



# THE *Mighty* DELTA

APRIL 2021

"WE KNOW THIS IS A BIG BUSINESS AND I  
KNOW I AM PART OF THIS BUSINESS. BUT  
STILL I AM A LITTLE BOY WHO JUST LOVES  
TO PLAY FOOTBALL"

A FANZINE FOCUSED  
ON THE TOP FOUR  
TIERS OF ENGLISH  
FOOTBALL, AND  
BEYOND.



# WELCOME

*Greetings, salutations, and welcome to Issue Three of 'The Mighty Delta'.*

*First off, apologies to all of those who were expecting the zine to drop in March - lockdown life scuppered our original timetable, but we hope it's worth the wait.*

*Our third edition features some fantastic interviews with the likes of Brentford's 'Danish Pirló' Mathias Jensen and Huddersfield's Harry Toffolo, and there's also a timely article on the emergence of uber-talented England midfielder Jude Bellingham, who must surely be a dark horse for England's Euro 2020 squad.*

*With the mag's publication imminent, the task of introducing 'Delta Three' rather fatefully fell in the midst of the proposed European Super League breakaway...which was absolute bedlam, eh!?*

*The general gist of this intro before the 'Dirty Dozen' backtracked in unison was that now was the time for fans to come together, and it was fantastic to see them do exactly that.*

*This zine was created as a celebration of English football clubs across the board - whether they be minnows, fallen giants, middle league drivers, ambitious upstarts, the nouveau riche or 'The Elite' - and recent events act as a timely reminder that we should cherish what we've got and be sure not to take this beautiful, and beautifully-evolved, game for granted.*

*There are so many fabulous clubs, achievements and personalities across 'The 92' (that 'twas for a short time 'The 86') - and we hope 'The Mighty Delta' sheds interesting light upon some of them.*

*(aaaaand breathe!)*



Stephen Gillett | Editor-in-Chief





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THE GRAPHIC  
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# CAPELLO & CRUYFF TO COVERCIANO & CHOLISMO

WORDS BY ALEX LAWES

**In the 1993-94 Serie A season, Milan won their 14th Italian title. In the same season, they won the Champions League; their fifth European Cup.**

Astonishingly, they scored 36 goals in 34 fixtures as they won the Scudetto. That is an average of 1.05 goals per game. Udinese and Atalanta were relegated that season, but only scored one goal less than the champions.

Barcelona coincidentally won their 14th league title that same season. However, they managed to accomplish that feat by scoring 91 goals in 38 games; an average of 2.39.

The compelling contrast between the sides was in the Goals Against column. Milan conceded 15 goals in that 34 game season, whereas Barca shipped 42 in 38.

However, the Spanish champions were the side that Milan defeated in the aforementioned Champions

League final. It finished 4-0 to the Rossoneri in one of the most famous finals of all time.

A clash of culture and style. It was Cruyff v Capello. A crushing blow to the ideologue, a resounding vindication of the pragmatist.

Barcelona were heavily favoured ahead of the final. Their manager Johan Cruyff even said it'd be impossible for them to lose. Fabio Capello's side were without the suspended Franco Baresi and Alessandro Costacurta as well as the injured Gianluigi Lentini and Marco van Basten.

However, Milan ruthlessly and remorselessly exposed the weaknesses of Cruyffism.

The aggressive press and high-line, that hadn't been taken apart yet in La Liga, was tactically planned for and executed to perfection. It has been described as one of the greatest European Cup final performances of all time.

Cruyff's Barcelona never won another trophy and he never managed a club side again. Capello went on to win another Serie A title with Milan before winning two league titles, in two spells, with Real Madrid and one title with Roma.

He did lead Juventus to first position on back-to-back occasions in the mid-noughties, but those league wins have since been revoked due to the Calciopoli scandal.

Outside of the Netherlands, Hungary and Argentina; Italy and Spain have two of the most distinguishable tactical traits and evolutions in football. In fact; they, and the Dutch, have superseded Hungary and Argentina in the modern era (1990 onwards) with Catenaccio and Cruyffism becoming the dominant styles of play. This rise reached a crescendo in that 1994 final.

The cliché of overly cautious and defensive play in Italy became something that was lambasted and disliked by many in England. The Champions League final in 2003 between Juventus and Milan at Old Trafford finished 0-0 after normal time, 0-0 after extra time and 3-2 on penalties to Milan. It has regularly been ranked as the worst Champions League final of all time.

The Italian national team developed an identity of "somehow finding a way" and are still often described as a "tournament team" as justification for potential success at major tournaments. Italy's best examples of winning in adversity via pragmatism would be the World Cup wins of 1982 and 2006.

1982 was two years after the Totonero scandal which saw 33 players investigated and/or charged for dealings related to match-fixing. Paolo Rossi was one of those charged and he was handed a three-year ban from football that was reduced to two years and therefore allowed him to play in the World Cup. A World Cup in which he'd be the top scorer and win the Best Player award as Italy won their third world title.

2006 was in the middle of the Calciopoli scandal. A scandal related to executives of bigger clubs influencing match referees and officials which led to Juventus being relegated to Serie B. Italy's goalkeeper, Gianluigi Buffon, as well as their captain, Fabio Cannavaro, were a part of that Juve squad. Cannavaro would be named player of the tournament as the Azzuri won another World Cup against the odds.

These two stories highlight a reactivity that is eminent in Italian tactics. The game

has often been slower and described like 'chess' due to tactical organisation. There isn't a reliance or obligation to create styles of beauty and progression.

The stereotypical ideals have been to focus on the result rather than the process, whereas the Spanish philosophy has honed the process in the belief that it will bring results.

The Spanish national team feared Italy; not because they thought the Italians would hammer them, but because they always assumed that they'd lose to Italy. It was a question of semantics and developed meaning – Italy wouldn't beat Spain, but Spain would lose to Italy.

In 2008, Luis Aragones led La Furia Roja to their second ever major tournament win, the first in 44 years, as Spain won Euro 2008. It was the first of three consecutive tournament victories which culminated in the final of Euro 2012 where they produced a stunning 4-0 victory over, of course, Italy.

Shades of 1994 in reverse and on the international stage as Vicente Del Bosque's side ruthlessly tore Italy apart. An Italy side which had kept back-to-back clean sheets in the knockout stages of that tournament. However, this wasn't a side built on Cruyffism; it was a side built on that tedious and over-used phrase 'tiki-taka'. "Take the ball, pass the ball" is how Pep Guardiola described Barcelona's style of play during a pre-match press conference in 2009.

Guardiola took over in 2008 and won three consecutive league titles, two Copa Del Reys, two Champions Leagues and two Club World Cups. In 2009, in his first season, the Blaugrana won the treble becoming only the fifth European club in history to do so. Barcelona scored 98 goals in the 2009-10 title win. Seven of that side would go on to play for Spain and win the World Cup that summer.

However, in the Champions League of that season, they were defeated by an Inter Milan team managed by Jose Mourinho. An Inter Milan team that became the sixth European club in history to win the treble.

Inter Milan won the 2009-10 Serie A title by scoring less than two goals per game on average; 23 goals less than that Barcelona side.

The contrast in style was, once again, amplified when the two leading sides from both countries faced off in the Champions League. Mourinho's Inter managed to knock

Barcelona out in the semi-finals of the competition despite having less than a quarter of the possession and not having a single attempt on goal in the entirety of the second leg.

The styles and the philosophies of both countries when it comes to football is evident. However, in recent years it has begun to flip around.

For example, in Serie A this season (as of Matchday 31), there has been an average of 3.04 goals per game, which would rank in the top ten all-time in Italy were it maintained.

Averaging over three goals a game is pretty impressive and not a country mile away from the best goal average in Serie A history: 3.32 goals per game in the 1949/50 season.

In contrast, La Liga currently has an average of 2.48 goals per game which means that this season, out of 93 recorded seasons, it ranks 78th on the list of goals per game for Spain's top flight.

La Liga has had 22 0-0 draws this season. In Matchday 27 recently, only 17 goals were scored in total - with three stalemates and three victories by a single goal. In fact, only eleven teams managed to even get on the scoresheet.

Matchday 31 in Italy, meanwhile, was a different kettle of fish - 41 goals flashing into Serie A nets, with only one club (Juventus funnily enough) failing to score.

This recent batch of results is representative of more goals going in across the board in Italy, while the lack of goals in Spain reflects that it isn't just certain teams that are lowering the average – it is the majority of the league.

The underlying data even suggests this isn't a fluke nor an anomaly. In Italy, eight teams have an xG-per-game of over 1.6 (Atalanta, Napoli, Juventus, Milan, Roma, Inter Sassuolo and Lazio), while only two teams in Spain do: the obvious two.





The average xG and xGA is simply just consistently higher in Italy than in Spain and this is reflected week in and week out.

Since 2016, Serie A has produced more goals than Spain on all but one occasion.

On that one occasion, La Liga averaged 0.01 more. The reasons behind this shift from defence to attack in Italy and attack to defence in Spain are all hypotheses that offer no definitive suggestion.

However, there are two that seem to make most sense: Coverciano and Cholisismo.

Renzo Ulivieri is the president of the Italian Coaches' Association and works at Coverciano, in Florence, which is the famous Italian school for coaches and managers.

He believes and perpetuates theories of pragmatism. In an interview with Cano Football in 2017, Ulivieri insisted he had to push the reset button when a new coach arrived espousing their own pre-determined philosophy. Ulivieri went onto explain: "There's an old Italian saying of 'Arrangiarsi' – it means to make do with what you've got."

Well, in recent years and as of right now, there are managers who appear to have simply rejected this notion. Maurizio Sarri's Napoli, Roberto De Zerbi's Sassuolo and, most prominently, Gian Piero Gasperini's Atalanta are examples of sides on smaller budgets – particularly Sassuolo and Atalanta – getting results beyond their expectations. However, they are doing it with astonishing grace, incision and flair.

A rejection of Ulivieri's principles and the evolution



of Coverciano could be reasons as to why Italy's attacking outlook has developed over recent years.

Andrea Pirlo and Thiago Motta are another two, in recent years, who have published a thesis after studying at Coverciano in which attacking, possession-based football is their philosophy – regardless of 'what they've got'.

Similarly in Spain, it could well be a reactionary response to the Clasico hegemony that has provoked the rise of Cholisismo.

Cholisismo directly refers to the Atletico Madrid manager Diego Simeone and his nickname of "Cholo". The word is a description of a social class in Argentina that is often oppressed and marginalised.

Simeone has used his nickname to brand a style of play that is about an execution of basics to a finite detail. It is football from the heart that accentuates the qualities of a limited group and harnesses hard work and team spirit to overcome opponents.

It is dull. It is defensive. It has been effective and this season, it might be effective again. 2014 saw Simeone's Atletico become the first side to win the Spanish title, outside of Barcelona and Real Madrid, in 10 years. They did so by scoring 77 goals in 38 games – 23 less than second placed Barca and 27 less than third placed Real. They conceded an average 0.68 goals per game.

It isn't a leap to suggest that many managers and sides in Spain have recognised this style causing a disruption to the big two and have decided to try and emulate it on a smaller scale. Jose Bordalas' Getafe being the best example. They qualified for the Europa League in 2019 despite scoring 14 goals less than Sevilla who finished below them.

The style of play relies on physicality and aggression. That aggression often leads to poor disciplinary records. Getafe have finished 20th, 20th and 18th in La Liga's Fair Play table during Bordalas' three full seasons in charge – and, as of writing in late April, they have already racked up a whopping 108 yellow cards and six dismissals this season.

Rather handily for the purposes of this article, Getafe's last sending off came recently in the process of winning a valuable point... courtesy of a 0-0 draw against Atletico Madrid. Some may argue that Simeone got out-Cholo'd on this occasion.

The evolution and shift in footballing culture and philosophy in Italy and Spain is exaggerated even further when looking at these disciplinary records. Italy has always been stereotypically seen as the home of the 'dark arts'; which is a key reason as to why Spain feared them for so long.

However, in the 2020/21 season so far, La Liga has had 60 red cards and 1396 yellow cards, marginally more than Serie A, which has seen 54 reds brandished and 1390 bookings.

There could be several reasons as to why Spain and Italy teams seem to have bodyswapped.

However, it would be more pertinent to view it as Italy gaining an attacking philosophy while clubs in Spain have suffered something of an identity crisis.

No matter the reason as to why it is happening and its deeper meaning, one thing is clear – Serie A is consistently more attacking and more entertaining than La Liga for possibly the first time ever.

# MASTERCLASS

*Fans love to chew the cud on how the beautiful game should be played, but it's time to find out what the pros think...*

In this edition, we discover what it takes to shine as a modern day full-back from Huddersfield Town's metronomic Harry Toffolo.

**Do you consider yourself a full-back, a wing-back or a winger even, how do you bracket yourself?**

I put myself definitely as a full-back even though the modern day full-back has to have the attacking ability to create going forward. I like to play full-back as you get to experience both sides of the game.

**Did you ever play any other positions?**

Everyone has their stint up front and I was scoring 50-60 goals a season in the East Herts League at Under-11. You slowly move back though. I was the only left-footer at Stevenage's Centre of Excellence and they started playing me at left midfield, and then at full-back. It's been a position that's evolved with me, I grew into it and have enjoyed playing it ever since. Even today, when there's a Premier League game on Sky, I'm just watching the left-back.

**Who were your footballing idols growing up?**

My family had a season ticket at Chelsea and when I first started going, Wayne Bridge was at left-back and then Ashley Cole. It was quite bizarre, as I must have been the only ten/eleven year old kid who'd bring a notepad with him and I used to just watch Ashley Cole. It was just an obsession. I don't think I ever saw him get done one-on-one even against Ronaldo or Messi. His fitness was incredible too with his overlapping, just up and down all game. There were parts of his game, particularly his fitness and energy, that I tried to put in mine.

**What are the tricks of the trade in one v one situations?**

There are two different ways you can do it. You can get really tight, so they don't have any space, but then you leave yourself very open in behind or you give yourself a yard

and back yourself one-v-one, potentially with the support of another player.

Some wingers like to do false movements and, as a full-back, you're also trying to keep your opponent guessing. There are little mind games throughout the game. You've got to be savvy and obviously do your homework and prepare. You have to adapt to each winger you play against.

**How important are full-backs in modern football; how have they changed the game?**

Nowadays, the amount of assists and goals full-backs are involved in, is potentially in the top five for most teams. A lot of teams are moving towards 'inverted wingers', which roll inside, which leaves a massive channel for full-backs to attack. It's quite bizarre, personally, for me nowadays, as I could be the furthest forward attacking a cross into the box.

It's constantly evolving. Now, full-backs are also going inside into central midfield.

**How has the development of the full-back affected wingers?**

Wingers are asked to do a lot more defending than they were before. Statistically they're probably having more defensive duels than they were ten years ago. I sometimes see attack as the best form of defence and I try to run wingers the other way, so when they do get the ball





they're too knackered to run me. You can see when you're playing against someone and you're relentless, you can see when you've got them.

**Is the traditional full-back who plays safe and pings channel balls a thing of the past?**

It all depends on the manager and the club and the playing style. Some teams still play with two big number nines and want their full-backs to put it on their heads and it can work, we've seen plenty of teams promoted playing that way. Nowadays, though, most full-backs do have a more progressive, attacking element to their game.

**How pioneering have Andy Robertson and Trent Alexander-Arnold been at Liverpool?**

They've evolved the game, they're the pioneers for full-backs in English football and helped define what a full-back is. I remember watching a programme with them and Rio Ferdinand where they spoke about switching the ball to one another, and you've seen goals where one's crossing it and the other's coming in from the other side. They have a fantastic relationship off the pitch and they bring it onto the field - they're the blueprint for full-backs right now.

**Who's been your toughest opponent?**

The two best have been (Bryan) Mbeumo for Brentford and (Ismaila) Sarr for Watford. I think I did well against them both, but they were the ones where you could really see their quality. Mbeumo's left footed and likes to roll inside and link play, so he was quite difficult from that perspective - how far do you go with him? Sarr was very direct, explosive and wanted to get the ball out of his feet. He was deceptively strong too. They both have incredible attributes.

**What's been the best full-back partnership you've been part of?**

I think the relationship with Pipa at Huddersfield, as we're both so aggressive. Sometimes when you've only got one aggressive full-back on one side, teams can nullify the threat and shut down that flank. At the moment, as soon as a team starts worrying about Pipa, I'm an outlet on the other side and vice versa. He's settled into life in England really well and we have a good bond off the pitch.



**How important is a modern full-back's crossing ability?**

Very. I do countless amounts of crossing. At Huddersfield, Carlos Corberan has told me that there are seven different types of cross and we work on which to use depending on where you are on the field. For me, it's important to get to the byline as much as possible, as that's where a lot of assists come from. It depends a lot on the profile of the team you're playing; for example, a very tall team may struggle against low balls into the box.

**How about throw-ins?**

You can think 'Ah, a throw-in, just stick it in the box or down the line', but I think of a throw as a free pass. It's an opportunity to start something: in two passes you could be playing down the other side.

**Which areas of your game are you always looking to improve?**

I want to contribute, so creating key passes. Sometimes you can put a ball in the box, and someone can miss from two yards out and you don't get the assist - but I see supplying key passes as a big part of my game. The other one is defensive duels: you can get forward, but you've got to be able to get back in and defend.

**How physically demanding is playing full-back in the Championship?**

Extremely. People forget but coming back from the first lockdown was carnage, playing a lot of games after a short break. This season the games are coming thick and fast, it's relentless. For me to be able to string together the amount of games I have through all the divisions is something I'm proud of: to go League Two-League One-Championship has been a nice trajectory and a nice progression; it happened sooner than I thought it would, now I just want to keep developing.

*Left footed*

*Centre back*




*Watch N&S*

*4-1-4-1*

*Weak right  
Press high*

*Zonal mark*

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# PLAYMAKER



*For this Viewfinder we asked Peterborough United's Joe Dent (@photojoedent), one of the talented photographers still working away during the pandemic, for three of his favourite images from this season.*

*It's been a very strange season with no supporters at matches. This is a picture of the Peterborough team making their way to the pitch for kick-off against Bristol Rovers, through what would have been a packed terrace!*



*Capturing a celebration is always the money shot and I was chuffed to capture this one of Peterborough's Sam Szmodics and Jack Taylor celebrating the opening goal against Plymouth, looking straight down the lens!*



*This is a shot taken from my remote camera positioned behind the goal. It's something I've been experimenting with this season and I'm very pleased with this shot of Peterborough's Frankie Kent scoring against Blackpool.*



# THE MIGHTY INTERVIEW

WORDS: *Stephen Gillett*



mathias  
jensen

*For a player who used to think the rough and tumble of Championship football might not suit him, 'The Danish Pirlo' is doing an admirable job for Championship frontrunners Brentford.*

As a young player growing up in his native Denmark, Mathias Jensen forged a reputation for spraying glorious assists from the middle of the park, his slick technical ability and eye for a pass drawing comparisons with legendary Italian 'quarterback' Andrea Pirlo – and the potential for such parallels endures given his performances for the Bees over recent seasons.

However, rather than embrace what – by anyone's standards – is a glorious moniker, Jensen is keen to play down the 'Danish Pirlo' talk. It turns out the 25-year-old considers himself more a midfield generalist than a deep-lying specialist in the mould of louche, bemuddled superstars of yesteryear.

"When I started playing a lot in the number 6 position playing a lot of deep balls and diagonals, I made a lot of assists, so I think that's where the (Pirlo) comparisons started.

"I don't see myself as any specific midfield position, though. I can show my qualities in different roles, so I don't have a favourite.

"In fact, when I found my position as a centre midfielder I started looking at more attacking guys like Zidane and Iniesta."

Jensen name-checking Barcelona maestro Andrés Iniesta is telling, as starting out as a professional at Danish side FC Nordsjaelland his dream was to forge a career in La Liga.

This ambition was realised when he secured a move to Celta Vigo in 2018, but a spate of injuries turned his spell in Spain's top flight into something more akin to a nightmare.

"Growing up in Denmark, I used to follow the Premier League and Manchester United, mainly because of Cristiano Ronaldo, but when I got a little older I got more into Spanish football.

"I always thought their football suited me better and my dream has always been to play in Spain. However, because of different circumstances, it didn't go very well (at Celta).

"It was my first time away from Denmark and away from my family and being injured all the time was pretty tough. I'm really glad to be at Brentford now."

It's almost guaranteed that Jensen's affection for Brentford is reciprocated.

Since joining the club in July 2019, Jensen has racked up 14 Championship assists (only Matheus Pereira, Jed Wallace, Emi Buendia and Alex Mowatt have more), and his blend of technical skill and football intelligence seems a perfect fit for a Brentford team renowned for their fluid, attacking football.

However, if you go back and watch Jensen's first interview with the Bees, on pre-season duty in 2019, there are moments that betray a slight nervousness on his part regarding how he would adapt to English football.

In the interview, he reflects on being 'better on the ball than off it' and muses that five years before he and the Championship might not have been a good fit.

So, what were his first impressions of English football and how did it compare to his short spell in La Liga?

"In Spain, it was much more technical and the games were not as tough, all the duels and physicality was a little lighter.

"My first impression when I arrived at Brentford was that if we could score all our chances then we would get direct promotion.

"In my first game (a 1-0 loss to Birmingham) we had 15 shots and hit the bar, and they (Birmingham) scored with their only chance of the game. It felt like we were very good compared to our opponent.

"As you play against all the teams in this league, though, you realise how tough it is. In the Championship, you have no time when you have the ball, and teams are pushing all the time to score.

"I have had to adapt my physicality - which is one of the things I can improve a lot. I give my all in duels, but I'm one of the lighter players. I'm not fast either, so I have to be cleverer than other players and I try to avoid a lot of duels by playing fast.

"It's tough, but very fun to be a part of and the atmosphere when spectators are at games is something special."

Jensen's style of play is virtually impossible to dislike, his game built on awareness, touch, guile, vision and speed of thought.

There are silky moments from this season that stand out: a ridiculous nutmeg followed by a thundering 25-yard drive (albeit tipped round the post) in the West London derby against QPR being a (rather random) highlight of ours.

A more high profile illustration of his talents came in last season's 3-1 play-off semi-final second leg victory over Swansea City at Griffin Park.

Trailing by a goal after the first leg and needing to make a fast start, Brentford sprang out on a counter-attack from a Swansea corner. Goalkeeper David Raya found Jensen on the right flank deep in his own half, as the Bees looked to break. A glorious first touch and a drilled ping from Jensen later, Ollie Watkins was through one-on-one with Swans keeper Freddie



**"WE'VE  
WORKED  
MORE ON  
CONTROLLING  
GAMES, ON  
KEEPING THE  
BALL MORE"**

Woodman and dispatched the opportunity with ease. In many ways, Jensen's involvement in that goal was a distillation of his best qualities.

For all their good football and goals last season (they top scored in the Championship with 84 goals), Brentford ultimately finished it empty-handed. They lost the subsequent play-off final to Fulham and then predictably sold two of their best players in the summer transfer window: Watkins for £28m to Aston Villa, and Said Benrahma to West Ham for a fee rising to £20m.

As you might expect from a staid Nordic temperament, Jensen remains philosophical about last season's play-off heartbreak and stresses that the Bees have been keen to find solutions to the challenges posed by the respective departures of Watkins and Benrahma.

"The lesson we learned from last season is that if we perform regularly and play solidly for the whole season, not just from October and November, then we have a good chance of fighting for a promotion spot. Last season, we started very badly; it took us a while to get going.

"We've worked on how to solve things and adapt without Ollie and Said. Brentford always sell players when they are doing very well, and others step in - it's not a problem.

"Said was probably the best player in the Championship last season though, he was very strong in one v ones...and one v twos, and one v threes!

"It was perhaps a bit easier playing with him on the wing, particularly because he would attract a lot of people towards him and create space for other players."



Famed for their 'Moneyball' recruitment model and their reputation for successful player turnover, Brentford's decision to pay Peterborough United £5m (potentially rising to £10m) for Ivan Toney already looks an absolute masterstroke.

With 29 Championship goals under his belt at the time of writing, Toney has been on fire this season and Jensen is certainly glad to have the hotshot onboard, as Brentford look to put aside their stuttering form from February onwards and go one better than last season when they fell at the final hurdle.

If they are to reach the promised land, Jensen believes his side need to out-fox opponents who alter their tactics against the Bees.

"With the addition of Ivan, who is more of a target player, we've had to play a bit differently to how we did last year. He's always in the box, and very physical, which is nice to have.

"We have had to work on playing with a different type of striker from Ollie last season, but so far Ivan's been incredible - playing a lot of games and scoring a lot of goals.

"This season is different. I feel that a lot of teams are man-marking us all over the pitch, which I don't remember them doing last season."

Recently described by Tottenham midfielder and international colleague Emile-Pierre Højbjerg as 'technically sublime', Jensen's fine form ((here's a stat: no midfielder has assisted more Championship goals from corners this season) has seen him promoted to Denmark's senior set-up.

Featuring a small cameo in a 1-0 win against England, playing for his country has been an "amazing" experience according to Jensen, who is hoping to learn from the likes of Højbjerg and Inter's Christian Eriksen and make the final cut for the Euros this summer.

"To play for your country against some of the biggest sides in the world is special and a feeling you can't really describe. Even though I only played two minutes, winning at Wembley was really nice.

"Talking to players like Christian and learning from them personally and mentally is very interesting. He almost never loses the ball, his finishing and free-kicks stand out, I think he is a special footballer.

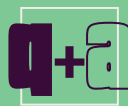
"It's been a big advantage for me that the Euros were postponed until this summer, as I think I wouldn't have gone last year. It's given me another year to perform better. Hopefully, I'll be there when the Euros do start; to win something with Denmark would probably be my biggest dream."

To bring the curtain down on our 'Mighty Interview', Jensen discussed one of his other goals: more goals!

For a player with a great strike on him and fantastic quality from dead-balls, Jensen's modest return of three Championship goals in two seasons is somewhat surprising, not least to Jensen himself.

"I don't know what's happening, but I would love to score more goals.

"I've always normally scored four or five goals a season for whoever I've played for before. It's something I've been working hard on in training and I really hope there's more to come soon."



### **Club supported:**

*Man Utd and Barcelona*

### **Career highlight:**

*Denmark debut  
(4-0 win v Faroe Islands)*

### **Lowlight:**

*My first six months in Spain.*

### **Best midfielder played with:**

*Christian Eriksen or  
Stanislav Lobotka*

### **Toughest opponent:**

*Romelu Lukaku. He was  
impossible to handle.*



## HISTORY LESSON

# RAINBOW FLICK

### RAINBOW FLICK

aka reverse flick-over, the Carretilha, the Lambretta, the Brazilian, the Arco Iris, the Okocha-Trick, the Sombrero.

*noun* SOCCER

*'a football skill where the ball is rolled up the calf and lobbed, or flicked, over the head of the opponent - following the trajectory of a rainbow'*

The English may have invented the beautiful game, but it's striking how some of its silkiest skills were honed elsewhere. There are plenty of mesmerising moves and fabulous feats (often without an anglicised name!) whose origins trace back to footballing galaxies far, far away from Blighty - and our regular 'History Lesson' aims to chronicle them.

After shining the spotlight on the 'Rabona' and the 'Elastico' in previous issues, we now turn our attention to the borderline offensive 'Rainbow Flick'...

The Rainbow Flick is definitely the trick for you if you ever want to make a name for yourself...just ask Ilhan Mansiz.

Prior to the 2002 World Cup in South Korea, not many fans outside of Turkey were familiar with Mansiz' name. However, a perfectly executed 'rainbow' over legendary full-back Roberto Carlos in Turkey's opening Group C

fixture against Brazil certainly got the world to sit up and take notice - Mansiz carving his name into football folklore with one sublime moment of impudence and trickery.

Although Mansiz offers a great example of how it leaves a lasting impression, the trick dates back to the Sixties and - as with the Rabona and Elastico - it can be traced back to South America.

On a fateful day in March 1968, Alexandre de Carvalho 'Kaneco' pulled out what is believed to be the first successfully performed Rainbow Flick in a 5-1 win for Santos over Botafogo SP. We'd love to tell you more about it, but unfortunately the archives are bare in relation to Kaneco's prototype. We imagine it caused plenty of excitement and possibly a riot, though.

There are two key pieces of information you need to know about the Rainbow Flick: i) it has a low success rate that means only the technically gifted will go anywhere near it and b) its inherent element of showmanship means that anyone performing it is likely to leave opponents feeling (more than a little) disrespected.

Perhaps the two players most readily associated with the skill - which is far more likely found in street football or futsal - are Jay-Jay Okocha (who the trick is actually named after in Germany) and Neymar.

Okocha popularised the trick during his unlikely, and all the more fantastic for it, spell at Bolton Wanderers in the mid-2000s. The former Nigeria international was sensational for Sam Allardyce's unfashionable Trotters and lit up the Premier League with his swagger and unpredictability. One of his many highlights included a fantastic 'rainbow' over the head of Gunners midfielder Ray Parlour following a short corner against Arsenal; 'The Romford Pele' totally befuddled by Okocha's cheek and ingenuity.

Neymar is arguably the most prolific Rainbow Maker. He's performed the manoeuvre throughout his career for Santos,

# OW



Barcelona and PSG, and it has a habit of severely riling his opposition. In fact, controversy was at the end of the rainbow in February 2020 when Neymar was actually booked for performing his patented move in PSG's 5-0 thrashing of Montpellier - the Brazilian's protests of 'I am playing football' unheeded, as referee Jerome Brisard showed him a yellow card for unsporting behaviour.

*Although some may deem it offensive and lacking in decorum, we're with Neymar on this one...*



# 7EVENS

*Each issue, Playmaker asks a well-known EFL footballer to pick an all-time '7-a-side' team bristling with personality.*

*In our third edition, Preston North End's January signing **Ben Whiteman** talks us through his 'Magnificent Seven'...all of whom played with the 24-year-old midfielder during his time at Doncaster Rovers.*

## Seny Dieng **"Safe Hands"**

Seny can go right the way to the top. The big thing that surprised me when he came into the team was how well he dominated the box. He was so commanding and nine out of 10 times he'd make the right decision on when to come for balls. Even when sometimes he spilled it, I didn't mind because he was brave and trying to take pressure off his team-mates. On the floor, he's fantastic with his feet. Some of his shot stopping was brilliant too - there were moments where you'd go 'Wow, how'd he make that?' You could always tell it was going to be a short stint at Doncaster and that he was going to go on to better things.

## Tom Anderson **"The Rock"**

He's definitely one you'd want in the trenches with you, as he's willing to put his body on the line: he'll put his head where a lot of players wouldn't put their feet. I saw him get one of the worst injuries I've ever seen away at Rotherham, where he was honest and kept his eyes on the ball and the goalkeeper fractured his cheekbone and jaw. His nose has been broken so many times, he's just a warrior. He's a brilliant lad, great to be around and he's so consistent: in training, and in the way he conducts himself on and off the field.





## John Marquis **"The Matchwinner"**

There's a perception of John as someone who throws his arms around on the pitch and some might see him as a bit stroppy, but I love his attitude – he is a winner. He's a bit of a nightmare at training, as he wants to win so much, and he'd do anything to score a goal. His record speaks for itself and I think if you ask any player in League One who the best striker in the league is they'd probably all say 'John Marquis'. People maybe don't notice just how hard he works off the ball, but he must be a nightmare to play against. I particularly remember two goals he scored for us against Plymouth that won the game and he's definitely a matchwinner.

## Reece James **"The Engine"**

I was umming and aahing about whether to go with Matty Blair, who's also got an engine, but Reece in some games would cover huge distances: 12-13k. He's just a natural athlete and fit as a fiddle. He was always up there for things like the Bleep Test. As a full-back now, it's really high intensity, with teams using them to attack, so I think it's probably easier for Reece now that he's playing centre midfield rather than full-back. He's still churning out silly numbers for high intensity and distance covered though.

## Andy Butler **"The Professional"**

When I first came to Doncaster, Butts was around 32/33 and he was in the best shape of anyone. His standards were just really high on the pitch and, in terms of looking after himself, he was just ultra-professional. He was bang on time for everything and hated people being late. As a professional, things like time-keeping, keeping yourself in shape, setting standards and being trustworthy, in terms of doing the right things, are all important, and you could always rely on Butts. He is still absolutely ripped to shreds and you don't play in League One at 38 unless you're a top professional.

## James Coppinger **"The Technician"**

The best player I've ever played with. The best word to describe him is 'legend' and there aren't many players with his longevity, honesty and loyalty to a football club. As a footballer, wow; I think his 'chops' are renowned throughout the EFL and his technique and ability to put it on a plate are outstanding. He's not the quickest, but his football intelligence and ability to manoeuvre a football are different class. He's still making defenders look silly at 40 and some of the things he does in training are sensational. I think I was good for Copps and he was really good for me, as I could trust him with the ball and he could do the same with me. We were just on the same wavelength.

## Mallik Wilks **"The X-Factor"**

Some games he would be non-existent, but he could always create a goal out of nothing; he'd just cut inside and bang a left-footer into the bottom corner out of nowhere. For me an X-Factor player is one of those where, when you're not playing too well, they can just go and score by themselves and Mallik had that. He was a proper character, the type you need in your team, and he has an unbelievable left foot. You can just give him the ball, and he'll go past two or three players and get you a goal. He's still quite young, and he could be anything he wants.

## EXTRAS...

Grant McCann

### **The Manager**

He lets you play your game and he was very expensive in the football he wanted to play at Doncaster. Training was always very good, short and sharp and he was honest. He brought the best out of me, and most of the players in my 7-a-side team are from his era too.

Shandon Baptiste

### **The Opponent**

I thought he was a brilliant player. He was one that really stood out: his ball-carrying, his decision-making, his physicality... he had the all-round package and deserved his move to Brentford.

# CULT HEROES INTERVIEW

WORDS: *Daniel Oliveira*

## ricardo rocha

***In January 2007, you moved from Benfica to Tottenham. What were the biggest differences between the Portuguese Primeira Liga and the Premier League?***

Honestly, I thought I was ready for the move even though it was a big change in the middle of the season. The differences were huge, for the first few days of training it was snowing, driving on the opposite side, food, and I didn't know anyone in the dressing room. Even though I speak English fluently, I had no one that I could speak Portuguese to feel a little bit more at home.

Football-wise the differences were big as well: training, the intensity and velocity of the game that you really need to understand and adapt to quickly, home games you go straight to the stadium on game day and, lastly, you need to be mentally prepared for the league. Some players adapt quickly, others need time and, more often than not, they aren't given that time.

***From Tottenham, you moved to Portsmouth. What do Portsmouth and the Pompey fans mean to you?***

After a short spell at Standard Liege, I had an offer from Portsmouth that I couldn't refuse because it was

the opportunity to go back to the Premier League and prove myself. Pompey welcomed me very well, a family club with amazing fans and we made a beautiful connection, which is still maintained nowadays because I'm a real fan of the club. At the time I was ready and prepared for the challenge so I gave my very best.

***You went through some tough times at Fratton Park, suffering three relegations, but you are still seen as a club legend. Why do you think the fans see you like that?***

I had some amazing and very difficult times at Portsmouth. In my first few months at the club we went into administration and were relegated, but at the same time we reached the FA Cup final that season against Chelsea.

My bond with the fans was natural, I think. I still remember my first game at Fratton Park when I received a red card for a professional foul and

I thought the fans would hate me for sure. Then when I returned against Burnley, I got another red for two yellow cards (which I didn't deserve!). Although we won the match, I thought I would be in trouble with them, but every single game they were there supporting me and the team because all they want is for you to give 100%, even when things don't go right.

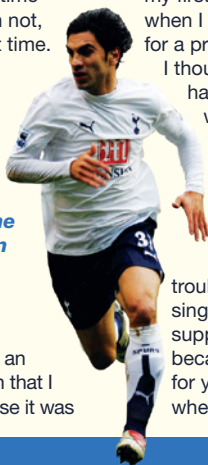
Then I was the Man of the Match in the FA Cup semi-final against my former club Spurs which we won. My family was settled, my kids were in school, and when the club went through another two administrations in the following seasons, I stayed to help. On and off the pitch, the club meant a lot to me and my family.

***During your career, you were capped for Portugal and played in top stadiums across Europe in the Champions League, but just how special was the atmosphere at Fratton Park?***

Fratton Park is a great stadium with an amazing atmosphere that others like Jose Mourinho and Thierry Henry have spoken about. It's all about the joy and passion of the fans for the game, their amazing support whatever the result. It's difficult to explain with words, easier to just feel it on game day.

***Do you still follow Pompey's results nowadays? Do you think they can win promotion to the Championship this season?***

I'm always interested in the team's performances and results. They have been stable for a few years now with the new owners rebuilding the club. They've been close to promotion in the last few seasons, being knocked out in the play-offs, but there's still







a great chance for them to go up this season. It's going to be difficult, but the change of manager looks to have been positive. It's a very competitive league, but they have the quality and it would be very good for the club.

***You earned a reputation as a tough competitor during your time in English football, was it deserved? And, lastly, who were the best players you played with and against during your career?***

I had that reputation, but to be honest I don't think I deserved it! Most reds were for double yellows or professional fouls. I had the pleasure to play with and against some top, top players. Playing alongside I would say, Figo, Rui Costa, Berbatov, Robbie Keane, Simao Sabrosa, Nuno Gomes and Ledley King. Playing against I would say, Cristiano, Rooney, Ibrahimovic, van Nistelrooy, Ronaldinho, Vieri and Torres.



# EVERYBODY SHIRTS



*James Vaughan was the Premier League's youngest ever goalscorer netting on his Everton debut aged just 16 in 2005, and he still holds that record 16 years later. Now back in Liverpool and at the other end of the scale, 32-year-old Vaughan is once again making the difference, bagging the bulk of Tranmere's League Two goals, as Rovers seek an instant return to the third tier.*

League Two is as competitive as ever this season, with six points currently separating first and fifth, the key to finding your way out of that? "It's about getting a bit of momentum and a bit of consistency" says Vaughan, "It's what you expect; in this league, anyone can beat anyone."

Out of action since the end of February with a knee injury requiring surgery, Vaughan could be back in time for the play-offs, but hopes that won't be necessary. "It's not too bad, it's slow as always, I don't know [if I'll be back for the end of the season] hopefully our season finishes pretty early with us being promoted, but we'll see."

Returning to Liverpool last year after a decade away, Tranmere's number nine is delighted to be back, "Liverpool is home for me and it has been for a long time now, I've got a young family now so it's been great being able to spend a lot of time back."

Vaughan has appeared for 13 different sides in a long and storied career, but there's two that still take up a lot of room in his heart: "Everton and Palace are the two straight away that stand out for me, I look at their results all the time, and Birmingham where I grew up, they're the main ones really."





"I've got really fond memories at Palace, I was only there a year but that was one of my favourite times in football and I had a really good time there."

But do Palace make it into the four shirts that have made his career? Well, we were lucky enough to find out...

## CLUB FANTASY

### Arsenal Away, 1999-01

It would be Arsenal, the yellow one with SEGA on. I had it when I was a kid, I loved Ian Wright and then it moved on to Thierry Henry. I wasn't really an Arsenal fan but I loved those two strikers.

## INTERNATIONAL CLASS

### England Home, 2006

The one we played with in the Euros, the U21s, that was a good kit, I would have been about 18 in 2006/2007. That's the one I remember the most, and obviously I have a few of them hung up at home.



## COULDN'T TAKE IT OFF

### Everton Home, 2004/05

It would have to be the Everton kit, when I started off, it was all I ever really wanted to do was wear the Everton shirt and I managed to do that. My debut with Everton was a real career highlight, along with the FA Cup semi-final (win v Man Utd in 2008/09).

## WILDCARD

### Inter Milan Home 2007-08

I loved the Inter Milan one that Ronaldo had.

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# MAN IN THE DUGOUT

With English football experiencing a new dawn when it comes to international success and youth development, one area yet to see a big upward trend is coaching. With Allardyce, Hodgson and Bruce currently in situ, the Premier League recycles many of the same old names and it's not dissimilar in the Championship where Warnock and Pearson remain in the dugout. Drop a division, though, and there's some high-end talent developing, and, here, we profile two talented League One coaches potentially destined for the top.



## KARL ROBINSON

### BACKGROUND

Merseyside-born Robinson's first foray into coaching was with Liverpool's academy, before he became the youngest manager in the country, taking over MK Dons at just 29 years of age. A six-year spell followed including multiple play-off finishes and promotion to the Championship, and now, following a stint at Charlton, Robinson seems to have hit his stride once more with free-flowing Oxford United.

Heading into a play-off final loss to Wycombe last season, Oxford had garnered a reputation for playing arguably the best football in the EFL, and despite a hangover to begin this season, the Us have charged back up the League One table. There's still work to do though, and if Oxford can't get to the Championship this season, Robinson may be going there without them.

### THE FAN'S VIEW

The Yellow Army (@YellowArmyOUFC): "Karl Robinson is not only growing into one of the best managers in the game, but he really cares about the football club and the people in and around it.

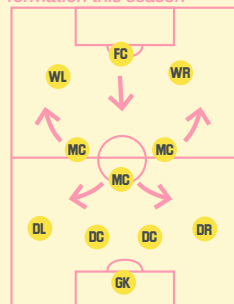
"He has a real passion that can irritate opposition supporters but makes him very popular among Oxford United fans. He has implemented an attacking style of play with a high press and it is good to watch. In our recent win over bitter rivals Swindon, we had to grind the result, so his Oxford side can mix it up when necessary.

"He promotes youth and has given a number of young players first team opportunities. Karl Robinson is a manager who will go a long way in the game, and we hope he can have a lot of success with Oxford United."

### THE PRO'S VIEW

Dean Bowditch (who played under Robinson at MK Dons): "Karl is an extremely good coach and man manager. I will always be grateful for what he did for me both on and off the pitch. He treats his players like people first and footballers second"

*Robinson's preferred formation this season*





## BACKGROUND

Another Liverpool-born coach, Lowe had a markedly better playing career, but it's his style and standing in the game that have set the 42-year-old apart from most other names in the EFL. Lowe's career has been all about doing things his way, taking his attacking style as a nomadic striker into his coaching, and so far, so good. Very good, in fact.

Instantly returning relegated Bury to League One, Lowe did the same with current side Plymouth, and had them well clear of the relegation zone, heading towards the play-offs before a recent stumble.

## THE FAN'S VIEW

Tom Sleeman: "I think the important thing with Lowe is his confidence and ambition within the game. "His experience during his playing career in the

Football League makes him perhaps one of the more well connected managers in the Football League even at just 42. He's keen to network and has also built friendships with Steven Gerrard and Jürgen Klopp. This has led to loans such as those of Adam Lewis and Zak Rudden.

"A lot of people will interpret his formation as a bland and defensive 5-3-2 when in actual fact it's a 3-1-4-2 instead. This alters what is perceived as defensive and is instead all-out attack.

"After a number of years with our academy not producing players that have been good enough for the first team, it has been positive to see Lowe blood both Luke Jephcott and Mike Cooper. Similar chances now look likely to be handed to Klaidi Lolos with Lowe maintaining a generally young and energetic side."

## THE PRO'S VIEW

Nicky Adams (who won promotion under Lowe at Bury in 2018/19): "I think Lowey's really good tactically, but also excellent with the lads. I do actually see similarities between Chris Wilder, and his number two at Sheffield United Alan Knill, and Ryan and his assistant Steven Schumacher - even though they're a lot younger. Chris made it to the top level and hopefully (Lowe) can get there too."

*Lowe's preferred formation this season*







*The Premier League is home to some of the world's most famous clubs and stadiums; grounds such as Old Trafford, Anfield and Stamford Bridge attracting fans from around the globe.*

*Take a step down the football ladder, though, and you'll discover a host of excellent stadiums in the Football League. They may not have the prestige or size of their top flight counterparts, but each has something to offer whether it be their architecture or the fantastic atmosphere they generate.*

*Here's Edward Walker aka [@thematchdayman](#) to give us the lowdown on another EFL ground that's seriously worth a visit.*

**DEEPPDALE**

*Preston North End*





One of the most nicely balanced stadiums out there. If you like football grounds where all the stands offer great views and are of the exact same height, Deepdale will be one of your favourites.

Preston North End have called this stadium home since 1878, and the history of the club is reflected in the names of not just the stands, but the road it can be found on. Sir Tom Finney, considered by many to be Preston's greatest ever player, has the road outside the stadium named after him, the stadium's West Stand named after him, and has a statue of his iconic 'Splash' image outside of the northwest corner.

Fans of Italian football may recognise Deepdale's modern design as it was greatly inspired by the Stadio Luigi Ferraris, home to both Genoa and Sampdoria. It consists of four large stands with open corners and floodlights housed on the vertex between one stand and the next.

What it creates is a very simple but very practical design, with four large single-tiered stands that offer a perfectly clear view of the pitch from every seat inside. Away fans are housed in the Bill Shankly Kop on the northern side of the ground, and there's a row of executive boxes and an analogue clock above the Invincibles Pavilion on the

stadium's eastern side, which pays homage to the historic 1888-89 Preston side that won the First Division and FA Cup titles without losing a game.

At 23,404 capacity, it certainly isn't the largest stadium that you can find in the northwest of England, but for fantastic views and the ability to accommodate both large and small crowds, few can match the practical design of Deepdale.





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There have been plenty of highs and some lows for Burton Albion over the past seven seasons, but there has been one constant: Lucas Akins.

The 32-year-old has earned cult status at the Pirelli Stadium, scoring 68 goals in over 300 appearances for the Brewers, and, what's more, he's played in EVERY outfield position for Albion.

We caught up with the rangy forward/midfielder/defender to find out just how he has cheated the fabled curse of versatility...and when he plans to go in goal!

"Your career path can almost determine your outlook and after starting out at Huddersfield and then going to Scotland, where I didn't play as much as I would have liked (for Hamilton and Partick Thistle), I was sort of in limbo before joining Tranmere and would have done anything to get back into the game. I literally would have played any position and I've just carried that mindset on with me throughout my career," Akins told Playmaker in an exclusive interview.

"If someone had said then 'You can play in the Championship, but you'll have to play right back occasionally', I'd have snapped their hand off.

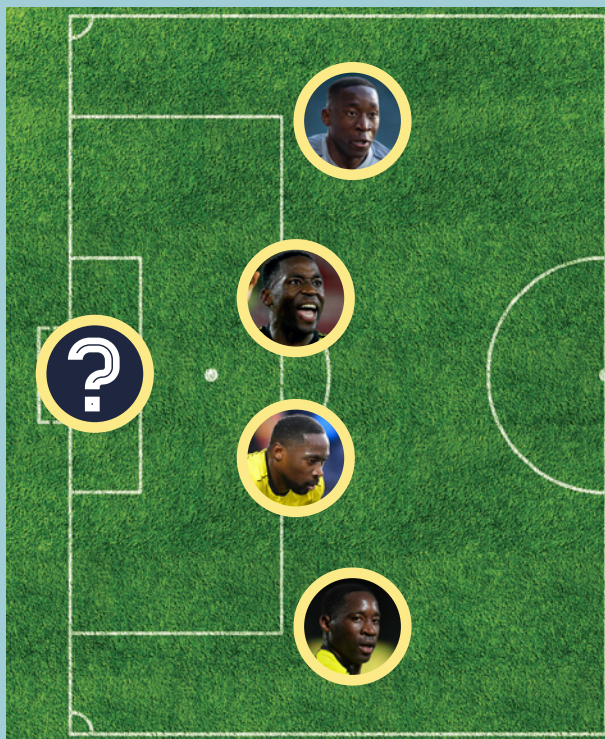
"It's never really fazed me being told I'm playing left-back even when it's just before a televised game on Sky. As you get older, you realise that anything you fear you've got to run towards and it's nice to prove to yourself that you can do something out of your comfort zone."

#### MR VERSATILE: A POSITION-BY-POSITION GUIDE

**GOALKEEPER** - Ok, I've never been in goal, not even in training. There was a player before me at Burton called Darren Stride who also played in every position, even in goal. I secretly want it to happen now - just to see how I'd get on!

**RIGHT-BACK** - I quite enjoy right-back, as you get wingers who switch off and don't like doing the defensive side of things - so you can find space against them. It depends who you're up against really, Peterborough's

# TEAM AKINS



Siriki Dembele was tricky recently and Kamil Grosicki for Hull was very, very good. I bomb forward as much as I can and do my best defensively. I've got really long legs, though, so keeping them shut is a big challenge.

**CENTRE-BACK** - I played there once against Wimbledon in a 3-0 win and I enjoyed it. I worked with Burton's physio Nick Fenton (who used to be a centre-half) before the game on the Friday and he said 'You'll be shocked how little running you do compared to normal'. It's more about the concentration side of things, keeping organised and knowing where people are around you. I was up against Joe Pigott who was a handful in the air,

Words by Stephen Gillett



but I held my own and I've never been more delighted to keep a clean sheet. I had Ben Turner - who obviously played in the Premier League - to talk me through the game. It might sound silly, but the timing of the leap is actually different when you have to win it as a defender, as opposed to competing for it as a centre forward.

**LEFT BACK** - We were playing Nottingham Forest in the Carabao Cup and when we were doing our shape before the game Scott Fraser was at left back and having nightmares about playing there (though he said he'd been watching videos of Roberto Carlos!), particularly as he'd have been up against Matty Cash who's a very strong, physical player. The

manager didn't let Scott off the hook, and let him believe that he was playing there until the team went up...but I was actually left back. Early on Cash knocked it past me and went to run, but I got my hand across him and after that it went alright. The only thing I struggle with at full back is taking throw ins on cold days, due to my bad circulation in my hands. They're usually frozen solid and I lose the feeling in them which makes it very difficult for me.

**RIGHT WING** - I try to link up play as much as I can - drift inside and switch play - but I also really like to cut in and get shots off with my left foot. I also quite like the fact that I'm up against full-backs who aren't as brutal as centre-backs, and I can be a target to hit from goal-kicks. In terms of the best left-backs I've played against, I remember a friendly for Tranmere against Liverpool on the wing and I was up against the Brazilian Fabio Aurelio; he had everything. I came off thinking 'so that's Premier League level'.

**CENTRE MIDFIELD** - I played centre-mid a couple of times for Burton under Nigel Clough and it went pretty well. I remember one of the games at Bradford away, which suited me as it was a big pitch and I was able to bomb forward. Tracking your players is different to when you are a defender: whether to go with runners or not. I played as part of a three, so I had a couple of midfielders around me to tuck in if I did get caught forward.

**LEFT WINGER** - I've actually been playing there a lot recently, as sometimes Jimmy (Floyd Hasselbaink) likes inverted wingers. It's horses for courses really as we've also got Jonny Smith who likes to come off the wing and get his shots off. As with on the right, I like to open play up: switch it or link up with my striker - and if I have to go down the line, I'm pretty comfortable crossing with my left foot.

**CENTRE FORWARD** - I would say anywhere in attack is my favoured position. I like playing in a front two, as I've had quite a lot of joy as a two and playing upfront by yourself can be a thankless task - I admire anyone who can do it and still score goals. Getting that selfless side as a forward is actually underrated; sometimes fans don't understand why forwards are taking up certain positions or holding onto the ball, for example - but they've often been told to; doing things for the team is a major attribute.







# hey jude

*Words by Connor Andrews*

**From the Championship to the Champions League: how Jude Bellingham became football's brightest teenager in just 18 months**

Borussia Dortmund's season hasn't been much fun. Title contenders last time out before their post-pandemic form dropped off a cliff, an exhausted Bayern Munich side opened up an unexpected title race this season, which BVB failed to join in on.

It cost them their manager, Lucien Favre, and there's a fair chance it could cost them a spot in the Champions League next season, having huge ramifications on the futures of their extraordinary crop of world-class young talent.

Of course that refers to the futures of Erling Haaland and Jadon Sancho, who sit right at the top of shopping lists for all of the world's biggest sides, however, there's one new name that's begun rivalling their importance, and may well be the reason they stay next season.

Jude Bellingham's ascent from the Championship to on the radar of everyone in Europe has been at a record pace, but the journey began long before most people in England had even heard of him.

"Links with the likes of Bayern Munich and Manchester United started even before Jude had made the first team. Every club in Europe knew about his potential and the main question was whether Birmingham City would be able to keep him long enough to get true value for bringing him through," says Brian Dick of Birmingham Live.

"Pep Clotet ended up giving him his senior bow - in a collectively poor League Cup loss to Portsmouth in August 2019. In one game it was obvious he would be able to cope. Within a month it was obvious he was going to do much better than cope, and at 16-years-old he made himself an indispensable part of the squad.

before running to the away fans and celebrating with them.

"The other came towards the end of the season when he bullied grown men at Barnsley, chased a lost cause to set-up the winner and just looked stronger, faster and better than anyone else on the field.

"The easiest comparison to make is that he was breaking Blues records set by the great Trevor Francis 50 years earlier. That's how good he is, a generational talent. They were very different players but what they shared is an unshakable belief that they belonged in men's football."

We hear so often that the difference between players who make it, and those who don't, is often hard work and dedication. Bellingham adds both of those elements to an incredible skillset, which has been clear for a while.

"Obviously everything stood out, but scouts from the clubs that were watching him are used to seeing technically good players. What will have impressed them about him was his physical maturity and if they ever spoke to anyone about his professionalism, his willingness to learn and take on board the right advice," says Brian.

"He is a very coachable player and you really needed to watch him week in week out to see another element attached to his game. He is yet to be given a footballing problem to which he can't find an answer."

On completing his move to Germany last July, there was little expectation Bellingham would spend a huge amount of time off of the bench at such a young age as there wasn't a precedent for it, as Tushar Bahl from BVB Buzz puts it: "I don't think it is fair to compare him with other young players in the Bundesliga. Because I don't think we have seen a 17-year-old playing regularly at such a high level in so long."

Bellingham didn't play his first 90 minutes until Halloween, but his class stood out from day one, "The initial idea was to introduce him into the first-team slowly. But he has shown maturity beyond his years and forced his way into becoming a regular starter," says Bahl.

"He plays with so much energy at both ends of the pitch. He always presses high up and is never afraid to go into duels. He also takes risks in possession, and always looks to go for dangerous vertical passes, even if they don't come off sometimes."

"Within a couple of months, he was being connected with Manchester United and Borussia Dortmund - with speculation he might even leave in January 2020. His performances wavered - as they do with any professional - but what never changed was his appetite for the battle or willingness to try different positions. By the end of the season he had played in every midfield position and even as a false No. 9. Nothing had fazed him."

Championship watchers started to take note, and so did every big club in Europe, and for Brian, there were a multitude of occasions where Bellingham convinced he was the real deal at just 16 years of age. "There were quite a few moments when I couldn't quite get my head around the fact he was just 16 yet living in one of the most physically demanding leagues in the world," he explained.

"I guess the big breakthrough was the goal away at Charlton in his first few weeks when he timed his run perfectly into the box and finished so coolly

## what will have impressed them about him was his physical maturity

Bellingham's become a regular since the turn of the year and the arrival of head coach Edin Terzic on an interim basis, with his display in a 4-2 loss to Gladbach back in January his stand-out performance despite it coming at the lowest point of the season for his side.

After he appeared to give away a penalty in the opening minutes, Bellingham was saved by VAR and superbly reset himself, setting up Jadon Sancho for an assist to Erling Haaland, before later running the entire length of the pitch and overtaking every member of his defence to get his foot on a certain Alassane Pléa goal.

But it hasn't been all plain sailing as Bahl confirms, with Bellingham's mentality being key to the huge reputation he now has in Germany, "The way he recovered from the Lazio game, which was his first Champions League game and he was taken off at half time after a nervous showing, it showed his character and temperament. He fought his way back into the team and now is a regular starter in all competitions. He looks so comfortable on the pitch, no matter who the opponent is," Bahl continues.

"The character that he has shown so far has been excellent. Take the clash against rivals Schalke for example. He came on in the derby and made a crunching sliding tackle on Schalke captain Saed Kolasinac just moments later. He is not afraid of going up against anyone, and has the belief that he can take them on. I think he is someone who will end up having a great connection with fans once they return to stadiums. He is also someone who I think has a real passion for the club, with the way he celebrates the goals and conducts himself both on and off the pitch."

"In the first few games, I think he struggled a lot with teams targeting him and tackling him. But now he is giving as good as he gets. He is

# he came on in the derby and made a crunching sliding tackle on Schalke captain Saed Kolasinac

turning into a combative midfielder who isn't afraid of lunging in or making a tackle. But at the same time, he is technically strong and has that balance which not a lot of players have."

English academy football is undoubtedly seeing a renaissance with one of the best crops of young players in the world, but there are indications that much like with Germany and Spain before, a focus on technique and skill results in a surplus of attacking midfielders.

Bellingham though, breaks the trend set by Jack Grealish, Phil Foden and Mason Mount, offering a level of all-round play that certainly shouldn't be overlooked by Gareth Southgate this summer.

"I don't think there has been enough talk in England about how good Bellingham has been and how big an achievement it is for a 17-year-old to be a starter for a Champions League team. I remember when he received his maiden England call-up, there was a bit of uproar from England fans and journalists, who said that it was undeserved," Bahl recalls.

"But if you look at his performances or watch him every week, he more than deserves to play at the top level. Maybe the reaction would have been different if he had joined Manchester United instead of Dortmund. But then he wouldn't have had as much playing time. For me, he is good enough to play at the Euros this summer."

England have a history of stuffing attacking midfield talent into the same line-up, but Bellingham offers the perfect antidote to the years of imbalance.

"I think he has the ceiling to become one of the best midfielders in the world," concludes Bahl, and with a top class coaching talent arriving at Dortmund in the shape of Marco Rose next season, Bellingham may reach that pantheon far sooner than anyone expected.





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# DIARY OF A SECRET AGENT

Words by Stephen Gillett

*Let me introduce myself. I'm writing this incognito, but every covert operative needs a codename (and it's important for football agents to be on first name terms). So, you can call me Bruce.*

I work for a football management company headed by one of the world's 'super-agents'. Our agency closes 100s of multimillion pound deals each year and we're always in the thick of the action every transfer window.

In the third installment of my regular column, I'll run you through what was a fairly uneventful January transfer window, address the abolition of the proposed EFL salary cap and revisit some of the biggest mistakes I've made and the sternest challenges I've faced as an agent.

## THE JANUARY WINDOW

It was a complicated window because of where teams are financially. A lot of loans and swap loans were done, one notable deal of mine taking an academy prospect from a top Premier League club to a table-topping European side to gain experience.

All in all, it was an uneventful window. What stands out most, for me, is that a lot of players still haven't been fixed up.

Your Daniel Sturridges might be expecting offers to fly in from everywhere, but they haven't come - and now players like Sturridges are going to have been

a year out of football. At what point does he turn round and say 'I've just got to find somewhere and get going again'?

Our advice to every player at the end of last season was if clubs offered contracts, they should accept them and we'd review in 12 months. Stay in the game. There were always likely to be shocks for players holding out for deals that didn't materialise and when players' first choices bite the dust, it becomes hard for them to mentally adjust and accept second best. They'll often say 'Well, I'm not going there' and then what do you do?

Here's an example from my own experience. A Premier League academy product, who's done well out on loan in the EFL, was offered a deal with a Championship club last summer: £12,000 a week and a £50,000 signing on fee. However, there was interest from elsewhere, and the player wanted to wait for a better offer...so we waited and waited, but it never came.

This January, I went back to the Championship club we snubbed last summer and managed to resurrect the deal...but the player had to settle for £4,000 a week in the end.

It was a tough one to take.

## IT WAS NEVER GOING TO WORK

The proposed salary cap in the lower leagues has been scrapped, which is positive news and

a significant development. I understood the idea behind it, but it was never a practical solution.

How can you allow Accrington, who have 3,000 fans on a Saturday afternoon, to offer players the same salaries as Sunderland and Portsmouth, who are getting 20,000? You can't expect players to get the same salaries in that situation.

I don't understand why there isn't a rule where clubs can spend x amount of their turnover on salaries. If clubs could only spend 60-70% of their turnover, they could push the boat out a little if they had a great year and - with players signing deals that stretch over several seasons - if they had a bad year, there would be leeway for clubs to play with the percentages and adjust.

## NEVER BATTLE A BILLIONAIRE

You've got to learn from your mistakes in this game, and probably the biggest I've made was telling a high profile player to tell his manager he wasn't going to play.

At the time, the player was at a Championship club who wouldn't sanction his transfer to the Premier League - the Prem club had offered the boy three times his wages and he felt that, after several unsuccessful cracks at promotion, he had paid his dues in the Championship and should be allowed to move on.

So, I told the player to say 'If you'll not let me go, I'm not going to play'.

After he issued the ultimatum, all hell broke loose. It turns out that if you try to bully multi-millionaires into selling players, there's only going to be one winner.

It quickly became clear that we had badly misjudged the situation, and the only thing we could do was pass the buck between us.

I pleaded ignorance and said the player had acted independently,



and I instructed the player to say the situation was new to him and he'd just been taking advice. Thankfully, it all blew over and the club offered my player a new five-year-deal and a hell of a rise.

He's now in the Premier League, so it worked out well - but that's definitely a situation I handled badly and have learned from.

### THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

In terms of players who I wished I'd signed, I always think back to Dwight Gayle - who I could have snapped up back when he was at Dagenham.

I organised a meeting with Dwight, before he had burst onto the scene, after Dagenham's manager

John Still had told me he was worth taking a chance on.

I met Dwight and pitched to him, but - honestly - I wasn't fussed if I got him or not. I didn't follow up on the meeting and the next I heard he'd signed for someone else. When I checked in with my contacts at Dagenham, they told me Dwight thought I wasn't interested.

He went on to score a shedload of goals for the likes of Newcastle and Palace, and he's definitely one that slipped through the net.

### COMPETING WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Nowadays one of the biggest challenges we face is other agents constantly ringing players up and putting ideas in their heads about how the grass is greener, and what they can offer.

There are agencies now who offer private fitness guys and private analysts, while our opinion is that clubs should be controlling and monitoring these areas, not us.

I could sit down with players and do analysis or put together private fitness plans...but my advice could be the exact opposite of what the players' managers actually want.

There's a story of a former academy player at a top Premier League club that illustrates my point. The teenager's agency got him private one-to-one fitness work because the lad demanded it, and he started bench pressing and doing a lot of dumb bell work that gave him a really bad back injury. He's since been released by the club and it all traces back to his agency meddling in business that's not theirs.

'Til next time,

*Bruce*  
xxx

**"It turns out that if you try to bully multi-millionaires into selling players, there's only going to be one winner."**



# NO SCORE DRAWS

Words by Stephen Gillett

Who's this rapid PSG forward running Barcelona ragged, son? A hat-trick at the Nou Camp is no mean feat, I tell you...Asprilla and Shevchenko are the only others to manage that since the Champions League began, you know?

*You're all about the history, Dad - never heard of Asprilla. That's Kylian Mbappé though...French, already a World Cup winner, absolute mustard, a genius.*

Mbappé, eh? He's amazing...haven't seen anyone as quick as that since a young Ryan Giggs was running down the wing.

But a genius? Those are a rarity, son. The true genius normally has fault lines, flaws galore. Kylian got any?

*Hmmm...he doesn't track back much? Throws his toys a bit when PSG are losing?*

Pah. Child's play. Fair to say, he's not a genius then. A superstar, a generational talent, a potential great. But not a genius.

I'm talking about sublime talents with a dark side. Perfection wrapped with imperfections. And, to be fair, the French have produced a few.

*Oh, yeah? Who?*

Heard of Cantona? King Eric? The pert-collared, barrel-chested centre-forward who inspired Man United to their first-ever Premier League title? Now, he could play. But he could also do kung fu. Kung fu kicked an opponent when playing in France, then round-housed a Crystal Palace fan when he was at United. Retired too young, grew a bushy beard and became a B movie actor. Legend of the game; Class A nutter.

*Sounds a character, Pops.*

Yeah, he was. But if we're talking French geniuses, Zinedine Zidane takes the petit pain. A strapping six-footer who could pirouette on a six-pence, one of the most elegant players to ever grace a football pitch. Was hypnotic to watch in full flow; an iron fist in a velvet glove. Won it all, scored three goals in two World Cup finals. But also headbutted an Italian in one. Snapped with the whole world watching.

Now, they were geniuses.





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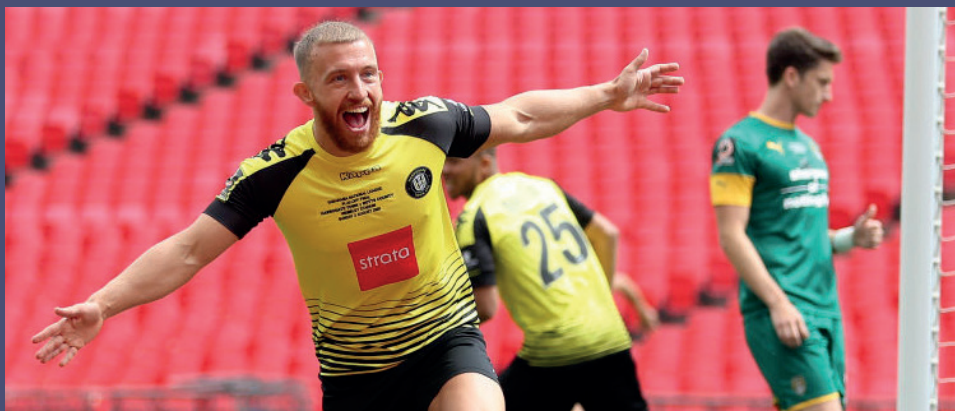
THE GAME! TIS GONNE!



# MIGHTY MINI INTERVIEW

WORDS: Stephen Gillett

## george thomson harrogate town



### **What was it like coming through at Nottingham Forest?**

I did two years there as a scholar. I didn't get offered a pro contract, but it was a positive experience.

Forest were always a club where if you were good enough, you would get an opportunity, but in my second year there was no reserve team and no U23s, so it was a big step to the first team.

Kieran Freeman was there with me; the year above had Karl Darlow and below me there was Patrick Bamford and Jamal Lascelles, so there were some good players coming through.

### **You then went to Spain to attend The Glenn Hoddle Academy; what was that like?**

I went over after my release by Forest. I had the chance to join Hyde United at the time, but I still wanted to learn and couldn't really turn it down.

To be fair, a good number of those who went are now playing professionally and the likes of Sam Clucas and Jordan Hugill were there. I was only 18 at the time and I absolutely loved it.

In Spain, they basically took over a club (Jerez Industrial) and we were playing proper competitive football, which was great for everybody at that age.

I'm not sure how it was perceived by the Spanish teams we played against; we were basically a big group of English lads and they used to get stuck into us. Overall, it was brilliant though.

### **You returned and went to university - how did you balance football and studying?**

I went to Loughborough and did a sports science degree. I played well over 100 games for King's Lynn part-time and would leave Uni and drive there for training on Tuesday and Thursday nights.

I also played for the Uni first team a few times, which was a good standard and a good learning process. I ended up getting a 2:1, which I was pleased with.

### **How big is the difference in standard between the National League and League Two?**

The level is definitely different between the National North and the National League.

We had just gone full-time in the Conference North when I signed for Harrogate, and I think that played a big part in our success, as we were on the training pitch all the time while a lot of others were only training Tuesday and Thursday nights. In the National League, we didn't have that advantage, as it's basically a professional league.

In League Two, the standard's not massively different. Teams are more streetwise, though. In the National League, games can often be high-scoring and if you go 2-0 down, you think



'We can still win this 3-2'.

whereas if you go a goal down in League Two, teams know how to protect a lead. That's the most noticeable thing I've seen: the first goal in this division is absolutely massive.

**Who was the best player you faced in the National League?**

I'm not the best at remembering opposition players, but obviously the likes of Danny Rowe when he was at Fylde stand out. Against him, the team talks used to be along the lines of 'Don't give him a yard anywhere on the pitch even if he's miles out' - but he was always a huge threat.

With most of the National League now full-time, I think there are loads of really talented players at that level. I also played against Macauley Bonne who has gone on to do well at Charlton and is now at Queens Park Rangers.

Obviously Jamie Vardy came up through the leagues to show it's possible, and there are a lot of players showing they can bridge the gap between the National League and the Championship, even the Premier League.

**You've made more key passes in League Two than any player this season (by a distance) - what's your secret?**

I do spend a lot of time practising free-kicks and dead-balls and - although it may sound a cliché - I think you have to have that motivation and repetition.

Harry Kane still has to practise penalties every day, in order to score them like he does; and Ronaldo's ability to hit 'knuckle-ball' free-kicks didn't develop by itself. You have to put in the work on the training ground and if you do, you'll hopefully get results.



In terms of technique, I've not had a free-kick coach or anything, but I do always remember when Glenn Hoddle came over to the Academy when I was younger - he was obviously retired then, but his ability to control a ball, flick it around cones and kill it when it was fizzed into him was really impressive and definitely inspired me.

**You've scored in a Wembley final (v Notts County in last season's National League play-off final); how does it feel?**

Unbelievable. It still feels like yesterday to be honest.

Sometimes I watch it back and I can still feel what it felt like. It'll never get old, that's for sure.

It was strange because Wembley was empty, and usually when I score I look for my Mum or my family in the crowd, so I didn't do what I normally would. I remember that first I celebrated into the wrong camera - not the TV one - and then I went over to the corner flag, as I didn't know what else to do, and basically waited for the lads to bundle me.

**You've been converted from tricky winger to midfield general midway through this season - talk us through the switch...**

I wouldn't say I was ever a tricky winger, to be honest! I got moved into the middle for our game against Salford and I've largely stayed there since.

It's different and been a good experience. I'm having to work on my heading - although I was often an out ball in the air on the right anyway - and am trying to do my bit, in terms of organising and communication. I was captain recently for our 1-0 win v Grimsby and it's been going well so far; the fact we won means we've got a 100% record with me as captain anyway!

**What were Harrogate's objectives pre-season - is it mission accomplished now that you're mathematically safe from relegation?**

I don't think anyone before the season would have said the objective was anything other than staying in the division.

Because of our success over the past few seasons, we're used to looking up rather than down the league table, and that's been our mindset throughout.

## THE DIRECTORY

*Delta Three smote the three-headed hydra of lockdown, home-schooling and a non-stop football season to emerge stronger than ever.*

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