names I would go for Mason Mount and Trevoh Chalobah from Chelsea. They are both really talented players.

**How did the players celebrate that Euros victory?**

Straight after the final we went out to eat as a squad, but I didn't do anything particularly special with family and friends when I got back. We did the celebrating with the team, which was great.

Our time with the Wandsworth wonderkid is almost up, but his time is just beginning. Last summer he was linked with a \$40 million move to Manchester United – as well as transfers to Tottenham, Liverpool and Arsenal – before he inked a new three-year deal with Fulham in June.

“I made my mind up to stay, months before I signed that contract,” he tells *FFT*. “I knew I'd play more games here than elsewhere, which is important at my age in order to keep developing.”

Twelve years ago, Gareth Bale excelled in the English second tier for Southampton as a 17-year-old attacking left-back, before being turned into a winger following his move to Spurs. Unsurprisingly, Sessegnon has been likened to Real Madrid's Galactico. What does he think of the comparison? “It is flattering,” he admits, “but it's still way too early to be compared to someone so great.” As for his best role, the Londoner is undecided. “I've enjoyed playing as a winger because I can impact the game more in terms of goals and assists,” he adds. “But it's good to be versatile. I'm happy in either position.”

Ryan Sessegnon has already compiled a splendid highlights reel. If he keeps adding to it, that hefty \$100m fee could be irrelevant. He may be terrorising the top flight next term with Fulham, an idea that should be enough to give Premier League defenders sleepless nights. ◉






WHEN YOU'VE HAD A  
**GUN**  
TO YOUR HEAD,  
SCORING IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE IS  
**CHILD'S  
PLAY**

Watford's wing wizard Richarlison had to grow up fast on Brazil's mean streets – that's why the 20-year-old is so determined and ready to make the most of his big break





**“I WORKED AT A CAR WASH, SOLD  
POPSICLES AND MADE TRUFFLES, BUT  
I DIDN'T LIKE IT – PLAYING FOOTBALL  
WAS ALL I COULD EVER THINK ABOUT”**



# R

icharlison stares blankly at the miniature pool table waiting at his feet. “Could you pot one of the balls?” asks *FourFourTwo’s* photographer, in English.

The Watford forward turns to a Brazilian member of the crew for an explanation in his native tongue, but clarification doesn’t cure the look of bemusement. Undeterred, he collapses his gangly 5ft 11in frame like a Transformer experiencing a malfunction, elbows and knees akimbo as he lines up his shot. As our snapper crouches to line up his own shot, Richarlison’s agent, plus his agent’s wife and a family friend, hang over the back of a sofa at the 20-year-old’s Hertfordshire home, poised to capture the moment on camera phones.

CRACK! The white ball connects with its target at speed, propelling it into a corner pocket.

“YEEEEAAHHH!!!” his trio of devotees cheer, throwing their hands up in celebration. “Got it,” says *FFT’s* photographer.

It took just one take. Like most other things the Brazilian’s attempted since coming to England last July, it all comes too easy.

He cost Watford \$20 million to buy from Fluminense, but dealing with the pressure of a big transfer fee is a piece of cake when you’ve previously had a drug dealer point a gun at your head.

“My life could have ended many times from being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Richarlison tells *FFT*, as the tone of our chat soon turns a great deal more serious.

“On the day the guy pointed the gun at my head, he thought I was a drug dealer trying to steal his distribution point.

“I was very scared. I thought, ‘If he pulls the trigger, I’m dead.’ But I survived and moved on. I had a dream of being a footballer and so I focused on training to reach my objective. I think I’ve always made the right choices and God’s now put me in the right place at Watford – and I’m doing well.”

He was doing well, as were the Hornets. However, after making their best ever start to a Premier League season, the club hit a major loss of form. Manager Marco Silva was dismissed in January and a new era under Javi Gracia began. But the club’s slump didn’t affect Richarlison, who hadn’t allowed himself to get carried away. “I kept my feet on the ground – I knew I hadn’t won anything,” he says.

Poverty, a broken home, rejection and a near-death experience – his mettle’s been tested by far more harrowing experiences than a mere drop in performance. No matter what’s been thrown at him, one goal has remained a constant. He puts down the pool cue and sinks into his comfy sofa to tell *FFT* all about it.



While Richarlison endured many of his toughest challenges in his hometown of Rubia, a rough area of Nova Venecia in south-east Brazil, he retains a fondness for his childhood.

“It’s a nice city and I’ll always go home to visit when I have holiday,” he says with a smile. “I like to fly my kite there – I was going to bring one back here, but it’s very cold and I can’t do it outside.”

Flying a kite? Shouldn’t a young millionaire footballer be cruising in a Bentley full of Cartier carrier bags? Not this one, apparently.

“I was raised by a very humble family, so I grew up playing with kites and footballs,” he explains. “Once, our neighbour mowed their lawn and threw the grass away, so me and my brother planted it at my house to make a pitch. We made two goalposts and played football.” Nothing was going to stop Richarlison achieving his dream – not the lack of a pitch, and not the pressure to take drugs in order to escape the hardships of poverty.

“Where I lived, a lot of people used drugs and guns, so although it was quiet, it was dangerous,” he reveals. “Several times I was offered weed, but – thank God – I never smoked it. The coaches from my football school were police officers and they always gave me and my brother good advice.



**Clockwise from left** Cue Richarlison hustling *FFT* at pool; the youngster’s goal earned Watford a point at West Brom in injury time

“A lot of my friends got lost on drugs and most of them are now in prison. I still talk to some of them, but I have a lot to be thankful for in not going down that path. I had a conscience. I couldn’t do it.”

As with many children from Brazil’s impoverished areas, football was Richarlison’s ticket out of a poor neighbourhood. But talent alone was not going to be enough to propel him to stardom. At a young age, he was forced to make big decisions that required the foresight, maturity and mental fortitude of a person much older than seven.

“When my mum and dad split up and she was moving out of Nova Venecia, I was on top of the moving truck that we were leaving on and jumped down to run to my dad,” he recounts.

“I knew my mum wouldn’t play football or take me to any games, so I went to my dad and stayed with him until I was 10.”

When his dad relocated for a new job, Richarlison had to move back in with mum. And when she struggled to provide for her four children on a cleaner’s wage, Watford’s future No.11 went to work.

“I worked at a car wash, I sold popsicles, I made chocolate truffles and I would work with my grandfather, but I didn’t like it,” he recalls.

“Football, the game I’d played since I was a kid, was all I could think about. Every Monday I would run 9km to the football school and train, whether it was in the hot sun or the pouring rain – I just didn’t want to do anything else.”

Richarlison’s relentless dedication paid off, earning him trials with the Brazilian outfits Avai and Figueirense. But as quickly as his dream took off, it was shot down, testing his resolve once again.

“Figueirense told me they didn’t want me, on my birthday,” he says. “I was very sad and I thought about giving up. But when I got home to my family, they gave me strength, and my coach at Gazetinha told me to keep going.”



He wiped away the tears and paid heed to their advice, joining Real Noroeste to play in the under-20 championship. Richarlison caught the eye of a scout from America-MG, who invited him to try out for their youth academy in Belo Horizonte some 350 miles from home.

He had to impress – not just to get his ambitions back on track, but because he couldn’t afford to go home. “I only had a one-way ticket, as I got hungry and spent the money for a return ticket on food,” he reveals. “I had to succeed.” The high-risk ploy reaped a high reward when America-MG recruited him to their academy in December 2014. Within four games, Richarlison had made history.

He starred in the final of the U17 Campeonato Mineiro tournament, providing an assist as America-MG toppled Atletico Mineiro to win the trophy for the first time in 17 years. Suitably impressed, the first-team ▶

# “I WILL RAISE MY LEVEL. I THINK ABOUT PLAYING IN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AND BEING THE PREMIER LEAGUE TOP SCORER. I CAME TO WATFORD TO MAKE HISTORY”

manager Givanildo Oliveira promoted him to the senior squad, but the forward soon suffered a setback.

“I picked up a bad injury and had a screw put in my foot – I was out for three months,” he says, his face twisting with frustration.

“I’d wake up at 5am to do my rehabilitation, and go home at 8pm. It was a very sad year, but I learned a lot from it and worked hard to come back even stronger.”

That he did, scoring nine goals in 24 matches for America-MG and laying on another four for his team-mates as they won promotion to Brazil’s first tier. A career that kept derailing was now on a fast track to the top. Major brands and the nation’s elite clubs courted a star on the rise: he signed a multi-million pound deal with Nike, and while Cruzeiro, Palmeiras and Corinthians all made enquiries, the 18-year-old opted to sign for Fluminense.

...

Coursing with confidence, Richarlison flourished in Rio de Janeiro and took his club form into international duty with Brazil. In early 2017, he put on a show for the scouts at the U20 South American Youth Football Championship in Ecuador, impressing despite his team’s disappointing fifth-place finish and failure to qualify for the U20 World Cup.

Nevertheless, Ajax were interested. Discussions were at an advanced stage and Richarlison was on a flight to Amsterdam – until his phone rang. This time it wasn’t a setback, but a Premier League boss.

“Watford’s offer came out of nowhere,” says Richarlison. “Everything was arranged for Ajax when I got the call from Marco Silva. I changed my mind because to play in England was a childhood dream. I didn’t think twice before coming here.”

Some might ask why a player would snub one of the game’s most famous clubs to play for Hertfordshire’s humbler Hornets. The cynical will cite financial doping, and they’d be wrong. The Dutch side offered Richarlison a more lucrative deal, but the lure of the Premier League was simply too strong. “Ajax are a big club, playing in the Champions League, and I would have got more money there,” he admits. “I came to Watford to play in the Premier League and stand out. No amount of money could ruin my dream.”

He did stand out, too, scoring five goals in his first 13 matches. Reality was proving better than the dream, even if the starlet soon learned that the Brazilian league’s metronomic rhythm was a home comfort he couldn’t bring over on the plane.

“I was on the bench for my first match, at home to Liverpool, and I quickly realised that the game’s very different here – players run for the full 90 minutes!” he laughs. “You have to train hard and recover well so you don’t get cramps during the game.” And the supporters have already rewarded his efforts with a terrace chant. “After I scored my first goal [against Bournemouth] I ran to the centre of the pitch and the crowd started to sing my name – I got pretty emotional,” he says, before reciting the song especially for *FourFourTwo*: “Rrrriiccchhharrllliiison... Rrrriiccchhharrllliiison!”

Silva’s penchant for a high-intensity pressing game, complemented by a counter-attack that’s unleashed at breakneck speed, challenged Richarlison to reach a new level of athleticism. But finding the fuel was an issue to begin with – he was burning more than he consumed and he started to shed weight.

“I didn’t like the food,” he explains, “and I lost 5kg as I was staying in a hotel and just eating hamburgers because it was the closest thing



I could find to a Brazilian dish. Then I found a home and my agent and his wife came to live with me, and I began eating more rice and beans.

“Slowly that started solving things, and later we found a Brazilian butcher working in Radlett. He imports a cut of meat from southern Brazil that you’d usually have at a big barbecue.”

*FFT* inhales a whiff of this evening’s meal: beef stew. “It’s delicious,” says Richarlison over the sound of his grumbling stomach.

With his muscles now receiving the nourishment they needed, the Brazilian made Watford’s training ground his second home. Even the invitation of an evening with megastar Neymar – his boyhood hero – couldn’t distract his focus.

“Neymar was in London, playing for Brazil against England,” explains Richarlison. “After the game [played on a Tuesday night], he called me and asked if I wanted to join him and his friends on a night out. “It was an amazing opportunity. As a kid I would copy Neymar a lot – I even styled my hair in a mohawk and used hair-straightening product. But I’d played on the Saturday and needed to rest. I had training the next day as well, so I decided to stay at home.

“The training in England is very hard,” he continues. “The players are always out to get you. Every time I get the ball, I jump because I know they’re going to hit me.”

His sacrifices have paid dividends on the pitch, as he has terrorised defenders with his direct style of play, using speed, skill and balance to



**Above left** Richarlison was quick to open his Hornets account, scoring away at Bournemouth in August  
**Left** The starlet flourished at Fluminense.

surge past opponents. Gushing praise followed, with Sky Sports pundit Jamie Redknapp comparing him to one of the all-time greats.

“The little things he does are a bit like a young [Brazilian] Ronaldo,” said Redknapp after Watford’s 4-2 defeat to Chelsea last October. “I’m not saying he can be as good as him, but he does special things on the ball that only a few people can do. He drifts past players. There’s a bit of petulance in his game still, but if the manager is able to polish that diamond then he’s onto something.”



Silva and Richarlison soon shifted expectations at Vicarage Road. By mid-October, Watford were up to fourth and stirring panic among the Premier League’s hierarchy. Life was good – until the ripple effect of a decision made by Everton’s board that month reached Hertfordshire.

The Toffees had sacked Ronald Koeman with the team languishing in 18th spot. Their ambitious new owners peered over the Hornets’ fence, liked what they saw and fluttered their eyelashes. Try as he might to resist, Silva couldn’t help but flutter back. Watford’s owners refused to budge, even when Everton offered \$18m for Silva’s services.

The situation unsettled the manager and his team. After collecting 15 points from their first eight matches, Watford took just 11 from the next 16, leaving them four points clear of the relegation zone – albeit still in the top half of a congested table – and costing Silva his job. The club cited the “unwarranted approach” from Everton as “the catalyst” for the collapse that made their decision inevitable.

Whatever his failings were, Richarlison wasn’t best pleased with the Portuguese gaffer’s exit and took to social media to vent his vexation at the news, tweeting an angry face emoji.

“Marco helped me a lot,” says the Brazilian, explaining his outburst. “He is a very organised guy who demands a lot from his players, and

he was always out on the training pitch with us, telling us how to start games and making us believe we could beat anyone.”

Silva was replaced by Javi Gracia – the Spaniard becoming the 10th coach to work under the Pozzo family, Watford’s owners, since 2012. “But a new day will always come and when you least expect clouds to clear,” Richarlison later tweeted, suggesting he was looking forward to a fresh start under the new manager.

Whether or not Gracia can help Watford to kick on, the fans are glad they still have their exciting Brazilian starlet around to help them push on for a highest ever Premier League finish, surpassing their 13th place in 2015-16. Richarlison was the subject of speculation in the January transfer window, with Arsenal and Chelsea reportedly circling.

While he admits the lure of a big club and a life-changing contract is appealing, Richarlison insists he’s fully committed to Watford – and judging by his tears on the bench after being substituted during their stunning 4-1 victory over Chelsea, he means it.

“I was crying because I wanted to play and help my team-mates,” he says. “But in the end, the guy that entered the pitch did the job well [substitute Roberto Pereyra scored], so it’s all OK.

“Look, everybody wants financial security for their family, and when a player says otherwise, he’s lying. If I play at a really high level, then the opportunities will come my way. But right now my mind is focused on Watford and helping the team.”

Richarlison is able to focus on his game because of the environment he has built at home, turning his little corner of Radlett into a Brazilian haven. “My friends are a huge help,” he says with a smile. “They’re very playful, they sing and dance, and this helps a lot with the adaptation to a new country. We learn English together.” He then unpeels a Post-it note that says ‘Sheep’, accompanied by a sketch of the fluffy farmyard animal. Does Richarlison have a pet sheep? “No no,” he chuckles. “Our teacher likes to put these small bits of paper up on the walls, so that we can learn the language.

“And then there’s Heurelho Gomes [Watford’s Brazilian goalkeeper]. He’s been like a father to me. He has helped me to sort out a car and a house – basically everything.”



Richarlison’s made life so comfortable in England that his old instincts kick in whenever he senses danger. “The paparazzi are crazy here,” he says. “A photographer ran towards me and put a camera in my face. I got scared – I thought the guy was about to rob me.”

The days of coming face to face with criminals on the street are now behind him, one hopes, but the struggles of his old neighbourhood are never far from his thoughts. Richarlison’s rapid ascent to the world’s most-watched league hasn’t cost him a sense of perspective. Still only 20, he remembers his career’s darkest moments, and they afford him moments of childlike fandom.


“I was rejected by Avai and Figueirense but today I’m playing in the Premier League against great players,” he says, beaming. “When we played Manchester United and I saw Zlatan Ibrahimovic, it made my eyes shine. This is a childhood dream that came true.”

That’s one achievement ticked off the bucket list; now he wants to be the player lighting up the eyes of the next generation. To reach that level, he’ll need to pull on the famous yellow shirt of the Selecao and prove himself as a world-class player. He’s still to receive a senior cap, but Richarlison has set his sights on making the 2018 World Cup squad – and even picking up a winner’s medal.

“If I stay focused and train hard, and [Brazil boss] Tite sees that, he will call me,” says the youngster. “Every football player dreams about going to the World Cup, and I think Brazil will win it this year. I want to be in the middle of it.”

Richarlison’s ambitions don’t stop there. He came to Europe with the aim of not just taking part, but taking over.

“I will raise my level,” he tells *FFT* with unmistakable intent. “I think about playing in the Champions League and being the top scorer in the Premier League. I came to Watford to make history.”

The odds are stacked against him, but settling for the easy life just isn’t the Richarlison way. As long as he has a dream to chase, then no matter what challenges arise, he’ll keep on pushing. 

HARRY  
WINKS







"I THOUGHT  
MY BOOT  
CLEANING  
DAYS WERE  
OVER!"

Words James Maw Photography Tom Watkins

TRADITION DICTATES THAT YOUNG PLAYERS DO THEIR BIT TO KEEP THINGS SPICK AND SPAN IN THE DRESSING ROOM, BUT HOW DID SCRAPING THE MUD FROM SCOTT PARKER'S STUDS HELP **HARRY WINKS** BOWL OVER REAL MADRID?



he ball thunders across the waxed surface and hits the pins with a *ker-plunk* so pitch-perfect, it could have been a sound effect from a zany American sitcom. All 10 pins are sent flying and a big white X appears on the screen suspended from the ceiling.

The half-dozen onlookers enthusiastically whoop and cheer, while a sheepish grin appears on Harry Winks' cherubic face. If *FourFourTwo's* learnt one thing in our 24 years, it's that football players are usually very good at anything they put their hand to. So it comes as no surprise to see this one waltz into a central London bowling alley, select a ball at random and nonchalantly serve up a strike.

"Do you bowl often?" *FFT* asks the Tottenham tyro, who turned 22 just days before. "Not really," he says, picking up another ball and strolling back to his mark.

This time, the pressure is on. A hush descends upon the alley as a growing audience watches on intently. The only noises are the air conditioning's steady, rhythmic whirring and an arcade machine that's older than the Spurs midfielder.

The ball thunders across the waxed surface. This time, though, the *ker-plunk* isn't quite so textbook. It's more of a *plink* as one solitary pin is sent toppling over. Harry Winks' ten-pin bowling is not, it seems, on the same upward trajectory as his football career. Mind you, few things could match his past year and a half.

"It's been a bit of a whirlwind," he says of an 18-month period that has transformed him from a Spurs reserve to an England international who has twice run the show against Real Madrid.

At the start of last season Winks had played 20 minutes of first-team football, spread over the latter stages of three Europa League games. Then, within the space of one month, he made his first Premier League appearance (as a late substitute in a 1-1 draw with Liverpool), his first start for Spurs (at home to Gillingham in the League Cup) and his first Champions League appearance (away to CSKA Moscow). Two months after that, he topped off a remarkable autumn with a first senior goal on his first top-flight start – a dramatic White Hart Lane win over the Lilywhites' London rivals, West Ham.

It was all the more enjoyable for Winks given that he's from a family of diehard Tottenham fans. He attended his first match at the age of five, a 2-1 victory over Middlesbrough with Teddy Sheringham and Les Ferdinand on the scoresheet. "My dad managed to blag us some good seats in the executive boxes right on the halfway line," Winks tells us. "The view was great and Spurs won, so it was the perfect first match. I don't remember much about the game itself. The thing that stuck in my mind was the atmosphere."

He cites Ledley King as his hero, and the 2010-11 Champions League run as the highlight of his time as a young fan.

"I was a flag-bearer for the home game against Real Madrid," recalls the midfielder. "We lost 1-0, but as a 15-year-old it was surreal to be within touching distance of top players like Cristiano Ronaldo."

Their paths would cross again six years later in a similar setting, but not before a patient battle for regular first-team action.

Winks' first taste of first-team training came as a 16-year-old when Andre Villas-Boas was Spurs manager, but it was Mauricio Pochettino who gave the youngster his permanent promotion to the senior side. The Argentine's influence on Winks has been sizeable, and he clearly holds his boss in very high regard.

"He's got that aura about him that says he's the man in charge and you need to respect him," explains Winks. "But he has a light-hearted side, too, so you know that you can chat with him if you ever need to."

That respect is clearly mutual; Pochettino has even been said to call Winks his 'Little Iniesta'. He will certainly settle for that, even if Winks' boyhood heroes are a little on the humbler side...



**Clockwise from above** He put in a star turn as Spurs toppled Real Madrid; in the 2016-17 season Winks left other players in his wake; "Gutter ball!"; instinctively celebrating his first strike with Mauricio Pochettino

**Harry, who were the first-team players that you looked up to when you were in the Tottenham academy?**

Scott Parker was definitely one. I used to clean his boots, and he was really good with me when I was first coming through. He was coming to the end of his playing career and always made time for the young lads. I can remember one time when he stayed late after training and talked me through some clips from a Europa League match he'd just played in. He showed me a few things that he thought I should do in matches. That really helped me.

**Mauricio Pochettino has had a big influence on your career. Do you remember your first meeting with him?**

I do. It was actually when I was signing my first professional contract, around the time that he arrived at the club. I was in there with my dad and he popped in to say hello. He said that he had watched a lot of my clips beforehand and that the club were right to sign me. I'm not sure if he was being serious!

I've got the utmost respect for the gaffer. What he's done at the club has been phenomenal, and from a personal perspective, he's given me opportunities, which is all you want as a young player.

**What's the best piece of advice he's ever given you?**

Probably just to stick with it mentally, which he's told me a few times when he could tell that I was getting frustrated. The first full season with the first team was tough: I was training regularly and travelling

**"I'VE HEARD THEM ALL BEFORE. THE FUNNY THING IS, I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT WINKING!"**



to matches every week, but not getting games. I needed to be resilient and work really hard in training to improve. He has toughened me up a bit and helped me to realise how difficult football can be.

**You made your senior debut as a substitute in a Europa League tie against Partizan Belgrade in November 2014 – a game famous for a series of pitch invasions by pranksters attempting an advertising campaign. What are your memories of that?**

I'd forgotten about that! [Laughs] It was strange, but it didn't distract me. It was pretty funny to watch. To be honest, I wasn't expecting to play in that game – it was the first time I had been on the bench that season, so I thought I was there for the experience. I was just enjoying the atmosphere and the match, but luckily the boys did the business so I got a few minutes at the end. I was shocked when the gaffer told me I was going on. I didn't have time to be nervous as it all happened so quickly. I remember being stood on the touchline, really excited and wondering what my family must have been thinking.

**How did the manager tell you that you'd be making your first Premier League start, against West Ham in November 2016?**

We'd done a session with all of the squad, and at the end the manager named the starting line-up, and I was in it! I hadn't expected that at all. We did a bit of tactical work, but there wasn't any extra chat and I preferred it that way – I didn't want to be treated any differently to the other lads just because it was my debut. It was surreal, though. I told my family and they were over the moon. It sounds a bit cringe, but it was a great day for my parents. They'd driven me to and from football for all those years and now I was starting a Premier League game.

I was very excited and a little nervous that night. But by the morning, I just couldn't wait to get out there and play. Getting my first Premier League start was obviously huge, but to top it off with a goal and also to come back [from behind] and win really kickstarted the season for me.



**Was running over to Pochettino in celebration (below) just instinct?**

A few weeks before that, Josh Onomah scored his first goal for Spurs in the League Cup against Gillingham, and the next day at breakfast the gaffer came over and had a little joke with him. He said: "How can you score your first goal and not celebrate with the manager? Harry, when you score your first goal, make sure you celebrate with me!" So when I scored, I instinctively ran to him.

**You had also played at the Emirates a few weeks earlier – your first taste of a North London derby...**

I only had about three or four minutes, but it was brilliant to feel that atmosphere. As soon as you're out there, you feel how much the two clubs don't like each other. It was another thing for me to tick off the list. I went to those derbies many times as a kid. I was in the stands at White Hart Lane a few years before, celebrating with the fans when H [Harry Kane] scored the winner, and now I was on the pitch.

**Your season ended prematurely when you were injured at Burnley. Did you instantly know that it was a bad one?**

I was running towards the touchline and my studs got caught in the turf, and as I went to change direction, my ankle buckled. I remember rolling off the pitch and crashing into the bottles, but after that it's all a blur. I was on gas and air. I knew straight away that it was bad and I was in agony. I went to hospital. It's just something that happens in football, but it wasn't a nice experience. I was pretty down about it for a while. We had a few big games left, including the FA Cup semi-final, so it was really tough to take, especially because it had been my first season and I was getting into the rhythm of it.

**Presumably, missing the last ever game at White Hart Lane wasn't much fun for you either...**

Yeah, that was hard. Everyone wants to be involved in a game like that. I was there in the crowd, and it was a great way to leave the stadium, but it was a shame not to play. These things happen – you've just got to get on with it. You've got to come back stronger. ▶

Winks worked his socks off to reach full fitness in time for the 2017-18 campaign, returning to pre-season ahead of his team-mates in order to get himself back up to speed.

He was a late substitute in Tottenham's 2-0 win at Newcastle on the opening weekend, but October's 1-0 victory against Bournemouth at Wembley was only his second league start. The next fixture? Just the small matter of an away day at the Bernabeu. Winks started and ran the show as Spurs battled to a credible draw, and earned praise from a man who was an idol during those academy days.

"Harry's very talented and a quality footballer," revealed Luka Modric in last month's *FFT*. "He showed against Real Madrid how good he can become. I hope he will continue to evolve in the right way, and if that happens then I believe he has a very successful career in front of him."

*FFT* puts these quotes to the man who could be Modric's long-term successor in the Tottenham midfield.

"To hear that he said that leaves me gobsmacked," says Winks after a long pause. "Luka is one of the best midfielders in the world – a top, top, top player – so that's a great confidence boost. I got his shirt after the game, but I didn't get the chance to talk with him, unfortunately."

Winks excelled again as Tottenham won the return fixture 3-1, and also played the full 90 minutes of a 2-1 win at Borussia Dortmund that secured the north Londoners top spot in 'The Group of Death'.

Another injury in December stopped him in his tracks, but now he's back – and it's not just Spurs he's thinking about either. Having made his senior England debut in last October's World Cup qualifying victory over Lithuania – and scooping the man of the match award to boot – Winks is eyeing a place in Gareth Southgate's World Cup squad...

**"THE MANAGER TREATS  
ME THE SAME AS THE  
SENIOR PLAYERS.  
I PREFER THAT"**

**You were called into the England squad for the first time early this season. Did you see that one coming?**

No, not at all. I was with the under-21s and preparing to play away to Andorra, when I got a text saying, "Come and meet the coaches in the meeting room." So I went down there and they told me that I'd been promoted to the senior squad. I couldn't believe it. I knew a lot of the boys there from Tottenham, of course, but it was still scary; it was still nerve-racking to see my name up there with all of those experienced players. But the boys made me feel welcome and it was an all-round great experience. I loved it.

**There were a couple of articles suggesting your call-up had maybe come a little too soon, given you hadn't started a huge number of Premier League matches. How did you feel about that?**

Obviously I backed my ability to go out there and do a good job, but in terms of the number of top-flight games I had played, it was a bit of a surprise. I'm not going to complain about getting that opportunity, though. I wasn't really expecting to play any minutes, let alone start, but I knew I had to grasp the chance if it came. When you represent your country, you've got to perform. It was a great day – and now I'm hungry for more of them.

**Is it true that the Spanish FA had been watching you with a view to potentially calling you up?**

I read a few reports saying that they'd been watching me, but I don't really know too much about it, to be honest. I don't even know if I was eligible, but my nan is Spanish. I didn't get contacted by anybody. I've always considered myself to be English, so it wouldn't ever have been something I would've considered anyway.





**Clockwise from below** It all got emotional after the victory in Dortmund; “Why have you given me Harry Kane’s ball?”; Winks now has one eye on the World Cup; “Oh come ‘ere, Son”; Karim Benzema holds up his hands to such a talent

**Is it true you prepared for Spurs’ away game against Real Madrid by having an afternoon nap?**

Yeah, I always do that. If we have an evening game, I try to sleep for a couple of hours before the pre-match meal to unwind, switch off my mind and get as much energy as I can.

**You know this is a headline writer’s dream, right?**

Yeah, yeah – I’ve heard them all before! Everyone always says I should wear No.40, too. The funny thing is, I’m not very good at winking.

**How nerve-wracking was it to step out for an important Champions League game at the Bernabeu?**

I was a little nervous, as any player would be, but I was more excited to have the opportunity to make a statement with this team – and we did it. We showed that we can compete with big sides like Real Madrid. The manager didn’t say anything special to me beforehand; he simply shook my hand as he did with everyone else and said, “Just play your normal game and enjoy it.” I prefer it when the manager treats me the same as the senior players, as it makes you feel like he knows what you can do and trusts you to do your job.

We made a real statement as a team that night, and for me to be involved in that game took my confidence to another level.

We probably could have come out of it with more than a draw, to be honest. But it was great to play the full 90 minutes and be part of a team that went to the Bernabeu and got a draw – I couldn’t have imagined it going that well for me on a personal level.

**Some people compared your performance to Jack Wilshere’s against Barcelona in 2010...**

Yeah, I have seen one or two comparisons and understand them, given all of the similarities. I remember watching that Arsenal game and he was phenomenal. I think he was about two years younger than me at the time, too. He did really well and credit to him for that, because it’s hard as a young player to go out there and play against the European champions.



**You suffered an injury setback over Christmas, but now that you’re back, what are your aims for the rest of the season?**

To stay fit, get back in the side and try to play in as many matches as I can – that’s the most important thing at the moment. We have still got some massive fixtures ahead of us this season and I want to help the team as much as possible.

**How important is it for Spurs to start winning trophies?**

It’s something we want to do and something we expect of ourselves. We’ve made a statement in the Premier League and shown how good a team we are, so now we want to step things up and try to lift some silverware, whatever competition it is.

**Do you have one eye on making England’s World Cup squad?**

That’s certainly an aim. I want to go to the World Cup, but it’s difficult because there’s so much competition for places, with a lot of players doing well. All I can do is get as much game time as I can, perform well and try to impress the coaches. I don’t think there’s any one particular rival for a place in the squad; there’s a handful of midfielders who can play in that role now. All I can do is focus on my game and improve as much as I can, and see what happens at the end of the season.

**How excited are you about playing in Spurs’ new 62,000-capacity stadium next season?**

I’ve actually been down there already and it looks phenomenal – we put on virtual reality headsets and saw what it’ll look like inside when it’s done. It’s going to be a great place to play in, and hopefully I’ll get the chance to do that and have a lot of success there. Playing in that very first match will be an aim. Beating Harry Kane to scoring the first ever goal there would be a dream, too!



KLUIVERT

45

# “THE AIM IS TO BE BETTER THAN MY DAD”



For most youngsters, that's not too bold a statement. But when you're Justin Kluivert and your old man has won four league titles, a bucketload of international caps and the Champions League, it's quite a high bar

Words Arthur Renard

**T**he business class section of a private jet, cruising through the air somewhere between the Algarve and Amsterdam, probably isn't the setting you'd expect for a young footballer's big break.

As Ajax's squad relaxed on their way home from a mid-season training camp in the south of Portugal last January, one of the younger members of the travelling party was beckoned to the vacant seat next to manager Peter Bosz. This had been the fresh-faced player's first prolonged exposure to first-team training, and as such he was only just getting his head round the idea that he was a professional.

Having taken a seat next to his gaffer, the youngster was told he had sufficiently impressed Ajax's coaching staff and would from now on remain with the first team on a full-time basis. The starlet's 18th birthday was still four months away.

"I was told I had played well and taken my chance," Justin Kluivert tells *FourFourTwo*, a year on.

"The coach said that I was an exciting player. A little more than a week later, I was handed my debut in an

away match against PEC Zwolle. That went pretty well too, and after the game everybody was really praising my style. But starting well is only doing half the job."

Kluivert had certainly made a decent first impression at the club and, unsurprisingly, his debut attracted extra attention due to the famous name printed across the back of his shirt. Even before that first senior appearance, pundits and fans had been speculating as to whether the young forward could follow in the footsteps of his iconic father, Patrick Kluivert – he of three Eredivisie titles, a La Liga crown with Barcelona and an iconic Champions League-winning goal.

However, despite standing out on his first outing for the Amsterdam club, the younger Kluivert's display against Zwolle actually went some way to quelling all of the comparisons. His adventurous dribbles were alternated with some very clever through-balls. This was a marauding winger, rather than a penalty box-dwelling centre forward, and a very good one at that.

When interviewed by Dutch broadcaster NOS after that game, Justin removed his smartphone from his pocket and read out a message he'd received from his proud papa.

"Very good game," the message began. "So how good does it feel? Incredible, right? And this is just the start."

Kluivert the winger had made his mark on the game, and Kluivert the centre-forward agreed.

On the day of his debut, Justin was 17 years and 255 days old. He beat his father to the Ajax first team by 167 days, not something many had expected to happen, including the youngster himself.

Only five months earlier, during the summer of 2016, he was still in the under-19 squad and had set himself three humble goals: "My aim was to get into the U19s of the Dutch national team, make my debut with the U23s of Ajax and then train a few times with the first team," recalls Kluivert. "But at the end of that season I was almost a regular starter for the first team, had played several games in Europe and was even included in the matchday squad for the Europa League final," he says with a confident grin. "Things went beautifully," he adds, perhaps understating his own overachievement.

His rapid start at the Amsterdam Arena is reminiscent of his old man, who was also on the bench for a European final at the end of his first season. Once again, Justin was younger than his dad when achieving the feat, though Patrick certainly had more of an impact on the 1995 Champions League Final. He clambered off the bench to score the only goal of the game in a historic victory over Milan. Justin stayed on the sidelines as Ajax lost 2-0 to Manchester United.

In the coming years, the 18-year-old hopes to follow in his father's illustrious footsteps and succeed at the highest level of the European game – but Justin isn't the only Kluivert looking to make lifting trophies a family business. Older brother Quincy (20) is in Vitesse Arnhem's U23 side, younger sibling Ruben (16) is set to join up with AZ Alkmaar next season, while half-brother Shane (10) is already wowing spectators in the academy at Barcelona.

The Catalan capital is also where Justin spent his formative years, in the days when his father was one of the key figures at the Camp Nou. "After matches, me and my brother Quincy would always go into the changing room, just to get some drinks," he recalls. "That was pretty cool. I remember one time my brother went in the Jacuzzi!"

When Patrick moved to Newcastle United in 2004, Justin wasn't able to watch his dad's games quite so regularly – his parents got divorced, ▶



## “LONDON’S AN ATTRACTIVE CITY, BUT MY TWO MAIN GOALS ARE WINNING THE TITLE WITH AJAX AND MAKING MY HOLLAND DEBUT”

By that stage, Justin had already started playing the game himself. He kicked off at the amateur club ASV De Dijk in Amsterdam, the very same side at which Patrick had begun his career 20-odd years earlier (back then, they were called ASV Schellingwoude). Like his dad, Justin soon moved on, and by 2007 he’d been drafted into Ajax’s academy.

However, he still enjoyed the occasional kickabout with his friends. Justin practised his skills by spending hours playing on Amsterdam’s streets. “I was living next to a playground, where I would always play football with my brothers and friends,” he says.

“Nowadays youngsters don’t play outside much, which is a shame as I think you learn your basic skills on the streets. It’s so important.”

However, Kluivert reveals he didn’t stand out during his early years in Ajax’s renowned academy. “I was never the best player in my team,” he says. “I remember, for instance, when I was with the U15s, many of my team-mates jumped up to the U17 side, while I was just moved on to the U16s instead.

“At the end of every season we would have evaluations in which you were told whether you’d be staying at the club or moving on. In those moments, I’ve got to admit, the thought of being sent away did cross my mind, and some of my pals were let go. Fortunately, things really took off for me when I played with the U17 team. I had matured and started to notice that I had some extra qualities the other players did not. That was the moment when I realised I had a real opportunity to become a professional.”



As Kluivert’s confidence grew, his movement through the youth ranks accelerated. He soon switched from the U17s to the U19s, and within another year the teenager had secured a place in Ajax’s U23 team for the 2016-17 campaign.

By December 2016, Justin had already hit the aforementioned trio of targets for the season when he made his debut for the Dutch U19 side and was invited to train with Ajax’s senior squad for the first time.

That trip to the Algarve and his first-team debut followed soon after, and he’s barely looked back since, establishing himself as an important member of the squad. Having played predominantly on the right wing in his early appearances, this season he has switched to his favoured left flank. As 2017 progressed, Kluivert continued to stand out with his dribbles, bravery on the ball and long-range shooting. His best display was, without a doubt, in the Eredivisie game against Roda JC, when he blasted home a sensational hat-trick in a 5-1 win. All three of his goals were somewhat similar, with the wideman cutting inside from the left wing before firing home with his right foot.

Yet, he doesn’t consider the match the pinnacle of his career so far. “It was great, but my highlight has been the Europa League final, even though I didn’t play,” he says of last May’s showdown with Man United in Stockholm. “Such an occasion is unique and just to be there was so special. You won’t experience that very often.

“You could feel the impact it had all over Holland. Some of my friends sent me images of people out on the streets watching on massive TV screens. It made for a feeling as if everyone in the country, or at least in Amsterdam, was supporting us.”

Before the final, Justin made sure to pick his father’s brain to get an idea of what he should expect of such a showpiece.

“Of course I asked him about some of his experiences, because he’d participated in a European final before,” he says. “He gave me advice beforehand, like to keep calm and just play my own game if I got any minutes on the pitch.”

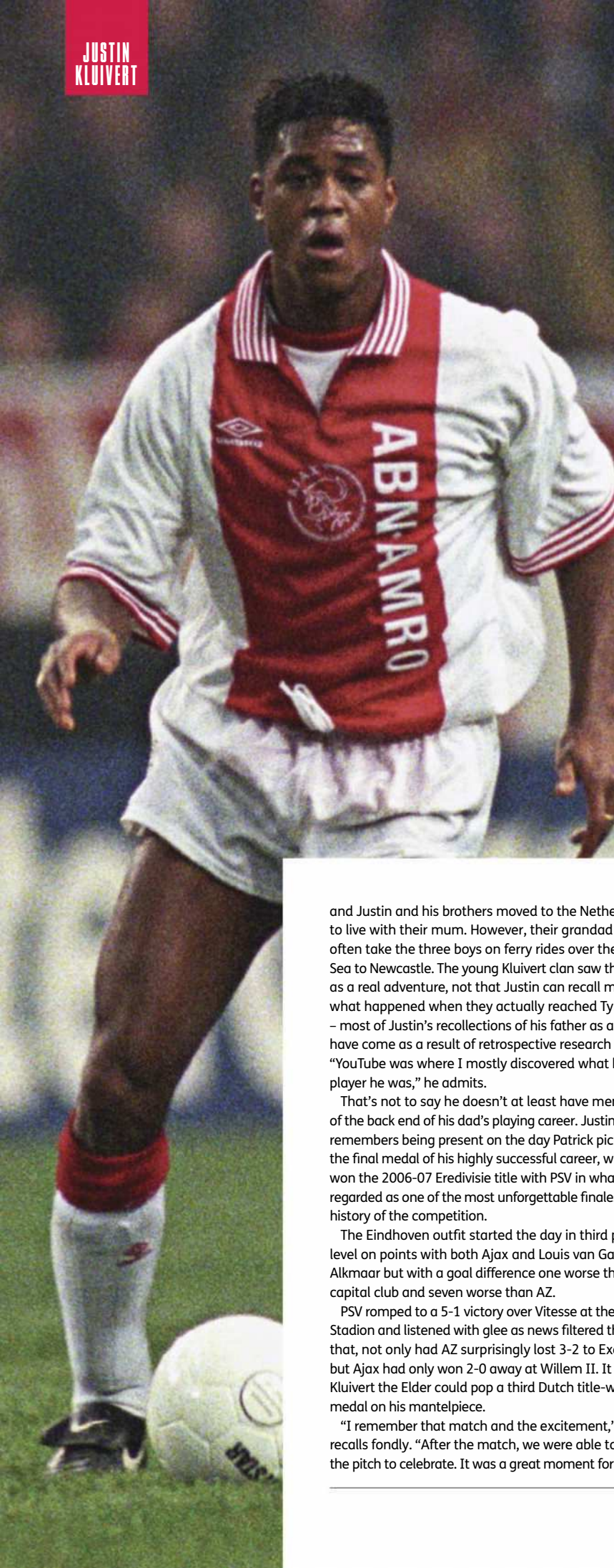
and Justin and his brothers moved to the Netherlands to live with their mum. However, their grandad would often take the three boys on ferry rides over the North Sea to Newcastle. The young Kluivert clan saw the trips as a real adventure, not that Justin can recall much of what happened when they actually reached Tyneside – most of Justin’s recollections of his father as a player have come as a result of retrospective research online. “YouTube was where I mostly discovered what kind of player he was,” he admits.

That’s not to say he doesn’t at least have memories of the back end of his dad’s playing career. Justin vividly remembers being present on the day Patrick picked up the final medal of his highly successful career, when he won the 2006-07 Eredivisie title with PSV in what’s still regarded as one of the most unforgettable finales in the history of the competition.

The Eindhoven outfit started the day in third place – level on points with both Ajax and Louis van Gaal’s AZ Alkmaar but with a goal difference one worse than the capital club and seven worse than AZ.

PSV romped to a 5-1 victory over Vitesse at the Philips Stadion and listened with glee as news filtered through that, not only had AZ surprisingly lost 3-2 to Excelsior, but Ajax had only won 2-0 away at Willem II. It meant Kluivert the Elder could pop a third Dutch title-winners’ medal on his mantelpiece.

“I remember that match and the excitement,” Justin recalls fondly. “After the match, we were able to go on the pitch to celebrate. It was a great moment for us all.”







Unfortunately for Kluivert he didn't get a run-out, but he did catch the eye of the man in the opposing dugout. Jose Mourinho knew all about Justin – in fact, the pair go way back, all the way to the days when the Special One was the assistant coach at Barcelona, and Patrick Kluivert was on the playing staff.

The Manchester United manager made a beeline for the young Kluivert after the final whistle. “He said it was nice to see me again after such a long time, because he had known me when I was a baby,” he reveals. “And he said it was nice to see that I was doing well.”

Kluivert insists Mourinho didn't try to prise him away to Old Trafford, but speculation persists that United are among a host of Premier League clubs monitoring him. There's even been rumours that Lionel Messi has asked Barcelona's board to bring the starlet to the Camp Nou, 20 years after his father first arrived in Catalonia. “I've heard that as well,” says Justin. “But I really don't know if it's true. I'm not in contact with Messi. Only he knows whether that happened, but it's nice to hear.”

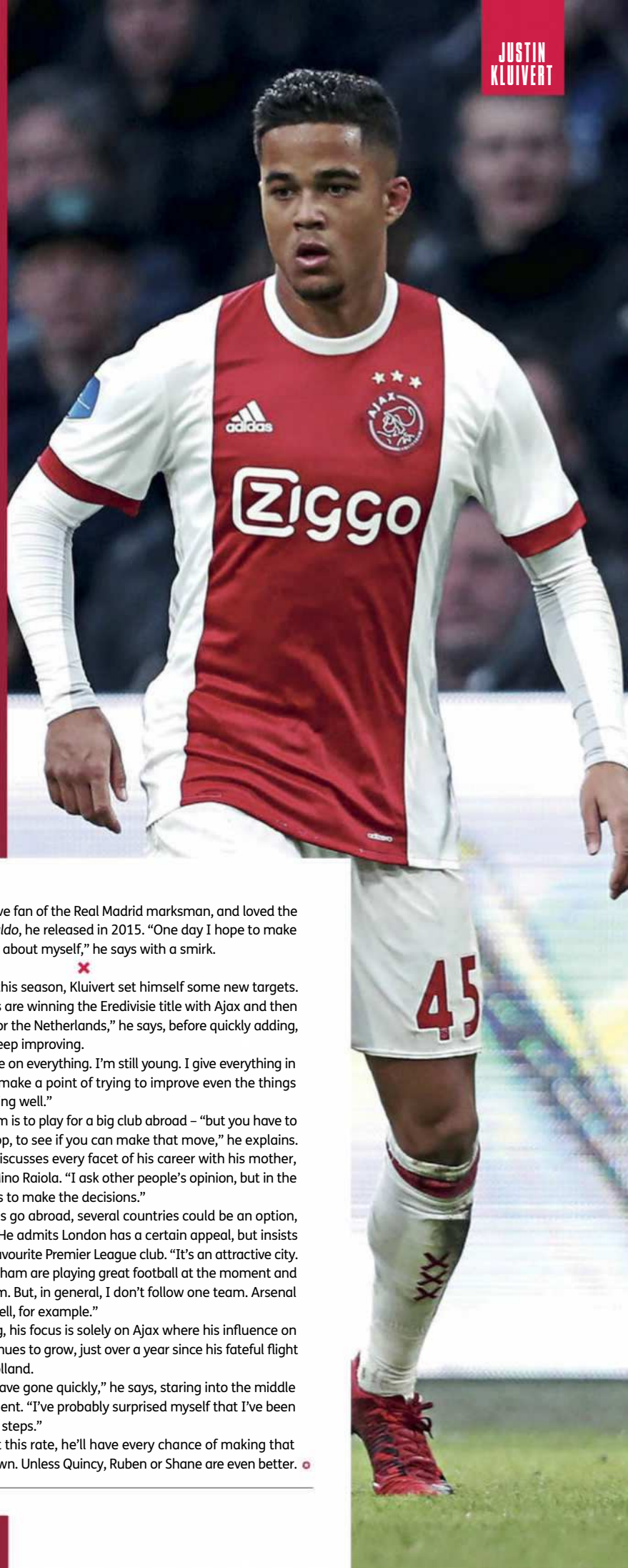
Messi, it should be noted, was in the Barça academy when Patrick was leading the first team's attack, and is a known admirer of a man who scored more than 120 goals in six years at the club.

His iconic surname may sometimes make Kluivert the centre of attention, but he's never seen it as a burden. “I'm calm and down to earth with those kind of things,” he says. “In fact, I love to play with this name, as it's like an honour. And maybe I can even expand the name and be even better – that would be great.”

Having spent a year as Paris Saint-Germain technical director, Kluivert senior is now back at Barça, where he keeps a keen eye on the progress of young Shane – the youngest member of the family and a recent inductee to the Catalans' fabled La Masia academy.

Shane may only be 10, but he's already acquired fame with videos of his football skills. Justin keeps in regular contact with him. “Sometimes we speak to each other via FaceTime,” he says. “It's good fun and I'll often give him advice. He looks up to me, so it's really important I do everything right. He wants the same boots as me, wants to copy my shooting style and my tricks, and he can perform them all, too! Whether he'll be even better than me I don't know – but I hope so.”

While Shane looks up to Justin, the Ajax starlet's got his own heroes. “Ronaldinho was a phenomenon,” says the 18-year-old. “But off the pitch he wasn't really a top professional. So these days I look up to players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, who lives for his sport as well. That's what I want to do in my career, too, because what you show out on the pitch also reflects on how much you're willing to sacrifice.”



Kluivert's a massive fan of the Real Madrid marksman, and loved the documentary, *Ronaldo*, he released in 2015. “One day I hope to make something like that about myself,” he says with a smirk.

Before the start of this season, Kluivert set himself some new targets. “My two main goals are winning the Eredivisie title with Ajax and then making my debut for the Netherlands,” he says, before quickly adding, “and of course to keep improving.”

“I want to improve on everything. I'm still young. I give everything in training and I also make a point of trying to improve even the things that are already going well.”

His ultimate dream is to play for a big club abroad – “but you have to see how you develop, to see if you can make that move,” he explains.

Kluivert says he discusses every facet of his career with his mother, father and agent, Mino Raiola. “I ask other people's opinion, but in the end it's me who has to make the decisions.”

If one day he does go abroad, several countries could be an option, including England. He admits London has a certain appeal, but insists he doesn't have a favourite Premier League club. “It's an attractive city. I have to say Tottenham are playing great football at the moment and really play as a team. But, in general, I don't follow one team. Arsenal are a nice club as well, for example.”

For the time being, his focus is solely on Ajax where his influence on the first team continues to grow, just over a year since his fateful flight from Portugal to Holland.

“I realise things have gone quickly,” he says, staring into the middle distance for a moment. “I've probably surprised myself that I've been able to make those steps.”

If he carries on at this rate, he'll have every chance of making that famous name his own. Unless Quincy, Ruben or Shane are even better. ◊

“THREE YEARS AGO I DIDN'T PLAY MUCH. SINCE DAY ONE BACK IN ENGLAND I WANTED TO SHOW WHAT I COULD DO”



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TIMO  
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SPECIAL





# DON'T THINK JUST SHOOT

RB Leipzig's Timo Werner is thinking big. As well as matching Miroslav Klose's World Cup scoring record for Germany, he's got his eye on a move to either Man United or Liverpool...

Words Chris Flanagan

Photography Leon Csernohlavek

**O**n the evening of Sunday, July 13, 2014, an 18-year-old lad sat in the middle of a restaurant with his mates, both eyes fixed on the big screen in front of him. He had just completed his high-school studies at the Württemberg-Gymnasium in Stuttgart, and now he was ready for the greatest celebration of all time. He watched on as, 6,000 miles away at the Maracana in Brazil, Miroslav Klose made his 137th and final outing for Germany. Then he jumped for joy as Mario Götze volleyed home in extra time to win the World Cup for Die Mannschaft.

That night, Timo Werner was just like every other football-loving teenager in Germany. This summer, it could be very different. It won't be Klose leading the line as Joachim Löw's men strive to become the first team in 56 years to retain the World Cup trophy. This time it's likely to be Werner, the relaxed young man sat across the table from FFT inside RB Leipzig's training ground, casually lobbing an elastic band into the air and looking totally undaunted about carrying the hopes of 82 million people on his shoulders.

"Four years ago I was with my friends, watching the game and just thinking, 'Please win! Please win!'" says the grinning goal-getter, who'd had his heart broken, aged six, by Ronaldo's brace for Brazil in the 2002 final. "Everybody's a part of it when Germany win – everybody says, 'We won the World Cup.' Four years ago I said it like that, but this year I hope my friends will be watching the tournament without me.

"If it turns out that I'm the main striker for Germany at the World Cup, there's no pressure for me. I'm very young and I just try to enjoy the moment. When I don't think of pressure – that I have to score goals, I have to, I have to – I just go for it. The rest comes by instinct."

Lightning-quick, with a 100-metre time of 11.1 seconds, Werner has been nicknamed *Rakete* ('Rocket') by Löw, who opted to start the livewire forward in each of the last seven internationals for which he's been available. Timo's netted seven goals in the process, and won the Golden Boot in his country's victorious Confederations Cup campaign in Russia last summer.

That came in the immediate aftermath of the youngster's real breakthrough season, when he hit 21 goals in 31 league games as RB Leipzig took the Bundesliga by storm in their first top-flight term. When we meet in early February, shortly before ▶

his 22nd birthday, he already has another 14 goals to his name for Die Roten Bullen in 2017-18. "What's happened in the last two years has been a bit of a dream," admits Werner.

Things are about to get even better.

### "LEIPZIG'S STYLE IS RIGHT FOR ME – IT FITS MY GAME"

People knew early on that Werner was pretty good. The son of former Stuttgarter Kickers striker Günther Schuh, he progressed through the youth system of his home city's biggest club, VfB Stuttgart, inspired by watching them win the Bundesliga title in 2007. He was 11 years old when they became champions that season. At 14, he hit a hat-trick in his first game for Germany Under-15s. By 17, he was making his debut for the Stuttgart first team, becoming their youngest ever player. And on his third Bundesliga start, he scored his first goal – the equaliser in a 1-1 draw against Eintracht Frankfurt – before running off to celebrate with the biggest grin in Germany plastered across his face. "The feeling was just incredible," Werner tells *FFT*.

That season, he would play 34 games for the first team, 30 of them in the Bundesliga, all while finishing off the final year of high school. It made for a surreal few months. "The younger boys at my school often wanted me to sign a shirt or sign their boots," explains Werner. "It was a bit embarrassing for me, as I didn't want to be a superstar in school. I was a normal student. I wanted to get my grades.

"It was crazy, because even the teachers would talk to me when we lost, and at Stuttgart in those times, we often lost! Mondays at school were not fun for me. But it was also a great time in my life."

While Werner established himself as a regular over the next couple of seasons and earned his first call-up to Germany Under-21s, it wasn't all plain sailing for the teenager. Sometimes deployed out wide rather than in his preferred position as a central striker, his highest goal haul across a single campaign was only seven in all competitions when, in 2015-16, Stuttgart were relegated.

"During my time at Stuttgart, I was a little bit scared when I was in front of goal," confesses Werner. "I would think too much about what I should do in every situation: 'Should I do this, should I do that?' As a striker, it's better if you don't think about anything. Now I run to the goal and I don't think, I just shoot. That's my strength: I don't think at that moment, only shoot!"

Despite Stuttgart's relegation, Werner had already shown more than enough to attract interest – Tottenham were among the clubs linked to the young striker during the previous season. The move he made in the summer of 2016 changed everything: a \$16 million transfer to RB Leipzig, a club preparing for what was supposed to be a difficult debut season in the Bundesliga. Leipzig's success has been built on bringing through young players, none more so than Timo.

"At that time I could have gone to other clubs," admits Werner, "but for me it was very important to play, and to play in a good team where there's a good feeling in the squad. Here, a lot of us are the same age and we're all friends. Also, the style of football is right for me. It fits my game. My game is really fast and the game of RB Leipzig is also really fast. We have a plan that when we win the ball, we have to get in front of goal as fast as we can. So for me it's good, because the first view of

our players is directly to the goal. I always know that when we win the ball, I have to go deep so I can score. That's the reason why I fit very well into the system here.

"When I first came to RB Leipzig, I thought to myself that I hoped to score 10 goals in a season. In the first season I scored 21 goals – it was amazing. This season has been the same: I've played 20 games in the Bundesliga and now I have 10 goals.

"I'm very happy that I made the step to Leipzig for my development. It was absolutely the right decision."

His style has previously drawn comparisons to Jamie Vardy, the man RB Leipzig once decided not to sign from Fleetwood – a decision they later admitted regretting. Such has been Werner's form since arriving, Vardy surely wouldn't get in the Leipzig team today.

### "I'M MORE MANCHESTER UNITED THAN LIVERPOOL"

Werner may have grown up following Stuttgart, but he has long had his eye on the Premier League, too. Like many Germans, his English is good – this is one of his first interviews using the language and two of RB Leipzig's media team are on hand to translate in case he struggles to express himself at any point. But he needs them only occasionally, and when asked which English clubs he watched the most as a boy, he launches straight into his answer.

"Manchester United and Liverpool were the teams I watched quite a lot in England," he reveals. "They were the two that I'm a little bit of a fan of, because they have so much history. When Alex Ferguson was the coach, United won everything and were outstanding. They may be one of the top three clubs in the world."

Timo bursts into laughter when *FFT* points out that, given the rivalry between the Premier League pair, he might be the only person on the planet to support both clubs. "In Liverpool it's also their stadium and the atmosphere," he continues. "But when I have to decide, I'm more Manchester United than Liverpool!"





TIMO WERNER

## “MANCHESTER UNITED AND LIVERPOOL WERE THE TEAMS I WATCHED A LOT – IF I HAD TO DECIDE, I’M MORE UNITED THAN LIVERPOOL”

**Clockwise from top** Timo starts out with Stuttgart; Besiktas fans were a real pain in the neck; the 2017 Confederations Cup Golden Boot winner greets a fan; Werner shows Chile in the final why Germany coach Jogi Löw calls him ‘Rocket’

The focus soon turns back to Germany when we ask Werner to name his childhood idol. “That’s easy to answer: Mario Gomez,” he says. “He was the number one striker at Stuttgart when we became the German champions, so he was my hero.” Werner and Gomez, now 32, were in the same squad for the first time, and so far only time, for Germany’s World Cup qualifying matches against the Czech Republic and Norway last September. “He will dominate the attack for Germany for the next 10 years,” Gomez revealed, thoroughly impressed by what he’d seen from the RB Leipzig goal-getter. “If he continues like this, it’s likely he will do the same in Europe.”

That praise meant the world to Timo. “It was a really nice moment,” he smiles. “We beat Norway 6-0 in Stuttgart. I scored twice in the first half and then Mario came on as a substitute for me in the second half. It wasn’t just the two goals – it was the fact that Mario celebrated my performance afterwards and said that I was the new him! In the past, I thought, ‘Can I be like him?’, and I wanted to show that I could. In the future, I will play for him.”

Werner had been a senior international for all of four months when he stepped onto the podium in Saint Petersburg to collect the Golden Boot trophy at last summer’s Confederations Cup. He had just helped Germany win the tournament with three goals and two assists in four appearances, including a brace on the way to bagging the man of the match award against Cameroon. Who presented him with the Golden

**Boot? Brazil legend, and 2002 heartbreaker, Ronaldo. The chap who was next to offer his congratulations? Diego Maradona (left).**

“Football is a team sport and in that moment it was amazing to win the Confederations Cup – my happiness was at 100 per cent,” says Werner.

“Then to win the Golden Boot took it to 110 per cent, and then to say hello to Maradona and Ronaldo... 120 per cent! They said I’d played well. Of course, that meant a lot. I have a photograph of that in a frame at my parents’ house.”

**His debut for Germany had come against England last**

March when Timo started alongside Lukas Podolski, who was making his farewell appearance for Die Mannschaft.

“That was a day I’ll never forget,” says Werner. “To make your debut for the German national team is something you have to work so hard for. Germany are one of the best teams in the world, so you’ve got to play really well to become a national team player. To know that I had done something different to other players, to become a player for the national team, was something special.”

The focus was on Podolski that night – all the more so after he signed off by smashing home the game’s only goal – but on Werner’s second outing for Germany, against San Marino in Nuremberg three months later, he was unexpectedly jeered by a section of the home support. Many fans around the country had disapproved when he was thought to have dived to win a penalty in a Bundesliga fixture against Schalke that season. Being the main striker of RB Leipzig was almost certainly a contributing factor, too, given the club’s unpopularity in Germany. Coach Joachim Löw came to Werner’s defence, insisting the boos were “simply not OK”, and they’ve vanished now that the forward is scoring regularly for the national team.

Success at the Confederations Cup has provided Werner with added confidence ahead of the real thing this summer: the World Cup.

“The Confederations Cup is like a little World Cup and it was the first experience for me in a competition like that,” he adds. “At that point, I didn’t even think I would get to play at the World Cup. Now I can say that maybe I will play there. So it was a good test to see how I played against some other strong national teams, and how I could compete with them this summer.”

Having lifted the Confederations Cup in Russia, can he imagine what it would be like to lift the World Cup there on July 15? “No!” he replies with a smile. “To imagine winning the World Cup in 2018... it would be the best year of my life. I think we have a good chance of doing it, even if it will be extremely difficult. We have a great team, we have a really good mentality and we are a tournament team – we save our best for the major tournaments.”

This will be Germany’s first World Cup post-Klose, but the fact that Werner has happily taken on the retired striker’s No.11 shirt suggests he won’t feel the strain of replacing the tournament’s all-time leading goalscorer. “No, because he is in Germany’s coaching team now, so if I play badly, he will come and play instead!” jokes Werner. “He’s been helping me – I’m a different type of striker to him, but he can still give me a lot of advice about what made his game so outstanding. If I can take around 15 or 20 per cent of his game into my game, I’ll become a more complete player.”

Breaking Klose’s record will be no mean feat, but Werner has made a faster start to his club career, having played in nearly 150 Bundesliga matches before turning 22.

“When I was his age, I’d just finished my carpentry apprenticeship,” said Klose recently. He didn’t make his Bundesliga debut until he was just a couple of months younger than Werner is now. Youthful enough ▶



to potentially go to four World Cups, will Timo be attempting to smash Klose's tournament record of 16 goals one day?

"Erm, I'll try!" he says, laughing. "But Miroslav Klose broke the record of Ronaldo, one of the best strikers ever, so that's a big, big thing to do. It definitely won't be easy to reach that total!"

### "I WANT TO BE AMONG THE VERY BEST"

It was September 26, 2017, and Timo Werner had a problem. Leipzig were 1-0 down at Besiktas in Werner's first Champions League away match. Home fans were going crazy with excitement, and the decibel count was high. It was all too much for Werner. He put his hands over his ears to block out the noise, then tried to play on using earplugs. It was no good. On 32 minutes, he asked to be substituted.

Leipzig lost 2-0 and the substitution made headlines around Europe. How could one of the world's brightest young stars ask to come off the field just because the stadium was too noisy? Werner tells *FFT* that the reality of the situation was a little more complicated.

"It was so loud, but that wasn't the reason why I had problems," he says. "I had some problems with my neck – I'd had a collision in the Confederations Cup final against Chile, and it affected everything against Besiktas. It was all connected with the whole system and I had a tough time breathing. I hadn't had that feeling in a match before. I couldn't concentrate on the game, because I had to cope with my body. I'd played in every game, as well as the Confederations Cup, and had a long season before that, and it was probably my body giving me a sign. But now everything is good again."

Indeed, Werner recovered to score three goals in Leipzig's final four Champions League matches, though it wasn't enough to help his club into the last 16. "Three goals was OK, as my injury meant I didn't play much," he says. "Playing in the Champions League was special. A lot of things have happened to me and I can't believe the speed of it all. Two years ago I played for 18th to 15th place in the Bundesliga – now I was playing in the Champions League, and when the anthem played I got goosebumps. We want to reach the Champions League again. I hope we can play in it so often that I don't get goosebumps."

Leipzig are firmly in contention again – they're third in the league as we speak to Werner, after last season's incredible run to second place. They've proved they're no one-season wonder. So has Werner.

"That was really important," he explains, "not only for myself but for other people to see that it wasn't just one season when I scored goals. Some people would say, 'Yes, but we have to look at what will happen next year'. Personally, I know that I can do very well in the Bundesliga, and now I can show it. I have a lot of self-confidence, and that's why I have played very well this season and, I hope, why I'll play very well next season – because I trust myself to score goals."

But Werner isn't the only young player to have flourished at Leipzig. Midfielder Naby Keita, 23, has fared so well that he'll join Liverpool this summer for a fee that may rise to \$120m. "Naby will be a world-class player because he has everything," says Werner. "I think he's a bit like Andres Iniesta, the same type of player, because he can dribble, shoot and score. He has a lot of qualities that the young Iniesta had. I don't think Naby will get worse – he'll only get better. The Premier League is different to the Bundesliga but he has a lot of skills, so in the Premier League he will play like he does here. He will do well."

And what of Werner's future? Leipzig are keen to keep hold of him for a while yet – his contract runs until 2020 – but Werner has been linked with a variety of clubs, including Real Madrid, and admits he is ambitious. "As a young player, first of all you want to play," he reveals. "But in this situation where I play for the national team and have more expectations for myself, I'm now at a point where at some stage in the future I'd like to play in a team who win championships. I'm very comfortable at RB Leipzig, though."

Can he win the Bundesliga title with Leipzig? "At the moment, no, as Bayern Munich are too strong. They're 15 points ahead of us, so they're too good. This is only our second year in the Bundesliga and we don't know what will happen in the next few seasons, but when you see all the players that Bayern have, you know

"I HAVE EXPECTATIONS, AND I'M AT A POINT WHERE AT SOME STAGE IN THE FUTURE I'D LIKE TO PLAY IN A TEAM WHO WIN CHAMPIONSHIPS"



they will usually be the best team in Germany. In a one-off game you can beat them, but over a whole season? That's not possible."

A move to the Premier League one day is, without doubt, something that interests Werner. However, while playing for Man United would be a dream – not that he's ruling out his other favourite team, Liverpool, or indeed any other clubs – he's in no hurry.

"Yes, playing in the Premier League is a dream for me," he confirms. "In the Premier League, I would like to play for two or three clubs, and Manchester United are one of those clubs. But probably not in the next few years – later, when my English is a little bit better!"

If his language skills in our chat are anything to go by, Werner shouldn't need to worry about that, but it's a telling remark. If he does seal a switch to the Premier League, he wants to be sure that he's ready. For now, the aim is to keep progressing and inch closer to the list of forwards regarded as the best in the world. "I want to try to be among the best at one point in my career," says the 22-year-old.

He's not too far away, even now. Everyone in the Bundesliga already knows what Timo Werner is capable of. If he can play a starring role for Germany at the World Cup, his talent will be known all across the globe. ◊

Above Leipzig and Timo have scaled new heights together Below Gomez: hero turned team-mate







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# GIANLUIGI DONNARUMMA

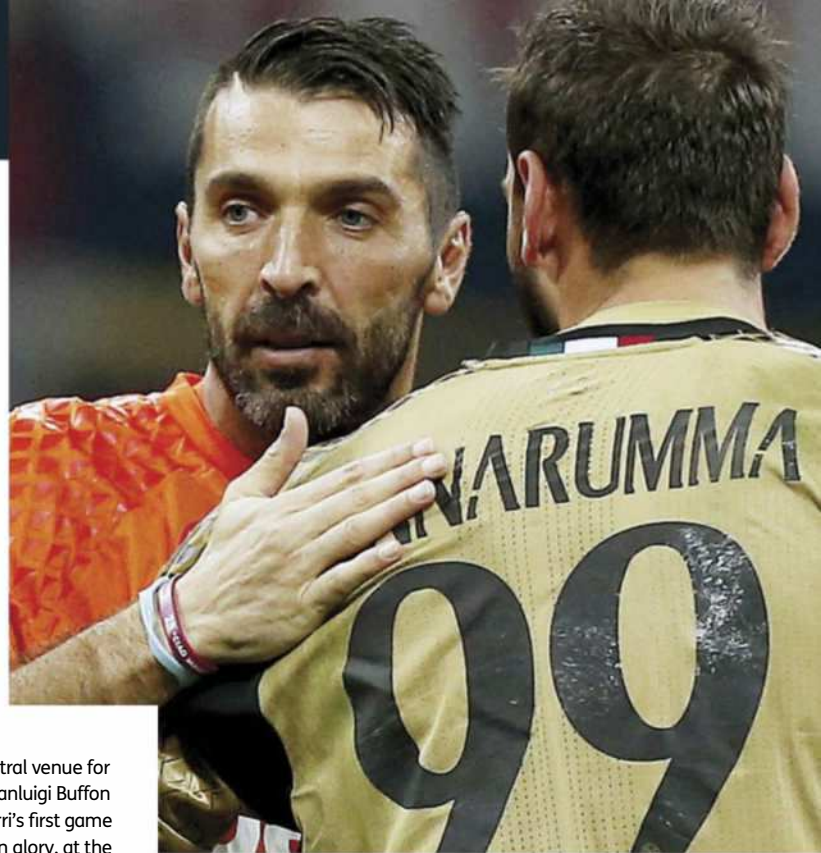
ITALY 1968 - 2038

**Interview** Sheridan Bird **Words** Chris Flanagan **Portrait** Paolo Verzene

Having made his Milan debut at 16 and first appearance for his country at 17, Gianluigi Donnarumma is well placed to establish himself as the next great Italian No.1. Now he just needs to win over his own fans...

THE CORONATION IS EXPECTED TO TAKE PLACE IN MANCHESTER LATER THIS MONTH.

GIGI IS GONE.  
LONG LIVE GIGIO.



On March 23, the Etihad Stadium will be the unlikely neutral venue for Italy's first match since the international retirement of Gianluigi Buffon – a prestige friendly against Argentina. It will be the Azzurri's first game since Sweden shattered Buffon's dreams of bowing out in glory, at the World Cup this summer.

A substitute that November night, as Italy were surprisingly beaten in a play-off at the San Siro, Gianluigi Donnarumma marched onto the field at full-time to embrace the tearful Buffon, his hero and the man who has been his lifelong inspiration. Now that the path is clear, a few months earlier than originally anticipated. Italy's goalkeeping jersey is his. Still only 19 years of age, it could potentially be his for the next couple of decades.

"He's a lad with extraordinary skills – he could be my son," said the 40-year-old, anointing Donnarumma as his successor after 175 Italy appearances. Indeed, Buffon had played 114 times for Parma and won three caps before Donnarumma had even been born.

That lad has just walked into the media centre at Milanello to talk to *FourFourTwo*. We've travelled to the Rossoneri's revered training base, in secluded woodland 30 miles north-west of the city, not far from the shores of Lake Como. A towering presence at 6ft 5in, he's staring at his smartphone as he arrives, towel over one arm after a hard morning's training. However, a smile soon flashes across his face as he greets *FFT* and sits down to discuss football.

"Gigi Buffon was always my idol," he admits. "I'm really sorry for him because he doesn't deserve to miss the World Cup. I was sad about it. I thanked him for everything he has done for me."

Donnarumma's been described as the new Buffon ever since making his Serie A debut for Milan in October 2015, aged 16. Less than a year later, he was replacing his hero at half-time of an international friendly between Italy and France.

"Playing for Italy makes your heart pound," explains Donnarumma. "When you hear the national anthem before the game, you almost feel like crying. It's a dream for all children to play for Italy and I'm proud to have achieved it."

Donnarumma spent two years training with Buffon for the Azzurri, so this will be the first time he has to go it alone without his mentor. And he's also expected to instantly replicate the performances that Buffon produced match after match.

"He's always given me lots advice when we've worked together with the national team," says Donnarumma. "I think it's hard to equal what he did – he is the absolute number one. But I'll keep working and try to do what he did, and improve. I hope to replicate even a little of what he did, because there's no one like him."

Donnarumma has at least been doing a pretty good impersonation of the man most consider the greatest goalkeeper of the modern era.

He could already put together a stunning showreel of incredible saves, and the starlet doesn't need to think for very long when *FFT* asks him to select his favourite.

"The penalty save in the 2016 Supercoppa Italiana," he reveals. That night, Milan took on Juventus in Doha, a rematch of that year's Coppa Italia final. Double winners Juve had won that final 1-0, but this time the outcome was different. The tie finished 1-1 and went to penalties, Donnarumma saved from Paulo Dybala and Buffon's Bianconeri were defeated. Milan had their first trophy in five years.

"There was a save from Sami Khedira against Juventus, in the league last season at the San Siro, that was also great," adds Donnarumma. "But the save in the Supercoppa was more special because it gave us the trophy. I still get goosebumps when I watch the video."

That he was making a difference for the club he supported as a boy made it all the more memorable for the teen. He may have grown up in Castellammare di Stabia, near Naples in Italy's south, but Gianluigi has followed Milan ever since his brother Antonio – also a goalkeeper but eight years his elder – first joined the Rossoneri in 2005. Gigio was only six at the time. "I was, and am, a Milan fan," he says. "When I was young, I used to love it when Kaka and Shevchenko scored."

Standing at 6ft 2in at the age of just 11, Donnarumma was always destined to be a bit different. Away from football, were there plenty of other advantages to his height – sneaking into the cinema underage, perhaps? "No!" he says, bursting out laughing. "I never really used my height. At the cinema I always sat at the back – because I was so tall, I didn't want to block the view for the other people. It was the same in the classroom at school, too."

Gigio's stature meant he was naturally suited to playing between the sticks. "I've always been a goalkeeper, but I do like playing upfront in training, just for fun," he says. "I play as a No.9, like Luca Toni!"

How did it feel to make his senior debut for Milan at 16? "I was very nervous, which is normal," he says. "It's natural that I felt nervous, but I didn't let it show because that wouldn't have helped the team. You have to transmit calm to the defence and team."

That's something he has done in more than 100 matches since then, never relinquishing the shirt after that debut at home to Sassuolo. He's the youngest player to have reached a century of appearances for the Rossoneri. The big question of late has been exactly how many more he will make wearing red and black.

All of Europe was waiting to see where he ended up last summer. For a month or so, it looked like it would be anywhere but Milan. Everything seemed rosy for Donnarumma a year ago but things have taken a very



surprising turn over the past 12 months. He's not the first star to have been praised to the high heavens before being deluged by vitriol, and he won't be the last. But few complete the full arc before they are even out of their teens.

Problems arose when it was time to renegotiate his contract, due to expire this year. Keen to build a team around him for the next decade, Milan wanted to tie Donnarumma down to a new long-term deal. But they met with resistance – not least from the keeper's representative Mino Raiola, the super-agent who also advises Manchester United duo Paul Pogba and Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

"Gigio's the Maradona of goalkeepers," said Raiola in June 2017. "He is not a slave. There are 11 top clubs interested – Manchester United, Man City, Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Juventus, Napoli, Liverpool and Everton."

The negotiations continued, but then they were abruptly called off, supposedly for good. "Sporting director Massimiliano Mirabelli made a very big offer to the player, who evaluated it and today informed us that he did not intend to renew his contract," revealed Marco Fassone, Milan's managing director. "This decision, taken by the player and his agent, is disappointing, but we have to move on."

All this was going on while Donnarumma was preparing to represent Italy at the 2017 European Under-21 Championship. When they faced Denmark in their opening game in Krakow, Milan supporters unveiled a banner labelling him 'Dollarrumma' and chucked fake dollar bills into the goalmouth. Raiola claimed Milan had threatened to leave Gigio in the stands for a year if he didn't sign a new deal – something the club strenuously denied. Things had got ugly: Raiola revealed the gloveman had also received death threats from fans.

After Italy lost 3-1 to Spain in the semi-finals of the U21 competition, Donnarumma decided not to return home to finish his school exams as scheduled. He went on holiday to Ibiza with his girlfriend instead, to get away from it all.

Raiola flew out to meet him, and soon there was a change of heart. Donnarumma put pen to paper on a lucrative new deal, keeping him at Milan until 2021 and reportedly earning him \$10 million a year, which is almost twice what Buffon supposedly gets paid at Juventus. A day later, Gigio's older brother Antonio rejoined the club from Greek outfit Asteras Tripolis, having originally departed the San Siro in 2012 without making a first-team appearance.

Milan went on a spending spree – signing Hakan Calhanoglu, Andre Silva and new skipper Leonardo Bonucci in a bid to return to the upper reaches of Serie A after four consecutive seasons outside the top five.

"I already knew Bonucci from the national team, and at first I couldn't take it in that he was at Milan," Donnarumma tells *FFT*. "We're a young group and he brings experience. He's a leader like Riccardo Montolivo, who was a great captain last season."

But if some expected things would go smoothly once Donnarumma had agreed a new deal, they'd be wrong. During a December cup tie against Verona, Milan supporters unfurled a banner calling for his exit. The request left a distraught boyhood Rossoneri fan in floods of tears in the dressing room after the game.

Milan had won 3-0, but their season was fast unravelling – the new signings had failed to revive their fortunes and the club sat seventh in the Serie A standings, way off the pace. On the day of that Coppa Italia match, media reports claimed that Donnarumma and Raiola wanted to cancel his contract and seek a January switch elsewhere, allegedly citing 'psychological violence' that pressurised them into agreeing his summer renewal. "*Gigio chaos*", read *La Gazzetta dello Sport's* headline. No translation required.

A section of the fanbase, already unhappy with what they viewed as the convenient recruitment of Donnarumma's sibling, were incensed. "Psychological violence by giving you €6m a season and signing your parasite brother? It's time to leave. Our patience with you is over!" read the banner at the San Siro.

Mirabelli swiftly stressed to the press that it was his decision to sign Donnarumma's brother, and it hadn't been forced on them. But he also aimed a thinly-veiled jibe at Raiola. "We know where the rot is coming from," he said. Raiola's retort was to accuse Mirabelli of 'using Gigio to wage war' with him, suggesting the club had gone back on a summer promise to offer Donnarumma the captain's armband.

The teenager was left in the middle of it all, taking to Instagram in a bid to calm the situation. "It was a bad night and I did not expect it," he said of the Verona incident. "I never said in writing that I'd suffered psychological violence when I signed the contract. Despite everything I look forward, and to the next game. Forza Milan."

A fortnight later, Donnarumma's older brother played a starring role as he finally made his first senior appearance for Milan, a victory over rivals Inter in the next round of the Coppa Italia. Three days after that, having earned praise from gaffer Gennaro Gattuso for his professional conduct during this latest drama, Gigio played his 100th game for the club. "I'm very happy here," he said afterwards, in an attempt to close the most difficult chapter of his fledgling career.

When times are stressful, Donnarumma heads to one of his favourite spots in Milan. "One of my friends from Naples has a restaurant called Il Kaimano in the Brera area of the city, so I go there a lot," he reveals. "If I ever go out in the evening it's a bit of a commotion, but I'm fairly relaxed about it now. If people are asking me for photos, it means I'm doing my job well."

He's happy enough to stay indoors as well. "I like spending time with my family, my girlfriend and my PlayStation!" explains Donnarumma. "I play online and I've created my own team. I picked myself in goal!"

He'll also listen to some music from his native Naples, or watch a bit of Premier League action. "I like English football – it's so fast and very aggressive," he says. "There are great goalkeepers in England such as Thibaut Courtois, David de Gea and Hugo Lloris."

Donnarumma is being talked about as a great keeper himself, even at 19. "Gigio has grown and progressed a lot in these four years with Milan," goalkeeper coach Alfredo Magni tells *FFT*. "We have to continue on this path, because he's still developing."

Everyone expects Donnarumma to become not only one of the best shot-stoppers in the world, but one of the greatest goalkeepers ever. No pressure, Gigio.

"It's a nice thing," he says when asked about the expectations that have been placed upon him. "But to get up to that level I have to keep working. I'm relaxed and carefree about it. It doesn't scare me."

Just as well, then, because a daunting task awaits him at the Etihad, when the Donnarumma era is expected to truly begin. That night, for the first time in his career, he is set to go head-to-head with a certain Lionel Messi. If he can handle the Argentine, it'll prove Donnarumma really can handle anything. ◊

**Above** Passing the baton: Gigio greets successor Gigio

**Below** The stunning save against Juventus in 2016 comes a close second on Donnarumma's showreel

"BUFFON WAS ALWAYS MY IDOL AND DOESN'T DESERVE TO MISS THE WORLD CUP. I WAS SO SAD"



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## HYUNDAI A-LEAGUE

RD 23	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Fri 16 Mar	Adelaide United	Melbourne City FC	7.50pm
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Sat 17 Mar	Wellington Phoenix	Newcastle Jets	5.35pm
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Sat 17 Mar	Sydney FC	Brisbane Roar	7.50pm
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Sun 18 Mar	Melbourne Victory	Central Coast Mariners	5.00pm
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RD 24	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Fri 23 Mar	Adelaide United	Newcastle Jets	7.50pm
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Sat 24 Mar	Central Coast Mariners	Sydney FC	5.35pm
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Sat 24 Mar	Melbourne City	Western Sydney	7.50pm
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Sun 25 Mar	Wellington Phoenix	Brisbane Roar	5.00pm
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Sun 25 Mar	Perth Glory	Melbourne Victory	7.00pm
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RD 25	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Fri 30 Mar	Adelaide United	Wellington Phoenix	7.50pm
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Sat 31 Mar	Brisbane Roar	Central Coast Mariners	5.35pm
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Sat 31 Mar	Melbourne Victory	Western Sydney	7.50pm
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Sat 31 Mar	Perth Glory	Sydney FC	10.00pm
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Sun 1 Apr	Newcastle Jets	Melbourne City	5.00pm
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RD 26	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Tue 20 Mar	Western Sydney	Brisbane Roar	7.50pm
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Fri 6 Apr	Newcastle Jets	Perth Glory	7.50pm
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Sat 7 Apr	Melbourne City	Central Coast Mariners	7.50pm
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Sun 8 Apr	Melbourne Victory	Wellington Phoenix	5.00pm
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Sun 8 Apr	Sydney FC	Adelaide United	7.00pm
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RD 27	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Fri 13 Apr	Central Coast Mariners	Newcastle Jets	7.50pm
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## INTERNATIONAL

SOCCEROOS	Home	Away	AEDT
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Sat 24 Mar	Norway	Australia	TBC
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Wed 28 Mar	Colombia	Australia	6.00am
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Matildas	HOME	AWAY	AEDT
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Mon 26 Mar	Australia	Thailand	9.00pm
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## ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

GROUP STAGE	Home	Away	AEDT
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Tue 3 Apr	Suwon	Sydney FC	TBC
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Wed 4 Apr	Ulsan Hyundai	Melbourne Victory	TBC
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THURSDAYS  
8.00PM/7.00PM on Match Days



KICKOFF

FRIDAYS  
AT 7.00PM AEDT



SATURDAYS  
AT 5.00PM AEDT



SHOOTOUT

SUNDAYS  
AFTER THE FINAL WHISTLE



MONDAYS  
AT 7.00PM AEDT

## THE BEST ANALYSIS, OPINION & ENTERTAINMENT

The best international football returns to FOX SPORTS in March, with the Caltex Socceroos and Westfield Matildas both LIVE in action. The Socceroos continue their World Cup preparations with two matches against Norway (March 24) and Columbia (March 28), with players out to impress new coach Bert Van Marwijk as the team's final World Cup squad begins to take shape.

The Matildas face Thailand in an international friendly in Perth on March 26. The team, featuring superstar Sam Kerr, will be gunning to continue their impressive form with a win on home soil.

The Hyundai A-League reaches its crescendo throughout February and March, as the home and away fixtures for season 2017/18 conclude. With a number of teams vying for a position in the top six, every match is a must win.

The month features a number of blockbuster contests, beginning with reigning champions, Sydney FC, at home to Brisbane Roar in a prime-time clash on March 17.

The action continues as Western Sydney visit Melbourne to play City (March 24) and Victory (March 31) with both matches set to have a big impact on the final make-up of the ladder.

The jam packed month is capped off with Asian Champions League football - when Sydney FC travel to play Suwon (3 April) and Melbourne Victory play Ulsan Hyundai (4 April) - in match day five of the tournament's group stages.

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# NO

**PRESSURE???** **HAH**

**EXPECTATIONS HAVE NEVER BEEN HIGHER FOR THE MATILDAS**

Alen Stajcic has turned Australia's women into worldbeaters - but can they carry that form into international tournaments? The world is watching...

Words Angela Bacic





!!!



**T**here is a downside to beating Brazil three times on the trot. Add a long-awaited win over USA and back to back wins over China, and the Matildas have a target on their back.

They are THE team to beat in 2018.

Four years ago, they headed into the Asian Cup ranked only 11th

in the world despite being the defending champions.

Today on the eve of the 2018 Asian Cup, they're fourth in the world and flying. Free-flowing, free-scoring, fearless football are their hallmarks.

They no longer try to snatch and grab, they now attack with unrelenting mercilessness, scything through midfields and defences and finishing with the ruthlessness of a streetfighter.

But while they have made the world sit up and take proper notice in their run of friendlies and last year's Tournament of Nations, they are now to be tested in the crucible of proper continental competition.

Can they sustain their form and repeat their 2010 glory? And at the very least, can they finish in the top five to secure their spot at next year's Women's World Cup?

One man wears the full weight of that responsibility on his shoulders and he wouldn't have it any other way.

In the last four years, head coach Alen Stajcic has changed the way the Matildas play football... but the job is not near done.

Despite all the recent success, Stajcic says the objective for the Matildas right now is to keep improving.

"We laid a good platform in 2017 of where we want to get to," he said.

"Our goal, as always, is to keep building and improving but also fixing up the areas we think we can do better on and off the field, to ensure we become even more consistent moving forward."

After losing the penalty shootout to the Brazilians at the 2016 Olympic Games, the squad came together in early 2017 to establish their key metrics for the cycle ahead.

"We set a goal about 12 months ago that we want to be a world class team and our definition for that was a top three team in the world," Stajcic said.

"I guess we are pretty close to achieving that.

"We wanted to be a team that could compete and win trophies, which generally this team hasn't done in its history. There has been the odd bit of

silverware here and there but not really anything consistent.”

The Matildas won five trophies prior to 2017 – three OFC Women’s Championships (1994, 1998, 2003), the 2010 AFC Women’s Asian Cup and the AFF Women’s Championship in 2008.

Seven players remain from the historic 2010 Asian Cup campaign, including Sam Kerr who was just 16 at the time... and is still youthful enough to be named Young Australian of the Year in 2018.

This time round, as is now apparently traditional, Australia have perhaps the toughest group of the tournament, coming up against Japan, South Korea and Vietnam.

The might of Japan and South Korea in women’s football is legendary but Stajcic is wary that Vietnam could still surprise, despite the Matildas’ solid track record against them.

This is the third Asian Cup in a row where Vietnam and Australia have met in the group stages and both previous times, the Matildas won 2-0.

But while Vietnam is potentially one of the lowest ranked teams heading into the tournament, Stajcic says they have to be wary of all the teams in their group.

“We were drawn in a group where that is no certainty at all,” he said.

“We got some tough teams in our group, Vietnam are probably the strongest of the emerging nations – and Korea and Japan are superpowers in Asia.

“It will be no easy feat to get out of the group and into the semi finals to qualify for the World Cup but we think if we play to our potential that we are certainly capable.”

With the recent run of stellar form, expectations are of course high – but not just from the media and fans.

“There is no question about it. The Matildas can win the 2019 World Cup,” Sam Kerr told *Players Voice* website last year. Kyah Simon and veteran winger Lisa De Vanna both later echoed that confident prediction.

Confidence for the 2019 World Cup in France grew immeasurably after their 3-2 win over Brazil in Newcastle, their fifth win in a row and the first time the Matildas had managed that kind of form.

That surge in self-belief came seven months out from the Asian Cup – and although the Matildas still haven’t even qualified for the 2019 World Cup, no dream is too big for the Matildas right now.

“I think it is great to have that expectation,” said Stajcic. “Our



## AFTER AN AMAZING RUN OF FORM, THE MATILDAS HAVE A TARGET ON THEIR BACK. THEY ARE THE TEAM TO BEAT IN 2018.

expectations have always been higher than what the public’s have been over the last two or three years.

“I don’t think there is any extra pressure or sense of needing to do something, we already have that expectation on ourselves.

“Those objectives we set for ourselves are the driving motivation to achieve what we want.

“It is great the public have come on board to share some of our vision and goals. However our internal goals are still much higher than what I’ve heard from the public.”

With the increased success has come increased profile and increased expectations... and the prospect of criticism if they are perceived to have failed.

Until now, the media and fans have only ever been supportive of the Matildas, even when they failed to retain the Asian Cup in 2014.

But the player and coaching group are only too well aware that honeymoon may be over given how good they have shown they can be. Now they have to keep it up – or face a backlash.

**Left** Stajcic has taken the Matildas from being respected to being feared

**Above** Everyone plays their part

**Below** In the last few months, the Matildas have yet to find a team they can’t smash. But will that form continue in tournament conditions?



“When you play well you get praised and when you don’t play well you get criticism, so it is something we are all going to deal with but then again I’m not expecting that,” admitted Stajcic.

“I know when this team goes out that they are going to give 100 percent to try and achieve our goal and we can never be criticised for lack of effort.

“It is always going to be a team that goes out there and plays the Australian way, plays in the right spirit, plays to try win the game.

“Will we win every game? Probably not but we are certainly becoming a team that has become a lot more mature and consistent.

“I think that is the part that has the approval of the Australian public, they love watching us play and they love the style we are playing, they love the spirit in which we play the game.” ▶

### FIXTURES

**Australia vs South Korea, April 8, 5am**

**Vietnam vs Australia, April 11, 5am**

**Japan vs Australia, April 14, 1.45am**

WE HAVE A REALLY GOOD  
CULTURE AND WE KNOW  
WHAT EACH OTHER WANTS  
AND NEEDS ON AND OFF THE  
FIELD. THAT'S IMPORTANT.



# GORRY'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Matildas' Mini left a couple of things behind at the last Asian Cup.  
Now it's time to bring them home...

Words Angela Bacic

**K**atrina Gorry is missing a trophy in her cabinet. In 2014 she should have been named player of the tournament at the Asian Cup, but a single goal defeat in the final against Japan denied her that silverware.

She still picked up that year's Asian Women's Player of the Year (at the tender age of 21) – but, well, you know... Now she has the chance to make amends.

Gorry is the pocket rocket who exploded on the scene with a Matildas debut at 19, then shot Australia to that 2014 Asian Cup final with three goals during the tournament... only to fall at the final hurdle.

But the Brisbane Roar star – nicknamed Mini for her 152cm stature – is confident the Matildas are even better than they were in 2014.

Despite the disappointment, Gorry admits: "It was a pretty exciting time for me.

"I was still pretty young and over the last couple of years I've reflected on how good we were as a team and how far we've come now. We were playing great football and to see how much it has developed is exciting and shows how far they've come."

The Matildas went into 2014 as reigning champions, but the lead up was disrupted when recently-appointed coach Hesterine de Reu was controversially sacked one month out from the opening game.

Alen Stajcic was named interim coach and immediately focused on

uniting the squad for the Asian Cup campaign. Although they narrowly missed out on taking home the trophy, Gorry says the tournament gave players confidence for the years ahead.

"We learnt how capable we are of being one of the best teams in world," she said. "We were going into the World Cup as a young but exciting team to watch. Leading into the future, the more experience we got, the better we were going to be."

Since 2014, there has been an evident change in the Matildas' football style implemented by the now-permanent coach Stajcic.

They press for longer, hold possession and average 500 passes in a match. But one of their greatest strengths is that the team have been together so long.

There are still 12 players from the 2014 Asian Cup squad including Clare Polkinghorne, Lisa De Vanna, Tameka Butt and Elise Kellond-Knight.

The players also can train and play with their Matildas teammates for the majority of the year at elite club level during the NWSL season in the US and W-League in Australia, something that was rare prior to 2008.

This intensity of players being able to combine at club level allows national team partnerships and understandings to flourish like never before.

"The fact we've matured and got more experience – four years experience – is pretty incredible, and we get to play with each other so often," Gorry said.

"We have Meeks [Tameka Butt] and Polks [Clare Polkinghorne] here, and also the clubs around have the same players so they get to play with each other all year round.

"We have a really good culture in the team at the moment and we understand what each other wants and needs. I think that is definitely important on and off the field."

Australia were drawn in a tough group with reigning Asian Champions Japan, South East Asian Games gold medallist Vietnam and World Cup Round of 16 side, South Korea.

While Stajcic is yet announce his squad for Jordan, Gorry said they will embrace the challenge ahead.

"We love to have a tougher group," Gorry said.

"If you want to head into finals with a couple of easy games, it makes it harder to get up for the semis.

"Knowing we have Japan and South Korea to play is pretty tough – and I think leading into the semi final, we won't be unprepared."

While media and fans alike expect the Matildas to make their way out of Group B all the way to the finals, football in Asia has become somewhat more unpredictable.

"I think across the board all the countries are developing at a rapid pace," said Gorry.

"You can never take any team lightly especially in Asia with how much they are growing as countries and the players too."

# ASIAN CUP 2018: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

Words Liana Buratti, Cheryl Downes and Marissa Lordanic

## GROUP B

### JAPAN



**WINNERS:** 2014  
**RUNNERS UP:** 2007, 1986,  
1991, 1995, 2001

While there will be no easy matches for the Matildas in the Asian Cup, Japan could be the team to stop Australia's bid for glory.

Japan boasts several championships, gold medals and finished second in the 2015 World Cup after defeating the Matildas 1-0 in the quarter final.

Australia and Japan's last Asian Cup clashes came in 2014 when they drew their first match, and Japan later went on to dominate the Matildas in the final and take the trophy.

But last year the Matildas beat Japan 4-2 in the 2017 Tournaments of Nations tournament in San Diego, hot on the heels of a 3-1 win over Japan at the 2016 Olympics qualifier tournament.

Under the guidance of formidable coach and former Olympian, Asako

Takakura, Japan has been going from strength to strength.

She took over from Norio Sasaki when he stepped down as coach after Japan failed to qualify for the Olympics. Takakura is a four-time Asian Women's Coach of the Year winner and has led Japan to an U17 Women's World Cup and an Asian U19 Championship.

Takakura will be aiming to repeat that success as senior level at the Asian Cup – and is unashamedly ambitious in her goals.

When she was announced as head coach she said: "We aim to play football that can lead the world."





# VIETNAM

6th Place: 2014

Belying their 32nd FIFA world ranking spot, Vietnam have been steadily climbing the ladder from their 43rd place in 2003. Take your eye off them and this team could be the dark horse of the 2018 Asian Cup.

Coming off the back of an unbeaten record in 2017 and living up to their nickname, "The Golden Girls" it would be naive to expect an easy match against them.

Coach Mai Duc Chung has led his team to gold three times since 2003, most recently during the 2017 South East Asian Games, following their second place in the 2016 AFF Women's Championship and semi finalists in the 2014 Asian Games.

Striker and Golden Ball winner Huynh Nyu will be the chief danger having scored six goals in three matches while cementing Vietnam's qualification for this tournament.



## FIXTURES

Japan vs Vietnam, April 8, 1.45am  
**Australia vs South Korea**, April 8, 5am  
 South Korea vs Japan, April 11, 1.45 am  
**Vietnam vs Australia**, April 11, 5am  
**Japan vs Australia**, April 14, 1.45am  
 South Korea vs Vietnam, April 14, 1.45am



# SOUTH KOREA (KOREA REPUBLIC)



**Third Place:** 2003  
**Fourth Place:** 1995, 2001

Although South Korea are yet to win an AFC Women's Asian Cup, they have been steadily climbing FIFA's rankings over the last 14 years, rising from 26 to 14.

South Korea showed their improvement and spirit under the guidance of coach Yoon Deok-yeo when they qualified with a young team for the 2015 World Cup for the first time in 12 years and made it out of the group stage.

With three more years experience, they can only be contenders.

Key players to look out for are Ji So-yun and Lee Geum-Min who each

scored four of South Korea's 21 goals in qualifying, with Cho So-hyun and Yoo Young scoring another three each. They also finished top of their group, beating out three-time Asian Cup Champions and a historically more successful North Korea

Last time the Matildas met South Korea was in 2016, where Australia took out the final round of the Rio Olympics qualifier with a 2-0 win.

# GROUP A

## THAILAND



**Winners:** 1983  
**Runners-up:** 1975, 1977, 1981, 2001

Thailand are making their 16th appearance in the Women's Asian Cup, equalled only by Japan. Currently ranked 30th in the world Thailand are one of the most

successful Southeast Asian football teams, having previously won the Asian Cup (1983), three AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championships (2011, 2015, 2016) and five Southeast Asian Games (1985, 1995, 1997, 2007, 2013).

However, since 1986 they have only made it past the group stage once where they placed fifth in 2014.

This time round, Thailand qualified by topping Group C after both Lebanon and Guam withdrew, leaving only Thailand, Chinese Taipei and Palestine in the running.

Thailand dominated their first qualifying match, routing Palestine 6-0

and backed it up in their second match by defeating Chinese Taipei 1-0.

Attacking midfielder Kanjana Sungngoen scored in Thailand's last three outings in 2018 and amassed 30 goals over 47 international appearances.

Nisa Romyen is also dangerous in attack, with 32 goals over 48 international appearances.

Former Matildas assistant coach Spencer Prior resigned as Thailand head coach last September after 17 months in charge, and Thailand are now coached by Nuengruethai Sathongwien who previously led them in 2014.



## JORDAN



**GROUP STAGE:** 2014

Jordan will make their return to the Women's Asian Cup after debuting in 2014. They lost every game at that tournament but, with the motivation of playing on home soil, the team known as Al Nashmiyat will be aiming high.

While the team qualified for this year's tournament by hosting it, they were also allowed to compete in the qualification tournament.

On top of that, Jordan has been busy in the last few months playing friendlies against clubs, academies and national teams from Spain, Japan, Thailand, Latvia, Cyprus, Afghanistan and France.

American Michael Dickey became head coach in mid-2017 and has plenty of experience with youth football in his roles as assistant coach for the USA's junior teams.

Star player Maysa Jbarah was prolific in 2017 with 23 goals including 13

goals in the qualification tournament and has continued that form in 2018.

Captain Stephanie Al-Naber is a veteran of the team and scored nine goals in the qualification process, the second highest scorer in the tournament behind her national teammate Jbarah.

Al-Naber has been part of the Jordanian national team since 2005 and has been a part of three West Asia Women's Championship titles and an Arabia Cup win with the national team.

They have a relatively young squad with the oldest player being 30-year old skipper, Al-Naber.







# CHINA

**WINNERS:** 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2006

**RUNNERS-UP:** 2003, 2008

**THIRD PLACE:** 2001, 2014

The Steel Roses qualified for the 2018 Asian Cup as one of the top three ranked sides from 2014, although they are still in the process of adjusting to new manager Sigurður Ragnar Eydólfsson.

The Icelander has only been in the top job since November after coaching his home country's women's side for seven years before joining Chinese Women's Super League side Jiangsu Suning in early 2017.

The Steel Roses have talent up and down the park. Wang Shanshan and Wang Shuang shine up front with the pair contributing four of their eight

goals at the Four Nations tournament held in China in January.

The creativity and freedom they enjoy make them two of China's biggest assets heading into the Asian Cup.

Down the other end of the pitch, the retirement of goalkeeper Zhao Lina has opened the door for Wang Fei to re-enter the national team.

Fei, who had previously retired from the national team in 2016, is one of the few Chinese players to ply her trade overseas, recently signing for Bayern Munich in the Frauen-Bundesliga after spells at Turbine Potsdam and Olympique Lyon.



# PHILIPPINES

The Philippines qualified for the Asian Cup via a powerful display seeing them finish second in their qualifying group.

Ranked 69th in the world, PWNFT hit the qualifying ground running, scoring 16 goals across three matches while defeating United Arab Emirates (4-0), Iraq (4-0) and Tajikistan (8-0).

It wasn't until their fourth qualification match that they conceded their first goal, but still fought back to snatch a 1-1 draw against Bahrain.

In their fifth and final qualification match though, the Philippines stumbled, going down to Asian Cup hosts Jordan 5-1.

Coach Richard Boon has only been at the helm since late 2017 but has been working hard in camps to instil his style of football within the squad.

He already has good players to work with in Hali Long who scored a hat-trick against Tajikistan as well as goalscoring sisters Sara and Anicka Castañeda. Based in the USA, Long is listed as a defender but offers versatility up and down the field.

Sara Castañeda plays as an adaptable central midfielder while Eva Madarang is key - the 19 year old forward scored four goals across the five qualification games.

Recent international results for PFWNT have not been strong. Managing a 2-1 win in their first outing against Malaysia at the 2017 Southeast Asian Games, PFWNT then went on to lose their remaining three matches against Vietnam (3-0), Myanmar (6-0) and Thailand (3-1).

The Philippines have never managed to get past the group stage of an Asian Cup and 2018 is the first time in 15 years they have qualified.

## FIXTURES

China vs Thailand, April 7, 1.45am  
Jordan vs Philippines, April 7, 5am  
Philippines vs China, April 10, 1.45am  
Thailand vs Jordan, April 10, 5am  
Jordan vs China, April 13 5am  
Thailand vs Philippines, April 13, 5am

# YOUR QUICK GUIDE TO THE MATILDAS

## KYAH SIMON

**DOB:** 25 June 1991  
**Current Clubs:** Melbourne City FC (AUS)  
and Houston Dash (USA)  
**Position:** Forward  
**Caps:** 43

After a hiatus in 2016 to undergo a double shoulder reconstruction, Kyah Simon has come back to the game rejuvenated. Simon's strikes have hit the back of the net twice this season but more impressively, she has provided five successful assists to her team mates during the 2017/18 W-League season. Simon is a team player with a wealth of international experience, scoring 14 goals in the green and gold including the winning penalty in the 2010 Asian Cup.



## ALANNA KENNEDY

**DOB:** 21 January 1995  
**Current Clubs:** Melbourne City FC (AUS)  
and Orlando Pride (USA)  
**Position:** Defender  
**Caps:** 59

A young and versatile player, Kennedy boasts skills in both central defence and midfield. She was naturally a midfielder but due to her height and physicality, Kennedy transferred to central defence. Her mental and physical toughness set her apart as one of the best defenders in the league. She admits: "As a defender, I love sort of getting in there. I take a little bit of my West Sydney side with me everywhere."



## CHLOE LOGARZO

**DOB:** 22 December 1994  
**Current Club:** Sydney FC  
**Position:** Midfielder  
**Caps:** 15

Logarzo brings agility, speed and her own "never say die" attitude to the Matildas. She was initially rejected due to her size, being told she wasn't big or strong enough to play football, but her success speaks for itself, having consistently acted as a motivator and encourager to her teammates, as well as making it difficult for any ball to get away from her.



## MACKENZIE ARNOLD

**DOB:** 25 February 1994  
**Current Club:** Brisbane Roar (AUS)  
**Position:** Goalkeeper  
**Caps:** 15

A Goalkeeper of the Year in 2012 and 2014, Mackenzie Arnold is the definitive safe pair of hands. Arnold last played for the Matildas in the 2016 Summer Olympics, where Australia picked up a 6-1 win against Zimbabwe in the group stage. In the W-League she kept six clean sheets, the most out of any goalkeeper in the league and conceded just 12 goals across the regular season.



## LYDIA WILLIAMS

**DOB:** 13 May 1988  
**Current Club:** Melbourne City FC (AUS) and Seattle Reign (USA)  
**Position:** Goalkeeper  
**Caps:** 44

Lydia Williams is arguably Australia's best goalkeeper, playing for Australia for the last 13 years. Williams has been awarded Goalkeeper of the Year on three occasions. Her true strength and grit shone through in the Grand Final against Sydney FC, where despite a leg injury, Williams played on, protecting the net and putting her body on the line to take the Championship... and later hobble on to the stage to pick up her winner's medal.

## EMILY VAN EGMOND

**DOB:** 12 July 1993  
**Current Club:** Newcastle Jets (AUS) and Orlando Pride (USA)  
**Position:** Midfielder  
**Caps:** 46

A previous Julie Dolan Medal and Goal of the Year winner, van Egmond brings a wealth of talent and experience to the squad. Her strategic playing style, accuracy and ability to hit long passes, coupled with her impressive experience playing internationally, enhances the Matildas squad.



# SAMANTHA KERR

**DOB:** 10 September 1993  
**Current Clubs:** Perth Glory (AUS) and Chicago Red Stars (USA)  
**Position:** Forward  
**Caps:** 57

Most people have become familiar with Kerr's name recently. Her meteoric rise has pushed women's football centre stage, not just in Australia but internationally. Sam is currently the all-time leading goal scorer in the NWSL, winning the Golden Boot and MVP awards in 2017, as well as most goals scored in a single game.

## TAMEKA BUTT

**DOB:** 16 June 1991  
**Current Club:** Brisbane Roar (AUS)  
**Position:** Midfielder  
**Caps:** 63

Being a member of the Matildas since 2007, Tameka Butt is another one of Australia's more experienced players. She is currently the third highest W-League goalscorer of all time and has collected an impressive number of awards throughout her career, with a Players Player of the Year, Julie Dolan Medal, Brisbane Roar's goal of the year, and hat tricks in 2009, 2012 and 2014.



## STEPHANIE CATLEY

**DOB:** 26 January 1994  
**Current Team:** Melbourne City FC (AUS) and Seattle Reign (USA)  
**Position:** Defender  
**Caps:** 64

Captain of reigning W-League Champions Melbourne City, Catley wasn't always a defensive player. She played her earlier years as a midfielder, switching to defender in 2011, finding her niche and having the skipper's armband thrust upon her. Catley brings a strong presence, leadership and versatility to the Matildas.



## ELLIE CARPENTER

**DOB:** 28 April 2000  
**Current Club:** Canberra United (AUS) and Portland Thorns (USA)  
**Position:** Defender  
**Caps:** 13

Current Young Footballer of the Year, Ellie Carpenter has already represented her country six times. At just 17, she is the youngest of the Matildas squad, yet shows talent and skill way beyond her years. Originally a national level athlete in track and field, Ellie has added those skills to her football repertoire, making her a quick and agile defender.



## LISA DE VANNA

**DOB:** 14 November 1984  
**Current Team:** Sydney FC  
**Position:** Forward  
**Caps:** 128

De Vanna brings incredible speed, skill and experience to the Matildas. Known for being able to run circles around her competition, as well as keeping her team fired up with her feisty nature and attacking style, she has represented Australia more times than any Matilda, and her experience will prove invaluable to the team.



## KATRINA GORRY

**DOB:** 13 August 1992  
**Current Team:** Brisbane Roar (AUS) and Utah Royals FC (USA)  
**Position:** Midfielder  
**Caps:** 60

Gorry as part of a Premiership winning team in both 2013 and 2018, and took home the AFC Women's Player of the Year and the FFA Female Footballer of the Year awards in 2014. She's able to kick a ball from range like few others in world football, leaving her permanently marked by her opponents. But luckily for Mini, she has the ability to pull off some tricky footwork making her a dynamic and dangerous player for anyone who comes up against her.



## ELISE KELLOND-KNIGHT

**DOB:** 10 August 1990  
**Current Team:** Free agent  
**Position:** Midfielder  
**Caps:** 87

Previously playing for Brisbane Roar, Kellond-Knight, or "KK" is a fully fledged international superstar. KK has won two Championships and a Premiership with Brisbane Roar, was selected for the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup All-Star Team and has won multiple individual awards. She brings unmatched world class experience and talent to the Matildas.

## CLARE POLKINGHORNE

**DOB:** 1 February 1989  
**Current Teams:** Brisbane Roar (AUS)  
**Position:** Defender  
**Caps:** 98

Humble and focused, the Brisbane Roar skipper was the first to 100 W-League games, with two Championships and two Premierships and contributed to the Matildas' 2008 AFF Women's Championship and the 2010 Women's Asian Cup. She's scored seven international goals, and she can get the job done even when under the pressure of playing at an international level.



# HAYLEY RASO

**DOB:** 5 September 1994  
**Current Teams:** Brisbane Roar (AUS) and Portland Thorns (USA)  
**Position:** Forward  
**Caps:** 23

Raso has always been part of a winning team, taking out a Championship in 2012 and winning Premierships in 2012, 2017 and 2018 when playing for Canberra United and Brisbane Roar. With her star still on the rise, she was also awarded Rose City Riveter's MVP Award for 2017, for scoring six goals and three assists for Portland Thorns. Whether it's her lucky trademark ribbons or her energetic and effective attacking that boosts her team into the finals, it seems as though whenever Raso is involved, winning is on the cards.

*All stats correct at February 19, 2018.  
 Information sourced from Football Federation Australia.*





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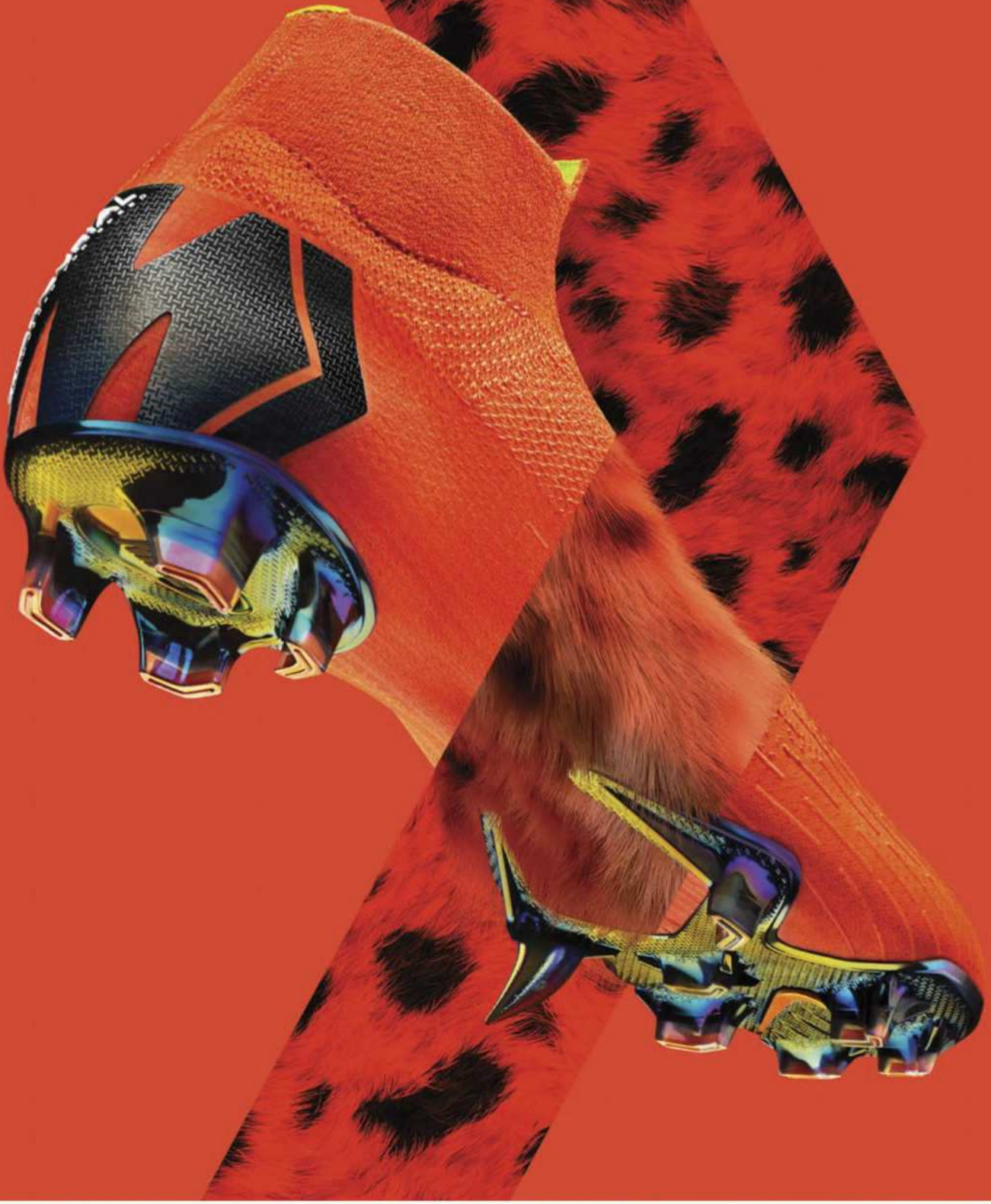


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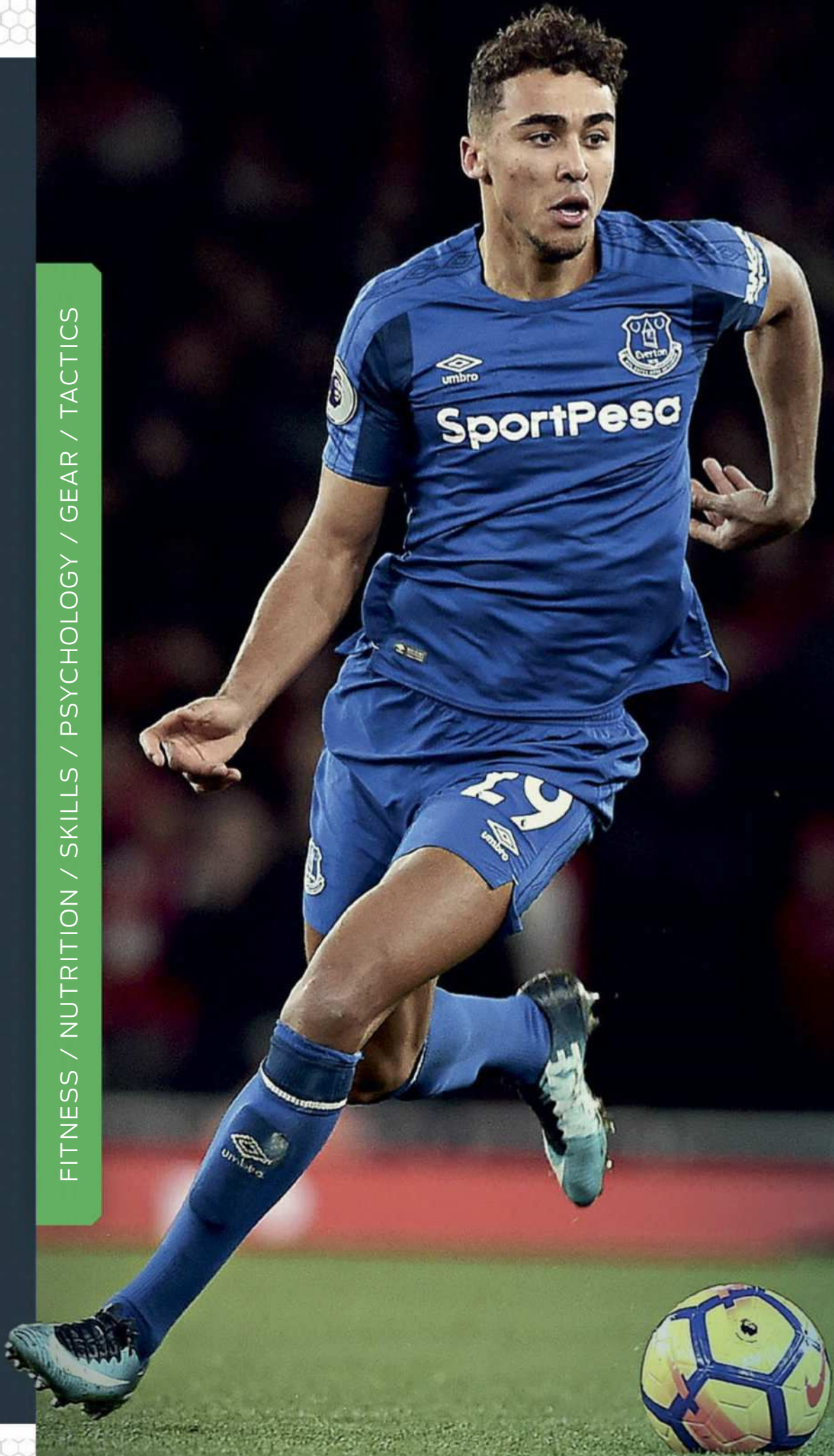


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# PERFORMANCE

FITNESS / NUTRITION / SKILLS / PSYCHOLOGY / GEAR / TACTICS



## MASTERCLASS

# DOMINIC CALVERT-LEWIN

Everton's quicksilver forward talks cage football, maturing out on loan and tips off Wayne Rooney

## You're a Sheffield lad – what are your earliest football memories?

I grew up in Hillsborough near Sheffield Wednesday's stadium, but I'm a Blade. My family support United, so I grew up following them. I always went down to the local park as there was this concrete court where you could play football and basketball. I used to play on there with a group of mates against older players. We were pretty decent so we'd always give them a good game, but I remember a few times when I got smashed in the mouth by a flailing arm!

## Do you think cage football can help to develop young players?

I played a lot of cage and street football and it definitely served me well. I would train on a Tuesday and a Thursday when I was a kid, and outside of that I'd be in the cage or at the park. A lot of talent is coming through the various age groups for England and many players have that street background, so I think it's helping to create skilful footballers.

## How important is it for young players to have role models?

I always remember dreaming of playing for Sheffield United at Bramall Lane. I'd watched players such as Kyle Naughton, Kyle Walker and later on Harry Maguire coming through and that gave me a lot of hope. I was about 14 or 15 and trying to get a scholarship when Naughton and Walker were breaking through, so seeing them being given a chance was inspiring.

## You were loaned out a couple of times before making your first Blades start. How did that aid your progress?

It helped me prepare mentally as much as anything else. I gradually got used to the pressure of playing in front of bigger crowds. You don't really experience it at academy level. I can remember coming on as a sub at Bramall Lane for the first time and playing against Chesterfield. It was a local derby and there was almost

30,000 fans there. I was scared of giving the ball away and making a mistake, as I was worried what people would think. Spending time out on loan helped me to get over all of that and just carry on with my normal game.

## Did it force you to mature?

Definitely. I had a one-month loan spell with Stalybridge Celtic in the Conference North. I had a little car and would go up to a service station, then get on the bus to travel to matches with the lads. That was the first time I felt like I was part of

"Rooney's been helping me a lot with some little pointers. It's the small things that end up making a big difference"

a proper team. Thinking about it now, it was a crucial time for me because I was learning my craft. Playing on the type of pitches you often play on in non-league, scoring goals and having fans cheer for you properly was a very important stage of my development.

## Is there a big gulf between the lower leagues and the Premier League?

Stalybridge had players who had been in academies and then played in Leagues One and Two, so there are good players at that level. But the style of football is different. We never played out from the back – we'd just boot the ball up the pitch, spin

it in behind and chase it. The difference between League One and League Two is not that big. You'll get some teams that play football and some that are physical, and I think that's pretty much the same for both divisions. The Premier League is a different standard of football.

## You joined Everton in 2016 – was that a huge step up in quality?

What first made me go 'Wow' were the possession drills in training, when you're just playing keep-ball. Nobody gave the ball away and it was pinged everywhere. Everyone played one- and two-touch, so I realised I had to know where my next pass was going before I'd even received it. You take your touch and then pass it off, and you think to yourself, 'Yes, I kept the ball!' It was a case of small steps for me. The quality and speed of the passing was incredible – the ball never really left the ground. It was a significant step up from the under-23s.

## What have you picked up from playing alongside Wayne Rooney?

I was over the moon when I heard that he was coming back to the club because he's a well-decorated English footballer. I think I'd be lying if I didn't say I was in awe when he first came into training, as any youngster would be. His quality was there for everyone to see from the start. He has been helping me quite a lot with

some little pointers. It's the small things that end up making the biggest difference – when you put them all together, you'll become a more rounded footballer. He's improved my positioning and my body shape as I receive the ball, which will make the game a lot easier for me. You need all the help you can get as a youngster in the Premier League, and Wayne has been a huge help to me so far.

## THE DETAILS

The young Toffee is on track to hit 10 goals in a season for the first time



Age

20

Height

1.87m

Shirt number

29

Total appearances

48

Games this season

37

Goals this season

8

Premier League

4

League Cup

3

Europa League

1



\*Up to February 15, 2018

# LIKE A PRO

Strength and conditioning coach Cameron Goff gives his expert opinion on pro players' Instagram snaps

**1 Nicolai Müller @hsv**  
 "Swiss ball 'stir the pots' are a great exercise for targeting core strength," maintains Goff, "which is exactly what footballers need to keep their balance."

**2 Robert Lewandowski @rt19**  
 "Every player should be performing activation work using bands before training sessions. Squatting with them places additional strain on your glutes."

**3 Leroy Sané @leroyसाने19**  
 "Bungee cords or sleds are a great tool to boost your acceleration. I'd only recommend doing them once the correct sprinting mechanics are set up."

**4 Adam Lallana @officialallana**  
 "The TRX back row will really target and strengthen your back muscles. This is a good routine to ensure players have a balanced posterior and anterior."

**5 DeAndre Yedlin @nufc**  
 "Barbell back squats increase your power. As the weight gets heavier towards the top part of the squat, you should feel a contraction in your glutes."

**6 Franck Ribéry @fcbayern**  
 "The bird dog on a ball will bolster your core and surrounding muscles of the spine, and helps posture control."

**7 Sergio Ramos @sergioramos**  
 "This exercise toughens adductor (inner thigh) muscles. They're vital for cutting and sidestepping at speed."

**8 Edinson Cavani @psg**  
 "Players often get on bikes the day after a match to aid their recovery, by pumping blood to the sore muscles."



1	2
3	4



5	6
7	8



T R I E D AND T E S T E D

# TEAM MANAGEMENT APP

*FFT is sure there is a better way for coaches to manage their Sunday league prima donnas! We look into global team management solution, Teamer*

## What is it?

A free sports management app to help teams, clubs and leagues organise, communicate, collect money and ease admin simply through web and mobile. No longer will the coach need to blast the squad with constant WhatsApp messages!

## How does it work?

Teamer allows organisers to set up events for games, training or any other club meetings or functions. You can set the time your members need to meet for the event, where the event is (with the aid of a map showing its exact location), attach a payment request and any other arrangements on the day. By selecting your lineup, you pick the members you want to notify and the form of notification they receive. You can specify whether they should receive their notification by email, text or using the Teamer alert. As

replies are received, your Teampage updates with real time responses letting you know who can and cannot make the upcoming event.

## Who uses it?

Clubs, teams and groups from all over the world. Sports such as Football, Rugby and Hockey and others like swimming, sailing and hiking. We think that it would take away the hassle of organising your end of season tour or a bucks weekend!!

## Why are they using it?

**It allows members to stay informed with the events that are going on within a team and club. By creating events and notifying members, you can easily communicate effectively at the push of a button and it takes minutes to set up. And a new feature of Teamer Club, which you can now manage your teams,**

club website and payments all in one place via web and the iPhone and Android apps.

## How much does it cost?

Zero! Teamer is a FREE application regardless of the number of teams you have whether you are using it for social, team or club management.

## Where is it available?

Via the website [www.teamer.net](http://www.teamer.net) and App Store for iOS or Google Play for Android.



▲ **Mousa Dembele**  
Tottenham's in-form midfielder continues to give opponents the runaround. He is one of the game's most underrated players.

▲ **Nike goalie gloves**  
An innovative pair of strapless gloves with extra grip might give goalkeepers the edge during the World Cup.

▲ **Gennaro Gattuso**  
The fiery former Milan midfielder, now their manager, allowed all of his players to slap him on the head after a 2-1 win over Lazio.

## HERO TO ZERO

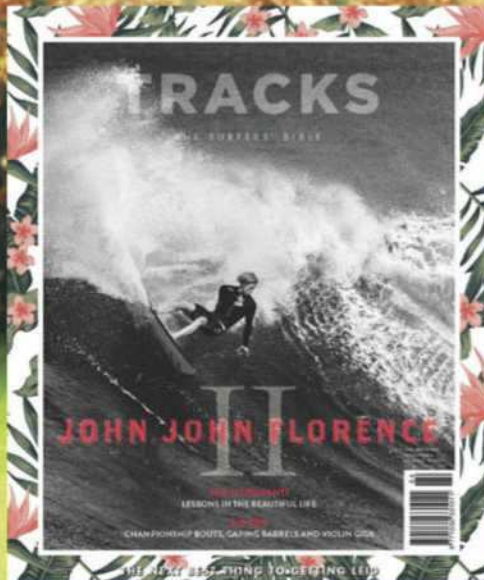
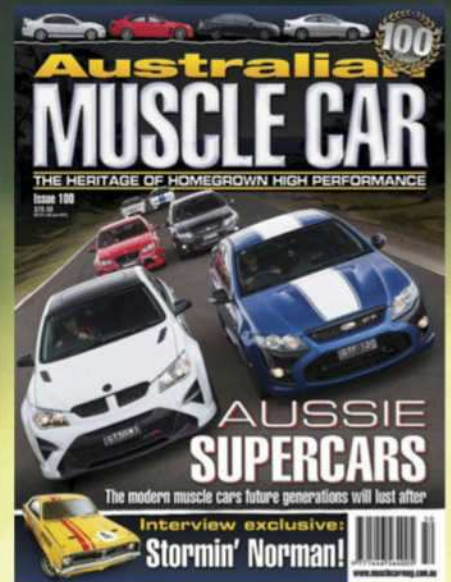
▼ **Oussama Tannane**  
The Moroccan ended his season-long loan with Las Palmas after four months, and has said he couldn't settle as he didn't know the club was on an island.

▼ **Nacional**  
The Uruguayan outfit were fined after fans made 'sick' gestures about the plane crash in which Chapecoense players lost their lives.

▼ **Tiemoue Bakayoko**  
The France midfielder is having a tough first campaign at Chelsea after a stellar season at Monaco in 2016-17.



# IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SPORT!



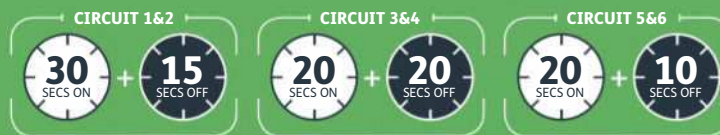
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HOW  
TO...

# GET FIT BEFORE THE NEW SEASON

Strength and conditioning coach Cameron Goff's interval circuit is designed to maintain your match fitness during seasons by keeping your engine running



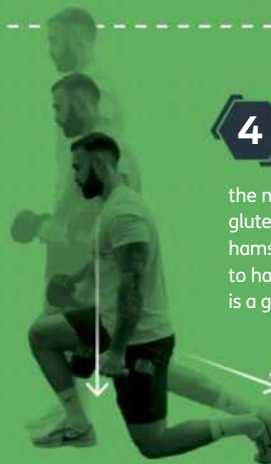
## 1 Kettlebell swings

If you're keen to get your heart and lungs burning like they do in a match, then this exercise is an ideal place to start. "Moving resistance at high intensity will really raise your heart rate," reveals Goff. "Make sure you hinge at your hips, as this isn't a squat and swing. Keep it nice and tight, but don't over-arch the back."



## 3 Weighted dead bug

A robust core enables you to run and turn more efficiently. "This is much better – though a little bit trickier – than a standard sit-up. Make sure you tuck your knees in to get a good squeeze. You should find this one slightly easier on your engine than the previous two exercises, to prepare you for the final two."



## 4 Reverse lunge

Without a sturdy pair of pins, you'll be unable to sprint box-to-box and make the most of all your fitness work. "This boosts glute activation. Footballers suffer from many hamstring problems – to avoid that you've got to have strong hamstrings and glutes, so this is a great move to help you remain injury-free."



## 2 Clean and press

This full-body movement ensures that you build a durable engine and strong exterior. "This works hundreds of muscles and is perfect for developing power. Start off at the ground, or mid-shin if you don't think you have the mobility. Drive through the hips before dropping into a front squat and then driving back up to your head."

## 5 Mountain climbers

Running is a lot more difficult when you are on the floor with your hands in front of you. "Mimicking a running motion as you hold yourself up with your hands is taxing on your engine but also your core. Bring your knees up as high as possible and you will really start to feel it burn, so no cheating right at the end!"



# MY PERFECT XI

# DENIS LAW

The Scottish legend selects an old-fashioned, ultra-attacking line-up, with his team of '60s and '70s stars assembled in a 3-3-4 formation



Interview Andy Greaves



### LEV YASHIN

"I played with some great goalkeepers in my career, like Bill Brown for Scotland and Alex Stepney at Manchester United. At the time, though, Lev was considered the best goalkeeper in the world. I can remember playing with him for a 'Rest of the World' team against England at Wembley in 1963 and was blown away by some of the saves he made that day."



### DAVE MACKAY

"Dave would mainly play in midfield, but he could also operate in defence or even as a sweeper. He was a proper all-round footballer. Even though we were Scottish team-mates and great friends, whenever it came to matches between Tottenham and Manchester United, everything went out of the window. Dave had absolutely no problem giving me a good battering if it meant benefiting Spurs! I attended his funeral in Edinburgh a few years ago and there was a massive turnout at the church. That shows you just how much affection and respect they had for him."



### ALFREDO DI STEFANO

"Di Stefano was my all-time hero. He operated in the old 'inside-forward' position for Real Madrid, and back then players there could do a bit of everything. Alfredo was a real master of the game, as he scored goals, made goals and even did a bit of defensive work. His heading wasn't the greatest, but that's the only element of his game that wasn't top notch! Like the other players I've mentioned, I can only imagine how good he'd be now on the carpet-like pitches. He'd be in the same bracket as Messi and Ronaldo, for sure."



## THE GAFFERS

**BILL SHANKLY AND MATT BUSBY**

"I just can't choose between Shankly, who taught me everything about football at Huddersfield, and Sir Matt, who made me the player I was at United."

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