

FIRST TOUCH



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Football Fact - C. Ronaldo

Innaugral Puskas Award winner

The Puskas award was created in 2009 to reward the best goal of the year. Cristiano Ronaldo was the first to win the coveted award in 2009. He won the award after he scored an impressively bewildering goal against FC Porto during the semifinals of the Champions League. Second on the list was Barcelona's Iniesta, followed by Wolfsburg's Grafite.

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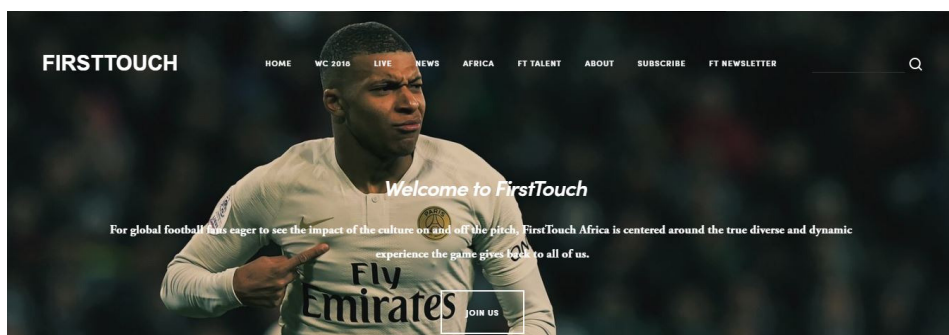
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ZIDANE'S RETURN TO MADRID, A HUGE FLEX



LIVERPOOL'S AFRICAN "IMPORTS" ARE OUT THERE MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE

Written by: Dennis Takendesa



The Merseyside club's silverware drought may soon come to an end as the Premier League and even the continental race to capture the UEFA Champions League trophy goes down the wire.

They have had to wait for 29 solid years to dream again, of the reality to be declared English champions. The last time they won it, their current captain, Jordan Henderson had just been born. As of now, only a finger nail distance separates them and Pep's Manchester City, every second, stride and sweat drop counts. This past weekend, Jurgen Klopp's men swept past a stern Chelsea side who are in hunt for a champions league qualifying spot by netting two with no response.

Like most times if not always, familiar names grabbed the headlines. The Senegalese marksman, Sadio Mané who is enjoying his best Liverpool season statistically, opened the scoring early in the second half. Mané was a privileged recipient of Jordan Henderson's carefully worked cross and was available to head the ball past Arizabalaga from close range, for his 18th EPL goal of the season. Just one behind leading scorer, Sergio Aguero and teammate Salah in the race for the Golden Boot. Mané has now scored 21 goals in 41 matches for Liverpool this season, including a super important UCL brace in Munich that ensured the Merseyside's progression into the quarter-finals.

The points were wrapped up, only a moment after Mané's goal. The Egyptian king, Mohamed Salah, who had earned a less desired nickname as a "one-season wonder" after going through eight Premier League matches without scoring, delivered a beauty. The 2017/18 PFA Player of the season sprang up from nowhere, wriggled and danced past Emerson before driving his effort into the top corner to score an EPL goal of the season conte-

nder. Nostalgic was the word. We were all taken back to the former season where he bagged 32 goals to break Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Suarez record of most goals scored in a single Premier League season. It's now two in the last two for the Egyptian. He is not doing bad either in the current, as he is joint top scorer with Aguero.

For the most part, it has only been these two Africans delivering the goods for Liverpool. However, the summer signing, Guinean Naby Keita is slowly coming to the party. After failing to net in his first 27 fixtures for the club, the dynamic midfielder now has two goals in his last three matches for Liverpool. So is the Cameroonian centre back, Joel Matip, who is looking an able long term partner for the heralded Virgil Van Dijk in the heart of the Reds' defence.

All the hard work and money spent comes down to this moment. Liverpool are two points clear off City who have played one game less and with a total of four top flight league matches to play. Their 2-0 advantage over Porto heading into the second leg clash of the champions league quarter-finals means they are very much in the running to possibly capture both the league and UCL titles. They have toiled and came close on numerous occasions but perhaps 2019 is their year.

One thing is for sure, their African talent remains a critical component of that charge and ambition.

As anticipated, the Liverpool and Chelsea EPL fixture grabbed the weekend headlines. So did Senegal, Egypt, Guinea and Cameroon who were well represented as the Reds marched on towards a possible Premier League title.

WHO WILL WIN THE MLS GOLDEN BOOT THIS SEASON?

Written by: Margaret Mandeya



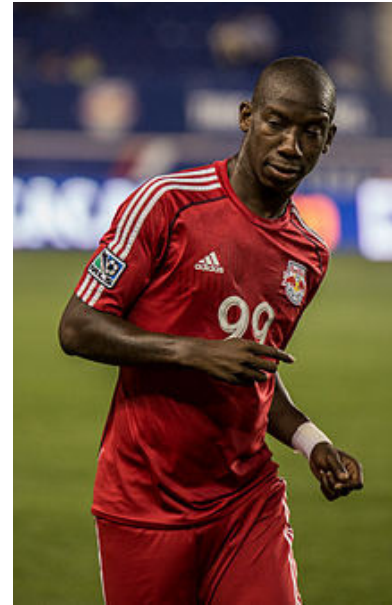
Name: Josef Martinez
Club: Atlanta United



Name: Zlatan Ibrahimovic
Club: LA Galaxy



Name: Wayne Rooney
Club: D.C. United



Name: Bradley Wright Phillips
Club: New York Red Bulls

There are few things that can be seen that are more magical than a beautifully volleyed goal. A quality goal stirs up as much emotion as one of Michelangelo's renaissance paintings. While quality goals represent all that is beautiful about the game of soccer, — the quantity of goals is as important as the quality. The MLS' golden boot award celebrates the somewhat obsession we have with scoring as many goals as possible. Here's a list of the top five favourites to finish the regular season with the most goals this season.

Number #1 - Josef Martinez

Atlanta United's, Josef Martinez is at the top of the world at the moment. Last year he managed to collect the League title with his team and was named MVP, capping it all off by taking home the golden boot. The 25-year-old closed off the season with 31 goals in 32 games, that was the best season ever recorded in the MLS for any striker. Josef Martinez's 2018 season was reminiscent of another South American giant's — Luis Suarez's outstanding 2013-2014 EPL season at Liverpool. Suarez scored 31 goals in 33 matches, won player of the year and the golden boot award ahead of teammate Daniel Sturridge.

Martinez is to Atlanta United what Suarez was to Liverpool. He's still going to be at the forefront of United's attack, scoring goals and setting the pace of the game. He has the best accuracy in the league, recording 56 on target shots out of 97. He is replicating the 85-90% average of last year's performance and could retain the golden boot.

Number #2 - Zlatan Ibrahimovic

After joining Messi and Ronaldo on the list of living players who have netted 500 goals for country and club last year, we know that Zlatan is a goal-scoring maestro. He is, after all, Zlatan. In his debut

MLS season, he proved to the world and his club that he can still be the engine of the team, with 23 goals in 27 games for the MLS giants, the LA Galaxy. However, he lost the golden boot to Atlanta United's, Josef Martinez. The 37-year-old has declared that his goal for this season is to beat Martinez's record-breaking 31 goals from last season, definitely something no one can put past him.

Maybe this will be the season that the Swede's age finally catches up with him or he'll maintain his solid performance throughout, and remain Galaxy's top scorer. His start to this season seems to be pointing more towards the latter of the two scenarios. After missing, a couple of matches back in March due to an Achilles heel injury, he came back to score three goals in three games. Zlatan's main task this season is to take LA Galaxy to the playoffs and claim that title.

Number #3 - Wayne Rooney

Wayne Rooney is absolutely and unequivocally a legend of the game. At 33, the veteran footballer's presence in MLS alone is an incredible development for the league. He has had one of the best careers in football, winning multiple titles at Manchester United. Many fans will be looking at what he can bring to D.C. United, hoping that he would replicate some of his best performances in the league across the pond. As a mid-season signing, he made a huge impact in D.C.'s successful campaign last season, making it to the playoffs. Rooney's 16 goals in 23 appearances was a good start to his career in the US.

Before Rooney left Manchester, it seemed as though the former captain had slowed down and was becoming more irrelevant with Jose Mourinho's preferring to leave him out of his starting XI. The subsequent move to Everton did not produce sparks either. Nonetheless, the move to the States seems like a more comfortable place for the striker. He's scoring goals and is playing

with hunger, working for titles that he hasn't been able to win in the last years of his career in England.

Number #4 - Bradley Wright Phillips

Another top runner for the golden boot this year is a two-time winner and New York Red Bulls forward — Bradley Wright Phillips. The 34-year old English forward closed last season with 20 goals and 8 assists. The playoffs period during the 2018 season was a slower part of the year for Phillips. Nonetheless, the rest of the year he was on point and on target, becoming the fastest player to score a century of goals back in July.

Phillips is the linchpin of the Red Bulls attack. The number 99 is good on the solo attack but he scores most of his goals from assists distinguishing him as the number 1 shot taker in the squad. The hype around the former Norwich player has lasted over 5 years since his MLS debut back in 2013, mainly due to his consistency as a centre forward which makes him a stand out choice to claim the golden boot this year.



Name: Jordan Morris
Club: Seattle Sounders FC

Number #5 - Jordan Morris

Last season we barely saw much of Jordan Morris due to an ACL injury that took him out for most of the season. The time has arrived for the 24-year old striker to prove himself. Jordan is a graceful player with an acute accuracy in the penalty box, and particularly brilliant with converting from really tight angles. Jordan's best season so far was the 2016 season where he netted 12 times in 33 games played.

Most likely to break the 20 goal threshold

The winner of the golden boot will most likely finish the season with an upward of 25 goals, given the competition with Josef Martinez who averaged 1.4 goals last season and Zlatan who wants to crush that record. However, there some players that are likely to surprise us and score between 15 - 20 goals this season and might even come close to finishing in the top five. Here are they are in no logical order:

1. Zlatan Ibrahimovic - Los Angeles Galaxy
2. Josef Martinez - Atlanta United
3. Carlos Vela - LAFC
4. Wayne Rooney - DC United
5. Krisztian Nemeth - Sporting KC
6. Jeremy Ebobisse - Portland Timbers
7. Kei Kamara - Colorado Rapids
8. Diego Rossi - LAFC
9. Nani - Orlando FC
10. Bradley Wright Phillips - New York Red Bulls



IS KARIM BENZEMA THE BEST STRIKER IN REAL MADRID'S CLUB HISTORY?



Written by: Tinotenda Magiya



Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, commonly referred to as Real Madrid is undeniably one of the most decorated clubs on the face of the earth. The Spanish giants have won everything there is to win, on countless occasions. With 33 La Liga titles, 13 UEFA Champions League trophies and 4 FIFA Club World Cup accolades to show for it, what else can a fan ask for. Their rich history is painted by some of the greatest names in the game of football that braced the white colors and terrorized teams in Europe, and beyond. Think of Alfredo Di Stéfano, Ferenc Puskás, Santillana, Hugo Sánchez, Raúl and the recently departed Cristiano Ronaldo who have all scored more than 200 goals for the club. In the midst of all this, there has been a growing debate about the case of French forward, Karim Benzema. Some make a claim for him being the greatest striker that the club has seen. Before disregarding this view. Let's explore his journey.

Joining Madrid as a youngster

As expected of the biggest clubs in the world, only the best players across the continent make it to the first team of the Los Blancos. Some have to wait until they hit their prime age which can be way into their late 20s. For instance, a world-cup winner in Zinedine Zidane, only captured the attention of Real Madrid at the age of 29 and moved to the Estadio Santiago Bernabeu in 2001. Such is the demand for quality at the club. Their blockbuster transfer policy targeting the best players in the world has since been referred to as Galactico signings. In the case of Karim, the forward joined Real Madrid from Lyon at the age of 21 in a deal believed to be in the region of \$50 million. He had only managed to score 43 goals in 112 appearances which amounted to 4 French Ligue 1 titles. Unlike Zidane, he had no FIFA World Cup winners' medal. This attests to Benzema's talent as a kid which caught the eye of Madrid and allowed him to become the third most expensive signing on their books in 2009 only after Ricardo Kaka and Cristiano Ronaldo. No doubt, Benzema was privileged to join Real Madrid at such a young age.

A Slow Start

Just like any player that joins the Real Madrid dressing room, Karim Benzema had huge shoes to fill. At the time, he faced competition from the club captain Raul Gonzalez, a striker regarded to be one of the best the Spanish National team has ever had. Also, there was a certain Gonzalo Higuain, the prodigy from the Real Madrid B team that was making waves and staking a claim for a seat at the big table. Really, Benzema had no right to ask for anything. In a total of 33 appearances, he scored just 9 goals compared to Gonzalo Higuain's 24 goals in 44 appearances. Despite the marginal goal return, the then Real Madrid coach, Jose Mourinho had seen enough from the youngster to force club legend, Raul to the exit door. Consequently, Raul left the club the following season and the striking responsibilities were left to the pair.

Evolution of Striking Role

Having followed football in the past two decades, one can witness the evolution of the game which has resulted in an increase in the demand of ball-playing abilities from all 11 players inclusive of the goalkeeper. In the present day, strikers are seen leading the press when out of possession and are pivotal in counter attacking

football where their hold-up play is questioned and they are tasked with feeding the ball to the wide channels. Jose Mourinho was way ahead of his time and quickly noticed that Benzema was not just capable of fitting this role, but also maintain a fair number of goal returns. As such, Benzema had an edge over Gonzalo Higuain even though the Argentinian was more ferocious in front goal. For about 3 more seasons, the pair were used interchangeably with Higuain undoubtedly more efficient in scoring goals but he could never get it around his head as to why he was not a clear starter in the Real Madrid team. As a result, he gave up and left for Napoli in 2013, leaving the reigns in Karim Benzema's hands. It is fair to say that Real Madrid have not lived to regret that decision considering the hefty \$44 million sum paid by the Italian club for a player struggling to keep Benzema off the team.



Complementing Cristiano Ronaldo

As established, Karim Benzema had outstanding playmaking abilities. His unselfishness on the pitch, often saw him drifting out wide creating space for Ronaldo to occupy the central positions where he created the most havoc from and scored unthinkable number of goals. In Ronaldo's best years of his career, he was playing with Karim Benzema, the striker that sacrificed a lot for the Portuguese international to achieve greatness and earn a mention among the talk of the best players of all time. Take a moment to reflect on Ronaldo's opener in the UEFA Champions League final against Juventus in 2017. How Benzema's movement drew Chiellini out of position before releasing the ball to Ronaldo who slid it through to Dani Carvajal on the right flank. From that moment, you could tell this was a goal scoring move as the Juventus defence was left confused as to whom will receive the final pass in the box. Benzema drew another defender in Barzagli. In the end, Ronaldo tapped home the goal from the edge of the edge of the eighteen area and sped off to the corner flag for his trademark goal celebration. We saw this on several occasions. The pair stroke up a devastating partnership which saw Ronaldo finishing off most of the moves and Benzema being hailed the master or genius behind the goals. Apart from that, one also ought to consider his defensive contribution in the new shape Madrid team especially in the absence of Gareth Bale. Cristiano Ronaldo was the only player free of defensive duties in the Real Madrid team which meant that his partner had to do most of the dirty work. Benzema covered the ground in tight matches like the El Clasicos where Barcelona had most of the possession and the Los Blancos had to do a lot of chasing. All this he did knowing that if he could manage to thread through just one ball in between the

lines to Ronaldo, he was the only player who could turn half a chance into a goal. Therefore, Benzema adapted his game to bring out the best in Ronaldo. This adaptation should never be underestimated considering Benzema was an out-and-out striker capable of scoring goals on his own. In addition, the best players must have the ability to adapt to a situation and perform at any club. The likes of Kaka failed to live up to expectations partly due to the fact that he could not adapt his game as he was used to being the main man in his previous club. That said, Benzema should be respected for being able to adapt his game to suit the team and survive in the club for as long a time as he has done. A decade to be specific.

Form after Ronaldo

Post the Cristiano Ronaldo era, Benzema is leading the line for Real Madrid with little competition for a starting berth. This season, he has managed to score a total of 31 goals across all competitions and is the second highest goal scorer in La Liga with 21 goals, only behind Lionel Messi. Karim's finishing abilities had been doubted over the past 9 seasons when Ronaldo was there as he was doing more of the creating but he is beginning to show his natural skill which is to sag nets. With 5 matches to go, the Real Madrid forward is on course to outscore all the traditional forwards in the league, i.e. the number 9s, precisely what is expected of strikers at Real Madrid.



The Accolades

The talk of the best in modern day football involves the individual contribution and the collective achievements won by the players. The debate about Messi and Ronaldo boils down to Ballon d'Ors and UEFA Champions League crowns. Although Benzema is yet to win the Ballon d'Or, he has done the most in winning everything winnable at club level. The table below shows Benzema's achievements in comparison with other Real Madrid players in his position.

NAME	UEFA CHAMPS	LA LIGA	FIFA CLUB WC	TOTAL ACCOLADES
BENZEMA	4	2	4	10
DI STEFANO	5	8	1	14
RAUL	3	6	2	11

To date, Benzema has a total of 10 major trophies just 4 shy of Di Stefano's achievements. This is promising for the striker who has just turned 31. He looks indispensable at the heart of the front line and with Zidane returning to the club, his fortunes look promising. Furthermore, the eras in which these players played for Madrid is different. Di Stefano and Raul were privileged to play in an era when Real Madrid was dominating domestically. The level of competition from the rivals was not as stiff as of the present day. That said, Benzema is at a disadvantage and has to inspire his team to change the narrative.



Individual Stats

The most interesting part for some. The numbers that reflect the individual's contribution to the game.

NAME	GOALS SCORED	NO. OF APPEARANCES
BENZEMA	222	462
DI STEFANO	323	741
RAUL	308	396

From this, it is evident that Benzema has the least compared to the rest. However, this does not take anything away from his individual contribution as he was playing with Ronaldo, and made sure that the player became the greatest goal scorer Real Madrid have ever had. Cristiano Ronaldo scored a record total of 450 goals in 438 appearances. Without Ronaldo, Benzema could have easily doubled his tally as long as he was given the respect his predecessors had when leading the team from the last third of the pitch.

Verdict

In conclusion, I think it is justifiable to consider that Karim Benzema is among the finest strikers that Real Madrid has seen. As established, his individual talent combined with his unselfishness on the pitch has had a ripple effect on the performances of other players like Ronaldo, and consequently, the team. Despite not playing in an era of dominance by the Spanish giants like his foes, he still managed to stake a claim among the

greatest Los Blancos strikers. I think Karim has a good shout for being the best.



EMERY DESERVES SOME ACCOLADES



Written by: Dennis Takendesa



Au revoir Arsene

That was the beginning, the conclusion of Arsenal's match-made in heaven relationship with Arsene Wenger ushered in the new. The French manager had been on the touchline of the North London club for 22 years and even made the not so informed feel that the club was named after the gaffer's first name. He had made and unleashed legends such as Thierry Henry, arguably the best play ever in the history of the Premier League who is still the leading scorer in the club's history at 228 in all competitions; assembled the infamous 2003/04 Gunners squad that became immortal after earning the cloak of invincibility by finishing the entire 38 matches season unbeaten. Even more, the record extended to a remarkable 49 Premier League matches without a loss. What else? His efforts in the training ground and astuteness, compounded with the class of grooming young players ensured the club fetched high on the transfer market. Eventually raising enough funds to aid the construction of that London structure they now call, Emirates Stadium. His closing CV with club reads 3 Premier League titles, 7 FA Cups (the highest ever) and 7 Community Shields. A remarkable record but yet he was more famously known across the world for adorably and controversially staying at the club for a long time as well as being the personification of gentleman character. Remarks and send-off gifts received from some of football's greatest players and managers as he left the Arsenal role said it all. We actually don't have enough time and space on this piece to lay it all down but perhaps his own reaction to the praises summarises everything:

"I had a feeling a little bit to assist (life) at my own funeral. People speaking about you, how you were. That's interesting, so I don't need to die anymore. I know what is coming. Apart from the sense of humor I would like to thank everybody for being so nice to me. It has been difficult but as well as fantastic"

- Arsene Wenger

The bottom line is that the 69 year-old left some pretty big shoes to fill for any kind of manager on the face of earth. It was obviously a rocket science project to find his successor who would build on his successes but more importantly address the challenges of the club that had become less competitive. Two Europa League appearances in Arsene's final two years was one agreed upon standard that the club was on a downward spiral, especially after qualifying in nineteen successive UEFA Champions League seasons between 1998 and 2016/17, a record only surpassed by Real Madrid in Europe. Names of possible replacements were thrown in the hat and let us remind ourselves who they all were.

Many were called but one was chosen

We won't go through them all, but here is a refresher course of Arsenal's process of appointing their new manager who would now be the head coach and take the club to the next chapter. The earliest reports suggested names like Ralf Rangnick, the current manager Bundesliga's RB Leipzig who supposedly influenced Liverpool's Jürgen Klopp and PSG's Thomas Tuchel's high pressing football philosophy. Then there was the real shortlist of Juventus' Massimiliano Allegri, Luis Enrique who won the treble with Barcelona in the 2014/15 season and former Bayern Munich and Real Madrid manager, Carlo Ancelotti. Many commentators asserted that to be an ambitious list by former Chief Executive, Ivan Gazidis and his budget conscious Arsenal. True to form, they couldn't get these for one reason or another. For instance, Luis Enrique reportedly required a yearly salary of £15m, which would have made him the second highest paid Premier League manager behind, Pep Guardiola. A more realistic list comprised of former Arsenal captains, Mikel Arteta, Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira who are all pretty much at the infancy stage of their managerial careers. Even names like Jurgen Klopp's assistant in



Zeljko Buvac came into the conversation which left the more ambitious Arsenal fans disgruntled and cheated. Did I also mention Maurizio Sarri, the current Chelsea boss who had gone toe to toe with Juve in the race for the 2017/18 Italian Serie A title, doing more than just threaten to break their Scudetto winning streak since the 2011/12 season. In summary, it was a long list and process that lasted close to two months of phone calls, interviews and board meetings. They were looking for a value driven gaffer who would accept a dialled down salary from Arsenal Wenger's, with keen interest of developing the current players, comfortable with a £50m starting transfer budget and most importantly maintain or improve Arsenal's attacking style of play that became synonymous with the former manager. Quite a big ask for a club desperately seeking and going through change. Even more, the task of replacing a manager that had been at the helm of a club for over two decades has never been easier. The example of bitter rivals Manchester United who parted ways with the legendary Sir Alex Fergusson is available for all to see. All the attempted successors in David Moyes, Louis Van Gaal and the special one, Jose Mourinho – spending over £500m in transfers were fiascos. Arsenal needed to get it right even with a tighter budget.

Now, when it all looked set that there were about to announce Mikel Arteta as their new Head Coach, the 37 year-old who was Pep Guardiola's understudy and yet to lead any form of club in his short managerial career – the unexpected happened, much to the delight of Arsenal fans. The former PSG, Sevilla and Valencia coach popularly known for winning three consecutive Europa League titles with Sevilla, Unai Emery, was announced as the new Arsenal Head Coach. Looking at his pedigree of successfully doing a lot with few resources such as was the case in helping Valencia stay afloat in the La Liga during a period when the club couldn't even foot their wage bill and obviously his silverware record with both Sevilla and PSG – Emery looked a great appointment. In fact, he had won 4 titles with PSG in just two years. The 47-year-old coach's resume and display of character by picking the Arsenal job which many acclaimed gaffers had sidelined, spoke volumes. However, the task at hand was not at all sunshine and rainbows. To start with, the Spaniard had to start on his English before anything else.

"Good afternoon" world

Arsene Wenger had become popular with reporters for usually saying, "look here," when responding to their journalistic requests. On the day of Emery's first press conference as the Gunners boss, after being formally introduced by the then Chief Executive, Ivan Gazidis, he uttered the precious words, "Good afternoon," in a strong Spanish accent. Quite a bold statement of intent and purpose by the gaffer who barely knew the language as amazed

onlookers by completing the entire press conference in the new language, though stammering his way through. The message was clear on plain tables, he was ready and not really short of the gentleman that Arsene Wenger is. Even until now, Emery is known for firstly passing on the greeting before responding to questions, "Good morning", "Good afternoon" or "Good evening" depending on the time of the day. He vowed to speak to each and every single Arsenal player individually as part of his settling plan, even waiting on those who had been on international duty at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.

Memories from his first training sessions with the Arsenal squad had the words intensity and demanding written all over them. He was reported to have banned fruit juice and even relaxed some of Arsene Wenger's norms by allowing players to use mobile phones. He held double training sessions, made some big calls by allowing loyal servants of the club such as Jack Wilshere to leave for West Ham even as he worked on his English. It really was all good vibes as far as the training pitch was concerned but their rivals were never going to make it easy for Emery and his new look Gunners to attain their targets. Emery and Arsenal's goals for the 2018/19 season were widely communicated, "make the club competitive once again" clearly by avoiding some of Arsene's humiliating losses and more importantly bring back champions league football to the club by finishing in the top four of the English top flight league.



Minnows amongst the top Six

Manchester City, Tottenham, Liverpool, Chelsea, Manchester United and Arsenal are the ugly sisters of English football as of now. They are the so-called big six amongst the 20 Premier League teams that compete in the top flight who go at each for the title and only 4 UEFA Champions League qualification spots every season. At the onset of Emery's Arsenal career, they were highly considered to be underdogs amongst the six, given they had finished 6th in the 2017/18 season and also the state of affairs at the club. Champions, Manchester City were in no doubt favourites to return the Premier League title with their obsessive manager Pep Guardiola and expensively assembled squad. Liverpool were tipped to be Rocky Balboa to City's cause, who would be Ivan Drago considering their impressive recording breaking 2017/18 campaign where they bagged a 100 points. That was Liverpool coach, Jurgen Klopp's analogy with regard to his club's title chances. The Merseyside club was of course boosted by the acquisitions of £66.8 million goalkeeper in Alisson Becker from Roma, Virgil Van Dijk for £75 million (record fee for a defender) and the highly rated Naby Keita for £52.75 million from RB Leipzig. In fact, Naby Keita's transfer fee was almost the equivalent of Arsenal's entire transfer budget. Ultimately, with these two, it was a no contest for Arsenal.



Arsene Wenger manager of Arsenal (R) and Ivan Gazidis, CEO of Arsenal (L)

Bitter North London rivals, Tottenham, did not make any summer signings as they budgeted on completing their £1 billion stadium but still looked a stronger side than the Gunners. Pochettino's squad was fairly balanced from the defensive point safeguarded by the likes of Toby Alderweireld (a Manchester United target) and Jan Vertonghen as well as in the middle going up top with the likes of Christian Eriksen, Delle Alli and Harry Kane. Furthermore, the successes of Poch in bringing back champions league football back to Spurs was all the confidence Tottenham Hotspur needed whereas Arsenal has to adjust to a new manager for the first time in 22 years, with a defenceless squad that had become famous for shipping in goals such as was the case in their 10-2 aggregate loss to Bayern Munich in the champions league. Obviously Chelsea were dealing with a new managerial appointment of their own in Sarri but were tipped to adjust quicker given the nature of the club's serial appointments. They were also boosted with acquisitions of a £57 million midfielder in Jorginho and the most expensive goalkeeper in world football, £71.6 million Kepa Arrizabalaga – virtually making them favorites to secure a top four spot ahead of Arsenal. Finally, it was clear that all was unwell in the Manchester United squad with Jose Mourinho's mourning for a centre-back even after getting Fred for £52 million and wing back Diogo Dalot for £19.3 million. In truth, no one expected United to finish outside the top four especially after rivalling City for the title in the previous season with a similar squad and the same special Mourinho.

In summary, Emery and the Gunners were simply minnows in that top four race, few gave them a chance but the continuation of the story outlines a different proposition.

Changes and even more changes

As if their managerial change and ill-preparedness to compete with the rest of the top six as far as transfers are concerned, Unai Emery and Arsenal still had to deal with a few more roadblocks in their pursuit of champions league football.

Over 50% of the backroom staff including medical doctors followed Wenger out of the Arsenal door and more surprisingly, the Chief Executive who led the hiring of Emery. Ivan Gazidis who had been in charge of Arsenal for most of Wenger's reign, left his own party for AC Milan and so did the adored billionaire Russian, Alisher Usmanov. Many Arsenal faithfuls had hoped that Mr. Usmanov would eventually assume majority ownership of the

club from American Sports Entrepreneur, Stan Kroenke, whom they believe is less eager to spend on the club. Instead, the Russian surrendered his stake into the hands of the less adored Kroenke completing yet another set of roadblock in Arsenal and Unai Emery's highway to the desired change.

This was not the end of it. The celebrated scouting genius, Sven Mislintat, who had masterminded the recruitment of Lucas Torreira, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Matteo Guendouzi, left his role, just less than two years into the Arsenal job. All this just gives even more context as to the seemingly impossible task on Emery's plate to smooth sail the ship of change. How did he do though? Let's find out.



The unbeaten run & players' modern day Zorro

An impressive pre-season, decorated by the outstanding performance of midfield prodigy, Matteo Guendouzi and the tantalizing prospect of the combination of Lacazette, Mkhitaryan, Aubameyang and Ozil (LMAO), preached hope. Two matches into the Premier League season, two losses to both Manchester City and Chelsea became a reality check. But what happened next couldn't have been in the script. Unai led his charges to a 22-match unbeaten run in all competitions. The 22-year-old Nigerian,

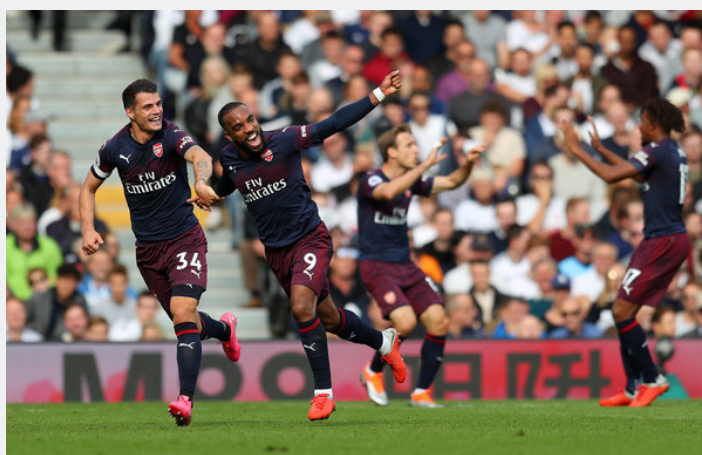
Alex Iwobi, international who had a mixed start to his career under Wenger suddenly earned the nickname, The Nigerian Messi. The new midfield acquisitions in Torreira and Guendouzi proved to be huge bargains as they strengthened the Arsenal spine which had been questioned since the departure of Alex Song. The two even started to bring the best out of the Swiss international, Granit Xhaka, whose fingerprints featured on most crime scenes that involved Arsenal conceding goals of their own accord. The 26-year-old has is slowly becoming a force to reckon with in the Arsenal setup though he still does have a few off days, here and there. Emery continued with his demanding attitude and even became a point of discussion in the January transfer window as he resorted to dropping the German artist and world cup winner, Mesut Ozil. The Arsenal head coach was undone, he appeared to have had a midas touch on all of the Gunners' current crop of players even the long-forgotten Carl Jenkinson who has been on the fringes got some minutes under his belt. Time won't permit me to mention the likes of Hector Bellerin and Rob Holding who had lost their heads during Wenger's last few years, perhaps as a result of self-esteem issues but bounced back to become regulars in Emery's team. Lacazette and the Gabonese international, Aubameyang are still soaring as perhaps the deadliest striking duo in the Premier League, even when they do not play together. The latter already has 18 goals to his name in his first full EPL season and very much on the toes of top scorers, Egypt's Salah and Sergio Aguero who are both on 19 goals.

He's like the Latin comic hero, Zorro, saving the day and redeeming North London again to yield to Arsenal's causes.

The possible fairy-tale ending on the horizon

Adding some few numbers to Emery's case for a great job so far, we learn that Arsenal is the third most prolific team in the Premier League with a total of 66 goals in 33 outings, just behind title chasers, Manchester and Liverpool who are head and shoulders above the rest. He is clearly succeeding in retaining the attractive style of play he was hired to. Arsenal already have 66 points with 5 more matches to play, that is 3 more points than their total tally for the whole of last season. There are on course to reach the Europa League semi-finals, if they preserve their 2-0 advantage heading into the second leg against Napoli – a route that also presents an opportunity to get champions league football if they go ahead to win it. They are currently 4th on the Premier League table and considering their run—in of games, still to play Leicester, Wolves, Burnley, Crystal Palace, and Brighton, they have a better chance at landing the 3rd spot as opposed to 3 other top six rivals who still have to face teams above them on the log. The only statistic that will matter is Arsenal's final position after match-day 38. Should that position be 3rd, taking into account all the circumstances that confounded Arsenal' season, the Spaniard definitely deserves some accolades. The Gunners could slowly creep back into title conversations in the next few years with the right backing of its board in the transfer market.

What are your thoughts?



WHY THE 2019 AFCON DRAW SEEMS OFF THIS YEAR



Written by: Dennis Takendesa



The wait is over, the 24 finalists of this year's Total Africa Cup of Nations were grouped last night in Egypt at a special event, held in the beautiful open space with a scenic view of the Sphinx and the historic pyramid of Giza. Battle lines were drawn long ago at the dawning of the qualifiers and now the chasing pack have learnt of their next opponents. However, there is something less interesting about the outcome of the draw, at least in my eyes.

Referencing the UEFA Champions League competition for example, there are rules that are factored in deciding fixtures and opponents, which include the club's country of origin, final position in the group stages and popularly the seeding or in other words the ranking of the club. For example, in a typical UCL round of 16 draw, no two teams that faced each other in the preceding group stages can be drawn together, neither can two clubs from the same country and teams that finished first can only play those that were second as reward for getting pole position. Now, it all seems different for the first AFCON finals tournament to host 24 nations.

In seeding the finalists, the most recent FIFA World rankings were employed. A case can be made to use such a ranking but it may be less specific to the African continent thus have seemingly failed to incorporate the performance of the teams in the qualifiers or any other factors that make the competition more diverse. For instance, group A which comprises of hosts Egypt, DR Congo, Uganda and Zimbabwe had three of the four nations that topped their respective groups. Ideally and more sensibly, the groups should have an equal balance of those who finished first and second – at least as a reward for the exploits of those who topped their groups. Even worse, DR Congo and Zimbabwe faced each other in the qualifiers group stage and have do battle all over again whereas the competition and experience would have been more diverse and rich if the opponents were shuffled well with 22 other finalists. DR Congo who finished second behind Zimbabwe in their group even got a higher seeding than table topping

Zimbabwe. One would be justified, should their question the importance of the qualifiers themselves. The same applies with the resultant group D that features one team that finished first in the qualifier groups, that is Morocco and then Namibia, Ivory Coast and South Africa who were all second. I obviously have more reservations about the resulting groups and the procedure of the draw of which time may not permit me to explore. Furthermore, the UEFA draw procedures are by no means a perfect standard but have indeed travelled some distance in promoting fairness and overall competition of the game.

After all is said and done, all this will not make the competition less interesting but might take a little bit of fun out of it. Rest assured, all the 24 nations will arrive in Egypt with a simple goal of conquering the continent and as we have seen in times past, they are no really underdogs in Africa.

The first and the second place finishers in the group stages are guaranteed round of 16 knock-out spots as well as four other best third-placed teams.

Here are the complete groups of the 2019 AFCON to run from the 21st of June – 19th of July in Egypt.

Group A: Egypt, DR Congo, Uganda, Zimbabwe

Group B: Nigeria, Guinea, Madagascar, Burundi

Group C: Senegal, Algeria, Kenya, Tanzania

Group D: Morocco, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Namibia

Group E: Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania, Angola

Group F: Cameroon, Ghana, Benin, Guinea-Bissau

WHY ZINEDINE ZIDANE'S RETURN TO REAL MADRID IS A FLEX

Written by: Siphosethu Thwala



As action around European football comes to a close, for some it has been wonderful, then again for others, it has been one to forget. Such is the case for Real Madrid. This season might easily go down as one of the club's worst seasons after a disastrous campaign. From being crowned European champions for a third successive time, who could have thought that Real Madrid would have a shockingly disappointing season?

About his departure

When Zinedine Zidane announced his shocking departure from Real Madrid at the backdrop of winning his third consecutive UEFA Champions league trophy with the club, one would assume that it was the beginning of the "end" for the club. Zidane left Madrid having delivered success that was unprecedented in the modern era. The days of clubs' ability to retain the European Cup were long gone. Nobody had done it in the Champions League era. He did. And then he did it again, defying history and maths by winning more Champions League trophies than he had spent years in charge. But things began to unravel almost as soon as he was gone. However, the selling story regarding why Zidane left the club was due to the club's decision to sell Cristiano Ronaldo instead of Gareth Bale. Apart from Bale, it is also said that Zidane wanted to sign new players and sell others, including Isco, but the club's President did not agree with those terms. Hence he left.

Scene take two

After Zidane's departure, the club announced the appointment of then Spain coach Julen Lopetegui just before the start of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in what was a shell-shocking move. Lopetegui himself was criticized for not consulting the Spanish Federation about the deal. The European Super Cup was surrendered to neighbours Atletico Madrid in the first game of Julen Lopetegui's brief reign and it only got worse from there. Lopetegui was eventually sacked in October 2018. After Lopetegui's sacking, in came caretaker coach Santi Solari who tried stabilizing the ship and subsequently offered a long-term contract. Despite signing a contract until 2021 after an interim period, Solari lasted only 133 days as Real Madrid boss. He was finally dismissed after a horrific run of results, which included losing back-to-back EL Clasicos in the Copa del Rey and La Liga. The last nail on Santi Solari's "coffin" came when Madrid were humiliated in their own beloved Bernabeu by Ajax. The Dutch club turned back the clock let alone reversed the natural order of things with their 4-1 win to end Madrid's long reign as champions of Europe.

Twist of fate in the Zizou-Real romance

Upon his return, the 46-year old Frenchman has made it clear that while he is happy to be back, there will be plenty of changes as he sets about leading Los Blancos back to the summit of European football. Furthermore, it is more likely that Zizou will be given more decision-making power in as far as the signing of players is concerned. His love for the club he had graced both as a player and coach, he said, was too great for him to resist. "I could not say no," he said. "I am here because the president called me." Like the parent who returns from the shops to find that the kids have run amok, set fire to the kitchen and soiled the carpet, he's not angry, he's just disappointed. Perhaps such has been the worry around Zidane's return to the club, the fact that it is merely a shadow of



the side he left nine months ago. Nonetheless, one would argue that the return of Zidane couldn't have happened at a better time than it did. Having returned with

just under 15 matches to play, this might well be the right time for him to analyse the team in terms of its depth and areas where the team needs strengthening. It is an open secret that Real Madrid will be very busy in the upcoming transfer window with the aim of doing away with an ageing team and bringing fresh blood that will help the team compete once again.

The beginning of a new beginning

Since Zinedine Zidane arrived at Real Madrid for a second era, he has made it clear in every press conference that he foresees an era of change. In the mind of the coach, he is drawing up a new-look Real Madrid, with new players, with some major departures and with a team that will be very different to the one that won four Champions League titles in five years. With six regular starters being 30 or older, including the likes of Marcelo, Ramos and Modric, the writing is on the wall that the team needs to revamp in order to become competitive once more. The famous BBC trident of Ronaldo, Bale and Benzema is a thing of the past, as Ronaldo left for Juventus, and Bale himself on the brink of an exit. Bale himself has failed to live up to expectations when it mattered the most. Many believed he would grab his chance when Ronaldo left, but injuries and below-par performances have added fuel to the fire of the Welshman's almost certain exit during the summer. Add to that, the team's midfield is also in an evolution process and at this point, it is unclear whether Toni Kroos, Luka Modric, Casemiro and even Isco for that matter, will be the preferred starters come next season, especially after the disappointing year all the players have had. Another area that appears to be overlooked yet critical is the centre back position which I believe also needs beefing up. Sergio Ramos has been a loyal servant but he may no longer be the player the club wants to build its defence around in two years' time, hence the need for a new defender that can partner up with Varane. In that regard, the club has been able to land a defender in Eder Militao who has joined on a deal until 2025, for a fee of around £43m.

A speculative summer is on the cards

Nonetheless, there is still more work to be done by the club as far as signings are concerned, going into the summer transfer

market. Perhaps one silver lining in this Madrid team is the emergence of Vinicius Junior, who has already shown what he can offer this side in his debut season. Not only him, but also the resurgence of Karim Benzema has had everyone paying attention to his capabilities which often times than not have been overlooked. So far, Benzema has raked in more than 30 goals in all competitions for Madrid, showing how lethal he can be. Still, the reality of the need to sign new players remain pivotal to Real Madrid. Real Madrid manager Zinedine Zidane has planned out a mapping of how he plans on replacing Cristiano Ronaldo's goals next season. Many star player names have been thrown around linking them to the club. These include Eden Hazard, Sadio Mane and Paul Pogba. Hazard's creativity would be something that can greatly benefit Los Blancos coupled with his eye for goal. Secondly, with Gareth Bale's exit being a subject of speculation, Sadio Mane's name has also been thrown in as a viable replacement and unsurprisingly so, given the amazing season he's had with Liverpool. The Senegalese forward has a great burst of pace that would most certainly be beneficial to Real Madrid's trademark style of counter-attacking gameplay. To round off the list, Zidane has also been rumoured to be keen on signing fellow Frenchman Paul Pogba, in a move that may be far-fetched but still possible given Pogba's struggles at United. All these potential arrivals would not necessarily mean that Karim Benzema has



a reduced role though. It is likely that the Frenchman will continue to be in the coach's plans and he has shown that he can grab the

spotlight if he is made the leading figure in the team, moreover, given Zidane's continued trust in Benzema paid dividends in recent times.



Is it only a matter of time?

The 2019/20 season is a big one for Los Blancos and the return of Zidane might be the recipe needed by the club to reclaim their glory days. The team's resurgence nonetheless depends on a number of factors, mainly how things play out in the upcoming summer transfer window. If the club gets the players it wants, then they may be well on their way back to the top. It may, however, take some time for Zidane to get the best out of the new crop of players, something that may not see the team being strong competitors for honours in the next season. Deciding on the formation, whether to stick to Zidane's 4-3-3 style of play, or switching to an alternative formation to allow as many key players in the team as possible may contribute to the slow progress. However, once they get their combinations right, Real Madrid will easily regain their position as the one of the three best teams in the world. The road to recovery has already begun with Zidane's comeback, it is only a matter of time before we see the "Real" Real Madrid. What's your take on Madrid's prospects, can they bounce back next season? Is the return of Zidane the right tonic for them?





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