

‘When you see the tree with amazing oranges at the top and cannot get there. You say: Oh, I got the lower ones because I don’t like the ones at the top.’

Jose Mourinho on Manchester City’s reaction to Manchester United’s signing of Alexis Sanchez in 2018



SHACKLES FINALLY FALL OFF



SAMAMA RAHMAN

After a tentative couple of years that saw major disruptions in streams of revenue caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, shadows cast over the balance sheets of football clubs started to disperse this season. Stadiums were finally filled almost to capacity for the entirety of the season after two years when that was simply not possible.

Not just that, but the promise of more lucrative broadcasting deals, greater financial overall security and some creative bookkeeping, in the case of clubs like Barcelona, meant that clubs were ready to come out of a two-year slumber with the shackles well and truly off when the transfer window began ahead of the coming season.

In England, the coming season will be the first time that overseas TV revenues exceed the domestic market. In total, the two deals will bring in an estimated £10.5 billion over the next three years, meaning clubs from its Premier League have the greatest financial muscle, with its mid-table clubs in a position to challenge any side in the world that cannot promise Champions League football on the open market.

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Over the course of the full season, those figures could become even more astronomical and end up at a record-breaking number.

The most ever spent in a single Premier League season had come before the pandemic. In the 2017/18 season, Premier League teams strengthened to the tune of €2.16 billion. That same year, La Liga teams and Serie A teams had spent a billion euros each as well and Neymar had become history’s most expensive player.

That spree would continue, with the three leagues spending over one billion euros each until the 2019/20 season when things changed drastically for everyone.

Premier League clubs would continue to spend over €1.5 billion euros, but La Liga clubs have spent just 1.2 billion euros combined since. Serie A clubs also took a step back,

dropping from 1.55 billion spent in the 2020/21 season to a combined 2.25 billion since.

With the background in mind, it would perhaps be fair, to begin with, the champions of the richest league, Abu Dhabi-backed Manchester City -- who spent £100 million on Jack Grealish’s creativity ahead of last season despite the effects of the pandemic.

This time around they added immense firepower, capturing one of the planet’s most coveted youngsters in Erling Haaland for a relatively middling €60 million. Alongside him followed Julian Alvarez, a 22-year-old who took home two match balls after scoring six goals for River Plate against side Peruvian outfit Alianza Lima in the Copa Libertadores. Other notable incoming transfers included Kalvin Phillips from Leeds, a midfielder who has already found a place in the England squad. In total, City’s business set them back about €110 million.

Their closest rivals Liverpool also made significant moves, including the most expensive of the transfer window thus far when they captured striker Darwin Nunez for €100 million.

In London, teams were frantic. Arsenal recruited striker Gabriel Jesus, wingback Oleksandr Zinchenko and 22-year-old midfielder Fabio Vieira for a combined €120 million. Spurs got the experienced and Antonio Conte-approved Ivan Perisic on a free deal while adding two crown jewels from lesser clubs, snatching up Richarlison from Everton and Brighton’s midfield dynamo



Yves Bissouma.

Even still, it was Chelsea who made the statement signing in town, adding the imperious Kalidou Koulibaly -- long regarded as one of Europe’s most elite defenders. They also added Raheem Sterling to shore up the front line, with the total outlay on both players reaching close to €100 million.

Unlike other leagues, the Premier League’s list of marquee signings does not simply stop once you get lower down the ladder. Multiple teams lower down the ranks have spent close to €100 million euros and even freshly promoted sides like Nottingham Forest and Fulham splurged, the former spending £17.5 million to land Taiwo Awoniyi and the latter signing Joao Palhinha for €20 million.

The landscape was different 12 months ago in England when £1.14 billion was spent in total. While not a sum to sneer at, it was also the lowest outlay in a summer window since 2015. For clubs outside England, those struggles have not completely dissipated.

However, the historical elite, the old-money teams, still reign supreme when it comes to pulling power, even compared to their Premier League counterparts.

Barcelona had to contend with dire financial straits and have activated so many ‘economic levers’ that the club has been ridiculed as ‘FC Palancas’, which translates to ‘Levers FC’. Nevertheless, that move and a number of outgoing transfers freed up enough money for them to sign the prolific Robert Lewandowski and prodigious Raphinha alongside midfielder Franck Kessie and defender Andreas Christensen.

Real Madrid were relatively constrained in their moves, although they did spend a mouthwatering €80 million on midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni before signing defender Antonio Rudiger for free. Whether those signings pan out or not, for Real Madrid this summer was all about an infamous fake-out that got Kylian Mbappe the biggest contract in the sport’s history.

In the entirety of La Liga, only three other deals have been made for more than €10 million so far.

Among those European elites also feature Bayern Munich, who have had one of the more impressive transfer windows of the season, signing two top players in defender Matthijs de Ligt (€80 million) and forward Sadio Mane (€32 million) to bolster their hopes of lifting the Champions League trophy.

Italy was also gearing up for an interesting season as champions AC Milan remained mum, making no moves of note while their rivals strengthened. Inter Milan have added Joaquin Correa for €24 million while also loaning back Romelu Lukaku, a player they had sold to Chelsea for €100 million last season after he helped them to the Scudetto. Juventus have been the biggest spenders in Italy, spending 40 million on Gleison Bremer and another 40 million to confirm Federico Chiesa. Another big move from the Old Lady saw them sign Paul Pogba on a free from Manchester United.

Despite all that, the madcap summer transfer window is still far from over. Another month remains, more big deals loom and more of those millions will find their way into the pockets of clubs, players and agents as they aim to give their fans the best possible experience.

An uncharted territory for Ronaldo

NABID YEASIN

Cristiano Ronaldo is a name that is synonymous with goals, success, records and trophies. For a player that has had such magnitude of success during a footballing career spanning almost two decades largely due to sheer determination, it is difficult to find his ultimate goals out of focus.

But that drive has lately led to the five-time Ballon d’Or winner finding himself in the spotlight for wrong reasons, somewhat par for the course for a player whose career has had its fair share of controversies.

However, the situation is unique and obviously unpleasant for the superstar who, for the first time in his glittering career, finds himself unwanted.

After dropping the bombshell on Manchester United that he wanted to leave the club earlier this month, all that Ronaldo has encountered is a barrage of refusals. Reportedly the likes of Chelsea, Bayern Munich, Manchester City and, most recently, Atletico Madrid, turned down the chance to swoop for the Portuguese.

In the meantime, Ronaldo has kept himself out of footballing action, taking leave from the entirety of Manchester United’s of pre-season tours to Thailand and Australia over the last month citing family reasons. The star has also irked two of his most loyal fanbases amid this whirlwind of transfer rumours.

Ronaldo’s desire to exit the English club is fueled by the fact that Manchester United missed out on the Champions League -- a competition where he has dominated over the years and is the all-time top-scorer.

His rigid desperation for Champions League football, however, is tarnishing the legacy he has built over the years with fans of Real Madrid and Manchester United after his agent Jorge Mendes reached out to Manchester City and Atletico Madrid, even agreeing to a pay cut to do so.

Atletico fans have been the most vocal in rejecting Ronaldo, initiating a social media campaign in opposition of their club signing the former Real forward with ‘#ContraCR7’, meaning ‘against CR7’, on Twitter. Other clubs have publicly dispelled rumours about signing the star.

However, the saga seems to be far from over

A Champions League sans Ronaldo may seem unfathomable to his fans and the Portuguese forward himself as he has featured in every edition of the competition in the last 19 years -- lifting the trophy on five occasions, one less than the record held by Real Madrid legend Paco Gento.



as the 37-year-old, accompanied by Mendes, reportedly told Manchester United to loan him out during his first meeting with new manager Erik ten Hag last Tuesday.

But as things stand, despite all the hubbub, Ronaldo might see himself doing what he has clearly been trying to avoid: play in the Europa League for the first time in his career.

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But is the fight for the mere opportunity to feature in the competition worth staining a glorified reputation built on the back of sheer brilliance, hard work and tenacity over the years?

If Ronaldo’s record is anything to go by, goals are a certainty regardless of the club he represents. But for the first time in Ronaldo’s career, what is at stake could impact his career far more than just goals and stats.