



# THE MODERN FOOTBALLER

THE GET FOOTBALL PERIODICAL

ISSUE ONE



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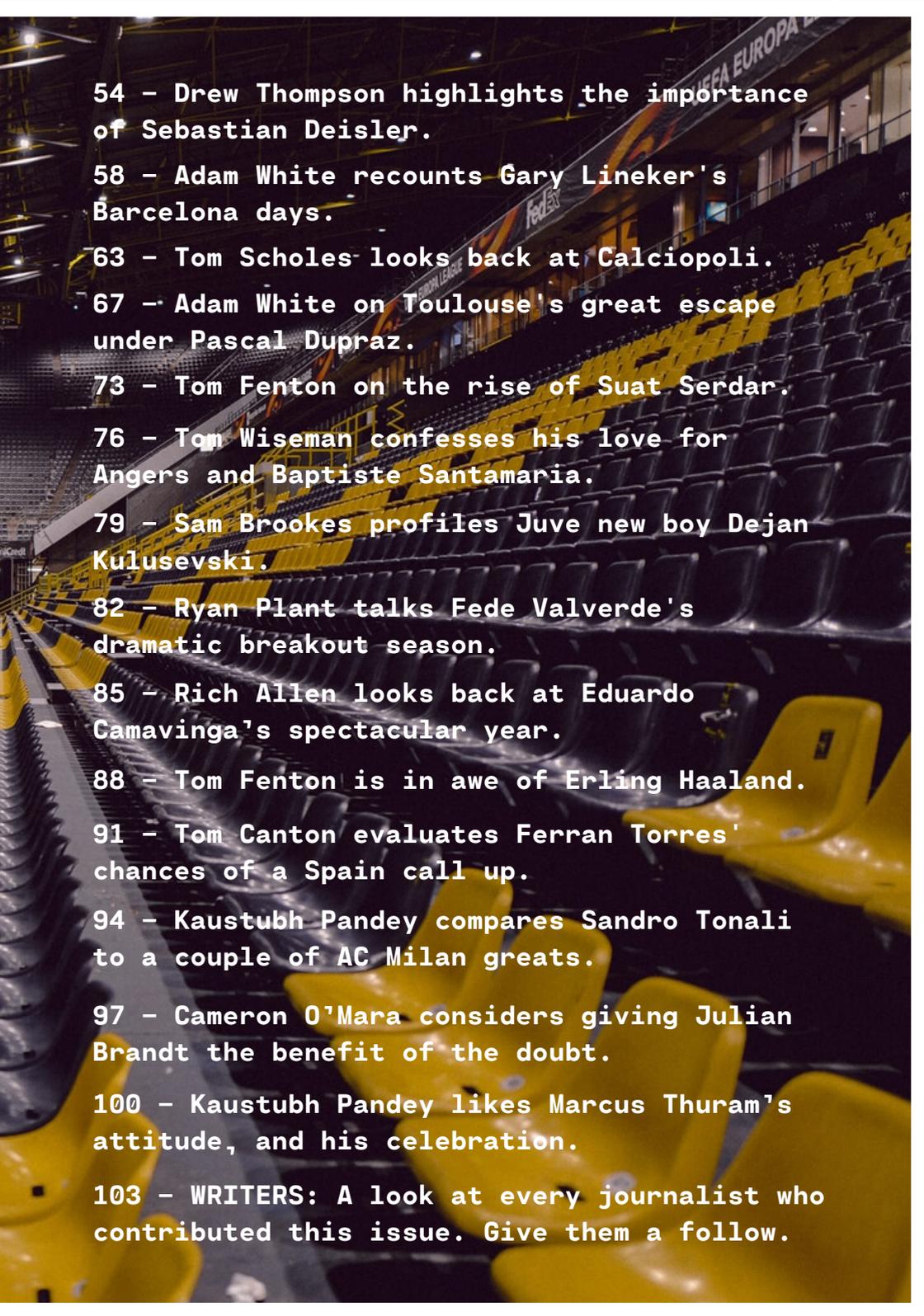
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# UP FRONT

A selection of stories from around the leagues, in brief. Featuring: Chimy, Rennes, Iličić, Hansi, Getafe, Ferri, Zlatan, Eintracht, Simeone, Reims, Eriksen, Rheinderby, Copa del Rey, DfI & Monaco.



## HEARTBREAK FOR CHIMY ÁVILA

Having signed the Argentine striker from San Lorenzo in the summer of 2019, Osasuna's Ezequiel 'Chimy' Ávila has been one of the players of the season in La Liga. Ávila grew up in Empalme Graneros, a poor neighbourhood in Rosario, an inland port city and home of Lionel Messi. The 25-year-old would ride a horse to get to football training so his mother could use his bus fare to buy food for a family of nine. Loaned to Segunda Division side Huesca from San Lorenzo in 2017, he helped the club achieve promotion to the Spanish Primera Division. After swearing that he would stay on if promotion was

secured, San Lorenzo agreed to extend his loan. A host of spectacular goals and assists made him a local hero in the northern city of Huesca and he quickly caught the eye of Osasuna, earning a €2.7m move. Osasuna sporting director, Braulio Vázquez, said: "*Chimy was born to play for Osasuna.*" A low centre of gravity and thick-set thighs that make him explosive; he leads the line by pressing hard. In 2019/20 he has notched 11 goals, nine in the league and two in the Copa del Rey. That goal-scoring run ended abruptly however when he ruptured his ACL in a league match with Levante in January.

Disappointingly for Chimy, that same week his agent Jorge Bilicich was in the Camp Nou offices, speaking to club representatives about a potential €25m move to Barcelona to play alongside his compatriot Messi.

Kieran Quaile  
@kquaile90

### RENNES FIND BALANCE

Two injury time goals for Rennes gave them a dramatic win in the Breton Derby against rivals Nantes at the end of January. The victory ensured Rennes maintained their position in third place after an impressive run of form. After the derby win, Julien Stéphan's side had lost just twice in their previous 12 Ligue 1 games, winning nine, as they took the lead in the race to keep pace with Marseille in second.

Despite the surprise dismissal of club president Olivier Létang in February, Stéphan looks to be taking great strides in his push to take the team forwards, having been in the job just over a year. Building on last season's Coupe de France win, the squad has been moulded carefully to reap the benefits of the famous Rennes academy. Of the 14 players who

were involved in a recent game away at Nice, eight were academy players. Eduardo Camavinga has obviously taken the plaudits this season, but the likes of Adrien Hunou and Yann Gboho have made their marks too. Stéphan has been all too aware of the need to add experience to this group of talented youngsters. Defenders Damian Da Silva and Jérémy Morel plus recent loan signing and World Cup winner Steven Nzonzi certainly add that. When mixed with other established players such as Benjamin Bourigeaud, M'Baye Niang and Édouard Mendy, it looks like a squad in good shape. Vital to any coach is an element of good fortune and with goals in the 93rd and 97th minute against Nantes, to go with late winners against Toulouse, Saint-Étienne and Lyon recently, it is clear Stéphan has managed to keep luck on his side. Whilst performances might not have been at the absolute top level yet, Rennes results have been on the whole more consistent than most and, although Monaco and Lille are right with them, the realistic reward of Champions' League football is looking less and less of a pipe dream for the Breton side.

Rich Allen  
@rich\_allen85

### ILIČIĆ FINALLY GETS CREDIT

Atalanta have been the feel good story of Italian football in recent times. A relatively small club that has shot to prominence playing a brand of attacking football that can only be admired. At the heart of their rise has been Josip Iličić. The forward arrived in Bergamo in the summer of 2017 having impressed at Fiorentina and Palermo. Yet there were still questions about whether he could find the consistency to take his game to the next level. He has answered emphatically.

It is not easy to stand out in this Atalanta side. With Alejandro Gómez shining on the left wing and Duván Zapata becoming a goal scoring machine since joining in 2018, Iličić could be forgiven for struggling to make his mark. That has not been the case at all though.

Having scored 11 goals in his maiden Serie A campaign for Atalanta, he followed that up with a further 12 last season, and at time of writing already has 14 goals with 16 games remaining this year. When Zapata was forced to sit on the sidelines for three months through injury, Iličić stepped up, ensuring that Atalanta remained firmly in the hunt for a Champions'

League places once more. His recent hat-trick against Torino in a 7-0 win drew widespread attention as he netted a free-kick from the halfway line. An extraordinary piece of improvisation, but that is simply what Iličić does, and more and more people are starting to take notice. As a 32-year-old, Iličić is finally starting to get the plaudits that his undoubted talent has long deserved.

Sam Brookes  
@FRcalcioSam

### HANSI HERE TO STAY?

*"We have a good relationship with him, his tactical and footballing knowledge is at a high level and, in a short time, he has shown us what we can do to improve our play,"* said Robert Lewandowski about Hansi Flick when he took interim charge of Bayern Munich. Germany's former assistant coach has certainly earned the respect of Bayern Munich players during his short tenure in charge of the Bundesliga club and it wouldn't be too far-fetched to say he could oversee the club beyond this season.

The 54-year-old lost just two of his first 15 games in charge of Munich in all competitions whilst he's re-energised this side who looked lost

under former coach Niko Kovač. Flick has established a possession based game, re-installing a *Mia San Mia* (the club motto, meaning: 'we are who we are') mentality back into the squad. Bayern's compact midfield of Joshua Kimmich, Thiago Alcântara and a fit again Leon Goretzka has allowed Alphonso Davies to flourish at left-back - another master stroke from Flick. He's getting the best out of Thomas Müller too, something Kovač failed to achieve.

Under Flick, Bayern haven't struggled to find the net and the goals are shared across the team despite what Lewandowski's tally this season may suggest. Over the course of Flick's first 15 games, Bayern found the net on 48 occasions, beginning Flick's tenure with four consecutive clean sheets - including a 4-0 win over *Der Klassiker* rivals Borussia Dortmund. Flick's Bayern are on the charge once more.

Daniel Pinder  
@DaniellPinder

### GETAFE CONTINUE TO SHOCK

Having won the Segunda division in 2016 and returned Alavés to the Primera for the first time in ten seasons, José Bordalás was sacked amid tension with the club's board.

Having not previously managed in La Liga, Bordalás developed a reputation as a second tier specialist. Four years later, having repeated the feat with Getafe - returning the Madrid outfit to La Liga at the first attempt - the Champions' League now awaits.

When Bordalás took charge in September 2016, the Madrid club were second bottom of the second division but, incredibly, at the start of February this year Bordalás' band of misfits and unwanted journeymen sat third in La Liga. This was no fluke. On the final day of last season the unfashionable Getafe spent 20 glorious minutes inside the top four. Although Valencia eventually squeezed them out, this season their form has continued unchecked despite juggling a successful Europa League campaign.

Although Getafe are accused of being an overly aggressive, streetwise and fiercely functional unit, their results are astonishing. Especially when considering they've achieved their success with the 16th biggest budget in La Liga (as of last season) and with the most eclectic group of players. Uruguayan midfielder Mauro Arambarri was unwanted by Bordeaux but is now an ever

# CLUBS

|               |    |
|---------------|----|
| MARSEILLE     | 18 |
| INTER         | 21 |
| BARCELONA     | 24 |
| NAPOLI        | 28 |
| PSG           | 31 |
| JUVENTUS      | 34 |
| BAYERN MUNICH | 38 |
| REAL MADRID   | 42 |
| DORTMUND      | 47 |
| LYON          | 50 |

# IL BISCIONE

**Inter Milan have been reborn. An arduous decade has culminated in a new and exciting side, a revamped project and a promising future.**

**INTER'S** old President Massimo Moratti, either got it wrong or could not afford to address the facts. Inter's treble winning team of 2010 was the end of an era, not the beginning. A decade on from those incredible scenes in Madrid, it is only now that the *Nerazzurri* finally believe they can break Juventus' stranglehold on Serie A. Even more than this, they have faith, that, with one or two more transfer windows, they could even push deep into Europe's elite competition. What has changed? Arguably, everything.

Ownership of a club can only affect so much. When Moratti eventually parted with his family club in 2013 - his father was president between 1955 and 1968 - the Indonesian businessman Erick Thohir, tried to build a club of the future but failed. His choice in sporting directors and coaches as well as his transfer

policy all failed and produced some of the worst Inter teams in recent years.

Eventually, Suning Holdings Group and Chairman Steven Zhang, took control of the club. The marketing, PR and structure improved, they had to battle financial fair play yet they knew, if they succeeded, the economic power behind the group was immense. Perhaps the shrewdest move came when Zhang hired Beppe Marotta as CEO for sport. The ex-Juventus executive knew how to win - he had the blueprint.

Moratta only wanted one man. Whilst Luciano Spalletti had done an incredible job by getting Inter into the Champions' League, he had run out of ideas and oversaw a disunited and fractious squad. Enter stage left, Antonio Conte. The serial Serie A winner and champion

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of the Premier League, a disciplinarian with a clear idea of how to play and how to act.

The change was immediate. All teams, from the *primavera* to the first team to the kids, would all play a version of his iconic 3-5-2. Conte too immediately identified the 'bad apples' and axed the likes of Ivan Perišić and Mauro Icardi. Both were exiled on loan, despite being two of the club's best players, but he didn't care and Marotta was right behind him. Now Conte was able to recruit players with tactical knowledge, intensity and work rate. The results have spoken for themselves.

There was one more thing that Conte and his team wanted to change. The culture of the club. Inter have been walking out to the song '*Pazza Inter Amala*' for years. Conte wanted to take the crazy out of the *Nerazzurri*. After all, the Milanese's best periods in their history have come when they have been organised and efficient. The reigns of Helenio Herrera, Giovanni Trapattoni, and José Mourinho are testament to this. No longer would Moratti be splashing money on exciting front men whilst neglecting the back. That was the old Inter, the new one will be modern, exciting and they would fight. The

proof of this was in rocketing attendances. A corner had been turned.

Recruitment as mentioned, has also been improved. Romelu Lukaku perhaps being the symbol of this. Reborn under Conte, his relationship with Lautaro Martínez is an extra benefit that has brought goals. Loan deals and big money have brought in quality. Alexis Sánchez, Nicolò Barella, Christian Eriksen, Stefano Sensi and Diego Godín are just some of the arrivals that have impressed. Conte has been vocal about a deep squad and even Ashley Young and Victor Moses have been brought in as back up in January and have looked impressive early on. Now they are close on the heels of Juventus and are putting up a serious fight for the *Scudetto*.

The Marotta blueprint has put the *Nerazzurri* into overdrive. An interesting element for this new Inter is that Suning were ranked second among China's top 500 private enterprises in 2018. This meant that they had an annual revenue of ¥557.875bn (approximately €77bn). As a result the Milanese will be able to compete with anyone in Serie A, and most foreign clubs, in the transfer market.

The future is bright. The transformation has been long awaited and you can sense the excitement in the city. Football is fashionable again, Inter are on the

verge of becoming a European elite club once more and a decade of discontent may soon be forgotten.

Richard Hall  
@RichHall80

## Inter Milan Seasons Since 2010 Treble

| SEASON | SERIE A | POINTS | COPPA   | EUROPE      |
|--------|---------|--------|---------|-------------|
| 10/11  | 2ND     | 76     | WINNERS | CL - QF     |
| 11/12  | 6TH     | 58     | QF      | CL - R16    |
| 12/13  | 9TH     | 54     | SF      | EL - R16    |
| 13/14  | 5TH     | 60     | R16     | -           |
| 14/15  | 8TH     | 55     | QF      | EL - R16    |
| 15/16  | 4TH     | 67     | SF      | -           |
| 16/17  | 7TH     | 62     | QF      | EL - GROUPS |
| 17/18  | 4TH     | 72     | QF      | -           |
| 18/19  | 4TH     | 69     | QF      | CL - GROUPS |

# DREAM TEAM

**Although more than two decades apart, the sackings of Ernesto Valverde and Bobby Robson raised many of the same questions at Barcelona.**



"**FOR** *the worst coach in the world, it's going really well.*" Whistles after 6-0 wins, constant criticism from the press over a lack of identity and his sarcasm aside, Bobby Robson was right. It *was* going well. The English coach secured a Cup Winners' Cup triumph, won the Spanish Super Cup and led Barcelona to one of their greatest ever victories - at least in an emotional sense - as they lifted the Copa del Rey at the Bernabeu. The Catalan club's famous anthem blared over the speakers at the home of their eternal rivals amid wild celebrations. But Robson survived just one season as Barça manager. The problem was obvious - he wasn't Johan Cruyff.

brash and rather disrespectful. Robson's success had become irrelevant, it was the method of that success that proved pivotal. Building on his spell as a Barcelona player in the 70's under the similarly influential Dutch coach Rinus Michels, Cruyff's playing style proved revolutionary as his 'Dream Team' won the club's first European Cup in 1992. During Cruyff's eight year reign as coach, Barcelona's identity became evermore fiercely entrenched and intrinsic to the club's ideology. Although Barça were trophy-less for the final two years of Cruyff's reign, Robson - perceived as old fashioned in Spain - could never stand up to Cruyff's legend.

With Louis Van Gaal hovering and the club's intention to shuffle Robson upstairs after the 1996/97 campaign a long-standing one, the Englishman's ousting was public,

Although Robson was regarded as a father figure by many of his players - including Ronaldo Nazário - liked by those at the club and handled himself with dignity

throughout, he simply became collateral damage in the Barcelona hierarchy's desperate search for an ideological successor to Cruyff. Although often at odds personally with Cruyff, Van Gaal's style was more suited to Barcelona's identity but, despite claiming the next two league titles - although neither points total came close to the 90 point haul under Robson - further Champions' League success was not forthcoming. The drought eventually lasted fourteen years and eight further managerial appointments.

More than two decades later, Barcelona found themselves at a similar crossroads. A successful, dignified coach, adored by many of his players but berated for a lack of philosophy by fans and media, unceremoniously and publicly sacked with his team leading La Liga. Ernesto Valverde's final training session must have been a surreal experience. He, like his players and the rest of the world, knew that Xavi Hernández - the embodiment of the philosophy of Pep Guardiola, Cruyff's true successor - had refused the chance to replace him. Valverde also knew Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman - iconic scorer of the only goal in the 92 final and Cruyffian disciple - had also said no

with Euro 2020 on the horizon. And he knew that third choice Quique Setién was all but confirmed as his successor.

After two disastrous Champions' League collapses to Roma and Liverpool, the 3-2 Spanish Super Cup semi-final loss (Barça had led 2-1 with ten minutes left) to Atlético Madrid accelerated the club's plans to replace Valverde next summer. Although he had somewhat miraculously survived the last off-season, Valverde, like Robson, had always been on the edge. He too has long been criticised by more puritanical fans and journalists for not strictly adhering to that intrinsic Cruyffian philosophy despite capturing the last two La Liga titles. Valverde's main problem? He wasn't Pep Guardiola.

Nearly twenty three years apart, the dismissals of Valverde and Robson raise the same question. What's more important; winning or playing well? Despite being a coach who failed with mid-table Real Betis last term, Setién's style of play has led many a Barcelona traditionalist to champion him for some time. Perhaps illustrating that winning is less important than widespread ire over a lack of recent European success had suggested.

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Transversely, despite the Messi-Suárez-Neymar trio hitting form plus the likes of Andrés Iniesta and Sergio Busquets in their prime, Luis Enrique was also painted as a more direct, *vertical* and pragmatic coach but his first season treble in 2015 bought him time and capital he likely wouldn't have been afforded otherwise.

Messi, Iniesta, Piqué and Xavi. Valverde meanwhile has suffered with frustrating returns from three nine figure signings; Ousmane Dembélé, Philippe Coutinho and, to some extent, Antoine Griezmann. Not to mention the decline of Iniesta, Luis Suárez and Busquets. The extent to which Robson's success (and also, intriguingly,

**'More than two decades later, Barcelona found themselves at a similar crossroads. A successful, dignified coach, adored by many of his players but berated for a lack of philosophy by fans and media, unceremoniously and publicly sacked.'**

Although it may be perfectly understandable for a club like Barcelona to demand both style and success, there has to be some elasticity between the two and some recognition that both can rely on factors besides managerial genius. For example, although their pioneering status is undeniable, Cruyff and Guardiola both enjoyed outstanding generations of players; Koeman, Laudrup, Stoichkov and Guardiola (the player) versus

perhaps even his lack of style) is down to translator/assistant coach José Mourinho's embellishment of his instructions when relaying them to his players is also open to debate.

Although Barcelona's labyrinthine mesh of political, sporting and ideological motivations beyond the relative status of Cruyff and Guardiola, such as Madrid's relative European success, contributed to

## ADAM WHITE: VALVERDE AND ROBSON

both dismissals to varying degrees, the worst thing that happened to Valverde and, earlier, Robson was still Guardiola and Cruyff. Although Robson boldly stated at his first Barcelona press conference: *"I am not afraid to follow him. When the president of the United States leaves, they have to get another president of the United States."* he later wrote that Cruyff still *"haunted my early days"* at the Nou Camp.

Future Barcelona coaches will feel the same pressure. Although that devotion to style is admirable and inexorably linked to the club, the successes of the likes of Robson

and Valverde shouldn't be so swiftly dismissed in favour of a maniacal search for the next Guardiola or Cruyff. Although many Barça fans celebrated the exit of Valverde, he came closer than they seem to recall to UCL success. A simple square ball from Dembélé to Messi in the final seconds of the first leg of last year's Champions League semi-final and Barcelona would have gone to Anfield with a 4-0 advantage. Psychologically an insurmountable lead? Maybe. What is for sure is that another fourteen year wait would be a disaster.

Adam White  
@\_Adam\_White\_

## Select Barcelona Coaches

| MANAGER   | GAMES | WIN % | TROPHIES | LIGAS |
|-----------|-------|-------|----------|-------|
| CRUYFF    | 430   | 58.1  | 11       | 4     |
| ROBSON    | 60    | 65    | 3        | 0     |
| GUARDIOLA | 247   | 72.5  | 14       | 3     |
| VALVERDE  | 145   | 66.9  | 4        | 2     |

*Trophies include Super Cups.*

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# More Than A Distant Memory

WHAT FOOTBALL CAN LEARN FROM THE STORY OF SEBASTIAN DEISLER.



**THE** annals of football history are littered with stories of what could have been. We can all cite former players who showed powers beyond understanding, but never quite made it for one reason or another. Everyone remembers Denílson during his time at Real Betis; how he dazzled with his sheer mastery of a football. There was also Ricardo Quaresma, who some thought to possess even greater potential than Cristiano Ronaldo. There are other names as well, both in recent memory and from days gone by, but one in particular will be remembered in Germany rather well; Sebastian Deisler.

Born in the foothills of the Black

Forest in the small city of Lörrach, Deisler began his footballing education like most other kids, for a small local side (FV Tumringen) at the age of five. After further stints with TuS Stetten and FV Lörrach, Deisler signed with Borussia Mönchengladbach when he was 15.

His introduction to top level football came at the age of 18, when Deisler made his debut for Gladbach in 1998. After making seventeen appearances and bagging one goal in the process, he would move on to Hertha Berlin the following summer after Gladbach failed to avoid relegation. Unknowingly, his second season of professional football would be a

harbinger of things to come.

As his reputation in German football continued to grow - as evidenced by being capped at all German youth levels by 1999 - Deisler was hit with his first serious injury; a cruciate ligament rupture. It would not be the last time he would lay on a treatment table. Just a year later, Deisler tore muscle fiber in his knee during the 2000/01 *ruckrunde*, leading to one of the most turbulent periods of his career the following season.

By now he was being hailed as one of a new generation of German footballers; players who were meant to push the nation forward in the new millennium. It was this potential and subsequent expectations and pressure placed on him that he would struggle with down the road.

In October 2001 he suffered a capsular tear that would keep him out of contention for 25 matches for Hertha until March of 2002. After recovering, disaster would befall him yet again; this time, damaged cartilage would result in Deisler being sidelined for the longest single period in his career.

Despite being injured, it would not stop him from completing a move

to Bayern Munich in the Summer of 2002. Even if, once recovered, it was presumed that he would not be able to reach his full potential while with the Bavarians. 259 days later, and now a Bayern player, Deisler was finally able to try and establish himself and make good on his potential. He would never be successful in this endeavour.

The following season he yet again tore muscle fibers and, despite being unavailable for only four of Bayern's fixtures, the mental and emotional strain he began to suffer on account of these recurring injuries and being under pressure to deliver as a player began to manifest itself in a serious struggle with depression that would eventually spell the end of his career.

After months of treatment, he would yet again return to playing duties for Bayern. But the storyline would only read more heartbreak as he - yet again - suffered another serious knee injury, making him unavailable for over 240 days. One month after finally recovering, a final muscle tear would be the last he would allow himself to suffer. At just 27 years of age, during his prime playing years, Sebastian Deisler retired from football in 2007. Citing exhaustion and not





# PROFILES



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THURAM 100

# Baptiste Santamaria



Angers  
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**ANGERS** are known as a club that, using their specialised and sophisticated scouting network, have have an impressive record recruit talented players from French lower league clubs. These talents nestle under the wing of manager Stéphane Moulin whose experience in developing young players is similarly highly regarded. The club has a profile based on continuity in almost every aspect from coach Moulin, a former player, who has been back at the club since 2005 and the first team coach since 2011, to General Manager, Olivier Picneu, also at the helm since 2005, and his brother, Benoît, serving as fitness coach for almost as long.

This continuity trope permeates into the squad as well. The current starting defence and goalkeeper has cost the club a grand total of zero in transfer fees and all, apart from 18-year-old academy grad Rayan Aït Nouri, started in the 2-0 victory in round one of the 2015/16 season, the club's first

game back in France's top flight for two decades. This is a rare achievement in modern football but cannot be sustained forever. While Moulin's tactics and setup can mask some of the individual deficiencies of the defenders, Baptiste Santamaria is the primary reason that the defence has enjoyed such longevity.

Operating as the midfield pivot in a 4-1-4-1, Santamaria is the sentinel in black and white. The 24-year-old is one of the best midfielders in France, his athletic endurance alone has earned him the nickname "4X4". With a passion for horse riding, Santamaria's stamina and endurance levels must have been inspired by his own race horse, Déesse de Bouillon. In the 2018/19 season, no player covered more distance than the Frenchman as he averaged 11.65km per match and this season he continued in that same trend.

A hard working and organised side, Angers players are always high in

these types of athletic rankings but Santamaria is the jewel in their crown. However, it is not all mindless chasing of the ball. While he can be bettered in a one on one take on it is his ability to make recovering tackles and snuff out danger that protects the defence. His defensive role is primarily to stop incoming attacks but he tends not to overly commit and be caught out of place or give away a foul in the defensive half. Across his four seasons with Angers he has fouled less often than he has been fouled (1.3 per 90 minutes to 1.4), he has never received a red card and only been handed 11 yellow cards.

It is not only his defensive and athletic abilities that continue to improve, Santamaria's passing has always been centred around keeping the flow of possession smooth and comfortable. He has kept these principles while developing into an astute long passer of the ball, able to switch play with ease and when under pressure. Santamaria has become the prime source of distribution in a double pivot alongside veteran midfielder, Thomas Mangani.

Even as a defensive midfielder, there have been times where Santamaria takes it upon himself to

drive up field with the ball at his feet and draw players towards him. Previously used as a winger before joining the western outfit from Tours, his solid dribbling ability has lent itself well to this task. Now, as a concrete tackler, he knows how to read defensive actions and makes himself difficult to dispossess without being cut down.

There is almost never a drop in performance from game to game from Santamaria, his consistency is one of his assets that people tend to forget about. Since joining the club in the summer of 2016 he has only missed seven league games. No outfield player in Ligue 1 has missed fewer in that time. Despite all the incomings and sales at Angers over the years, he has remained the cornerstone of the club's over-performance.

There was interest in the summer from a host of clubs. Aston Villa made a €10m bid and offered four times his current wage, but Angers rejected this wanting more. Napoli were also reportedly an interested party. It is common to see a player's performances and their intensity drop after failing to get their desired transfer but there has been no sign of this whatsoever. Still, this will almost certainly be his

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last season at the club, with Santamaria stating in recent interviews that he would like to play at a higher level.

Recent interest from Atalanta reflects the notion that the 24-year-old deserves to be playing with a club in either European competition. Angers will most likely aim to receive around €16m for him, a very reasonable fee for a player who has never had any

injury problems and has gained four full seasons of experience in the French top flight, developing into one of the most underrated midfielders across the continent. Replacing him will be a hard task for Moulin, Pickeu and the recruitment team. But if anyone can do it, *Les Scoistes* can.

Thomas Wiseman  
@WYSAF1

**"It is true that it was a special period and I was well highlighted in the transfer market, but I was not destabilised. Quite the contrary. It motivated me to keep giving my best."**

*- Baptiste Santamaria on his good form resulting in links to the Premier League.*

# Erling Haaland



Dortmund

19

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**NO** matter the size of the achievement, there will always be detractors. Score 12 league goals in 25 games as a 17-year-old? Well it's only the Norwegian league. Score nine goals in one game? It's only the Under 20 World Cup. Become the third youngest player to score a Champions' League hat-trick? It's only against Genk. Now though, the penny finally seems to have dropped. As Erling Braut Haaland tore his way through his first four opponents in Germany, scoring eight times in the process, few were doubting the talent they were witnessing this time.

It seems safe to suggest that Haaland really isn't your average 19-year-old. Here stands a forward, who is not only 6'4, but is also strong as an ox and can beat a defender for pace. Such is his size, that former team-mates dubbed Haaland the 'man-child'; not maliciously, but because he was baby-faced with the accompanying frame of a comic book villain. When a teenage striker is blessed with

just about every physical attribute you could hope for, big things are always going to be expected of him from the outset. This is especially true, given that Erling is the son of former Leeds United defender Alf-Inge Haaland. The Dortmund star was actually born in the city of Leeds in 2000 - but it was back in his father's native country of Norway that the younger Haaland took his first tentative steps into the professional ranks.

He started out at the relatively small Bryne FK, a second division side, where he would feature 16 times for the senior team without registering a goal. It's interesting to note that, despite being earmarked for the top from an early age, Haaland wasn't especially prolific during the early years of his career. A £100k move to Norwegian giants Molde FK followed in 2017, where he would again make a modest start, scoring twice in 14 league appearances. It wasn't long before Haaland would announce himself however, with the following season

proving to be a defining one. Under the stewardship of manager and childhood hero Ole Gunnar Solskjær, Haaland took the league by storm, scoring 12 times in 25 Eliteserien games. A record like that, from a player yet to celebrate his 18th birthday, hadn't gone unnoticed – the notoriously shrewd RB Salzburg were already waiting in the wings.

The decision to join RB Salzburg was, on the face of it, a simple one. Few clubs are capable of honing young talent better than the Austrian outfit, who in recent years alone have developed the likes of Sadio Mané, Naby Keïta, Marcel Sabitzer, Dayot Upamecano and many more. They are the masters of signing promising young players from foreign academies and developing them, before finally selling them on for a hefty fee a few years down the line. Haaland was the latest low risk gamble made by RB, who paid €8m for the young forward – a relatively small outlay, if the move panned out as expected.

Once again, Haaland got off to a solid, but ultimately modest, start to life in Austria. He played just five times in his first six months at the club, in large part, due to the form of regular forwards, Hee-Chan

Hwang and Moanes Dabour. He was going to have to bide his time. Then, in the summer of 2019, came the perfect opportunity for the 18-year-old to showcase his talent to the RB hierarchy, and indeed to the wider world. The Under 20 World Cup gave him a chance to follow in the footsteps of Paul Pogba, Riccardo Orsolini and Fikayo Tomori, who all used the stage to their advantage in previous editions.

While his Norwegian side largely failed to impress, Haaland most certainly lays claim to the competition's most memorable moment. In the history books, Haaland is listed as the 2019 top scorer, what that neglects to mention though is that all nine of his goals came in just one game, against Honduras - his ruthless finishing ability and razor sharp penalty box instincts going into overdrive.

He returned to RB following that historic summer for what would prove to be another ground-breaking campaign. His league form was imperious, with 16 goals in 14 Austrian league appearances, a staggering record for even the most seasoned forwards. But it was Haaland's Champions' League form that would truly astound

onlookers. Eight goals in four games, including a superb hat-trick against Genk, caught the attention of the entire footballing world. He became the third youngest player in Champions League history (after Raúl González and Wayne Rooney) to score three in one game. By now, the jury was in. Haaland was a star in the making.

Before long, Europe's biggest clubs were beating a path to agent Mino Raiola's door. It may be Haaland's ultimate dream to win the Premier League one day, but he resisted advances from England in favour of the club most likely to take his game to the next level – Borussia Dortmund. Signing for €20m at the end of December, it is a deal that has the potential to radically alter the futures of both player and club. For Dortmund, he may finally be a number nine capable of emulating the likes of Robert Lewandowski and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. Haaland meanwhile gets to play for a club with a remarkable track record of turning raw potential into world class ability - Jadon Sancho being just the latest example.

Haaland possesses just about every attribute needed to succeed at the highest level. As we've already seen in his opening BVB salvo, he's powerful, quick, has an eye for goal, and makes intelligent runs between the posts. In his league debut at Augsburg, Haaland provided a stunning late cameo, the young Norwegian international scoring a rapid fire, counter attacking hat-trick.

Contrastingly, a week later at home against Union Berlin, the striker proved to be just as effective against a low block defence. The early signs are ominous – no matter the scenario, he always scores. Weaknesses remain, as he still plays with the degree of rawness one might expect from a 19-year-old but if he continues to improve at the current rate, the sky really is the limit for the Leeds born sensation. The future is bright for Haaland – and, for now at least, the future is yellow.

Tom Fenton  
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**"It's f\*\*\*\*\* boring. I'm bored now.  
How bored on a scale of 1 to 10? 9.9."**

*- Erling Haaland on tiresome transfer rumours.*

# WRITERS

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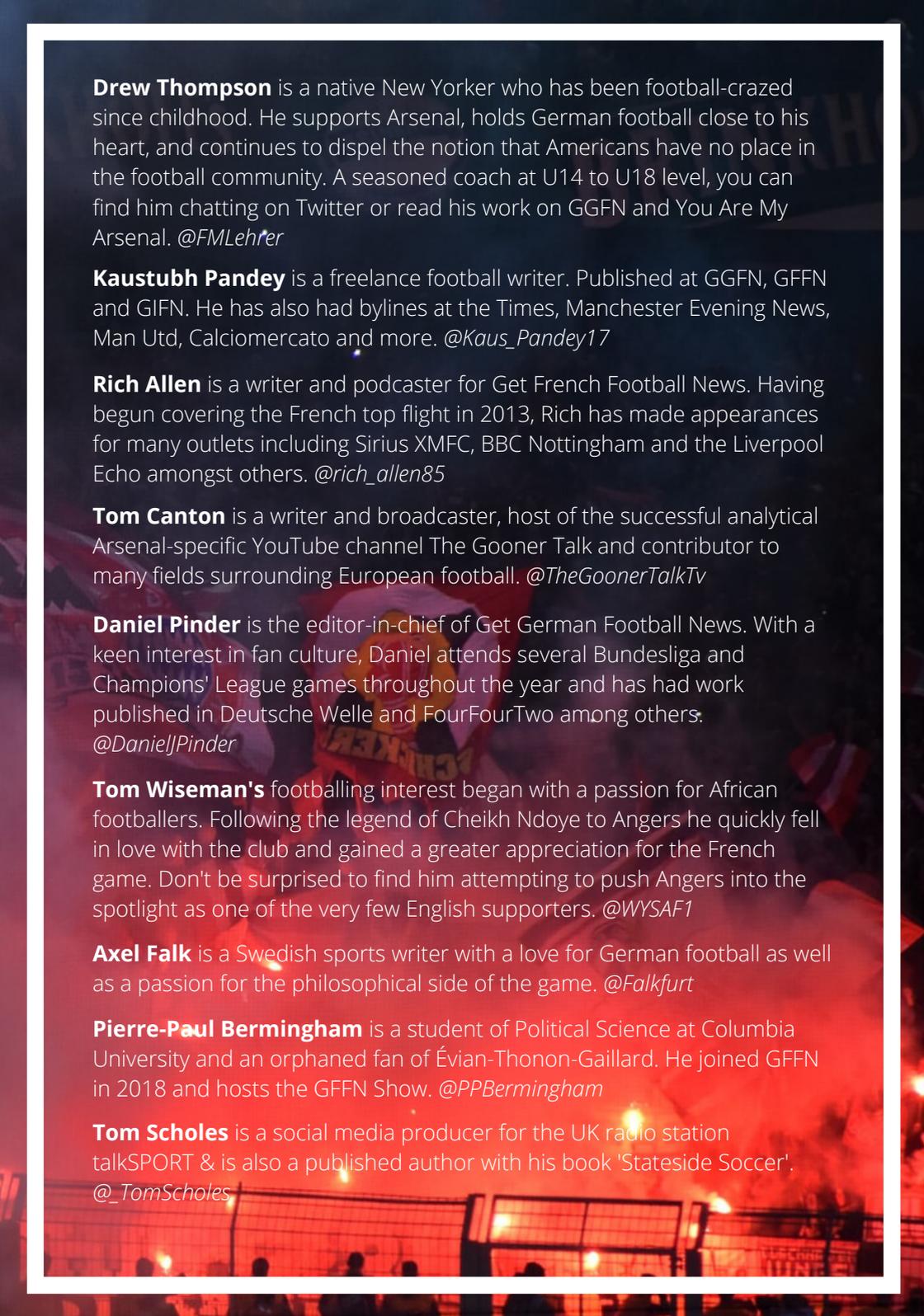
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