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Introduction

by James Richardson

Welcome reader, to a brand new *Totally Football Book*.

Another year has passed – how was it for you?

Good, I'm guessing, if you're a fan of Champions League drama, crypto-backed fan initiatives, or dizzying RPMs on Watford's managerial merry-go-round.

Not so great perhaps, if you're a supporter of Derby, if you're Ralf Rangnick's PR guy, or run events management for major finals in Paris.

Here at Totally Towers, we enjoyed the season so much we went back and watched it again, and took extensive notes! *What did we discover?*

It was the season when football *almost* got back to normal, with the return of crowds*, and the end of social distancing – unless you were a Manchester United defender.

A season that brought resurrections for Ronaldo and the extraordinary Christian Eriksen, but also the year we lost Steve Bruce, Mike Dean and poor Rebekah Vardy's phone there in the North Sea, sinking like some cellular Norwich, or the value of John Terry's NFTs.

Has it all marked a new chapter for the game? Only time will tell, but in the meantime, here's a set of 'em from us, to cement your memories of this golden age.



When will football be normal again?

by Carl Anka

Football since 2019 has been . . . weird. Do these seasons that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic just not count? Or should we accept that it's always been weird?

'Last season doesn't count because they changed the rules.'

This book looks at where football stands in 2022, but the above sentiment has been bubbling under for several years now. Football used to be one thing, but in the last few years something has fundamentally shifted and it's become harder to properly evaluate.

Does Liverpool's Premier League win in 2019-20 count if it was finished behind closed doors? Can we really say Real Madrid were the best team in Europe in 2021-22, considering their bizarre run to Champions League glory? The comic book readers among you will know what I mean if I said the past three seasons have felt like 'non-canon' football experiments. The non-comic book readers will hopefully understand what I mean if I said the COVID-19 pandemic both disrupted and exacerbated a number of traditional football conventions, leaving the last few years of football a little weird. Strangeness invites suspicion, and

opposition football fans love doing anything that could take the shine off their rivals' achievements.

Put this all together and we've entered an era of Too Weird, Doesn't Count football.

The oddity starts with the 2019-20 season — the first Premier League season with VAR, which ended up being hated by nearly everyone and revealed we've all watched football with a very particular, very personal rulebook in our heads that rarely matched up with the person sat next to us watching the same game. The 2019-20 season also saw what constituted handball change and we spent an awful amount of time watching offside lines being drawn on a pitch looking for errant elbows, heels and other pointy parts of the body.

It had a 110-day pause due to the pandemic, and then the Premier League came back with five substitutions and games behind closed doors. Oh, and the Champions League and Europa League had (really fun, should be repeated) single-legged knockout games in Lisbon and Cologne respectively for their closing stages. For several weeks at the tail end of the English season, football below the Championship didn't really exist. Over in the Netherlands, Ajax probably would have won the Eredivisie, but in late April 2020 everyone decided to pack it all in on account of *gestures to lockdowns* . . . you know.

Too Weird. They changed the rules. Doesn't count.

The 2020-21 season saw the return of three substitutes in the Premier League while a number of other European leagues continued with five. The majority of Premier League games were played behind closed doors in a confusing series of events that first saw certain clubs play in front of limited crowds due to their geographical location; there was a real moment where clubs in the south of England had a soft home advantage playing in front of fans compared to those in the north.

Eventually, everyone realised the tier system introduced by the government didn't quite work and everyone had to play behind

closed doors, and it all too often felt like a slog. Playing behind closed doors probably led to a bunch of differences on how football teams played that we are still struggling to quantify to this day. The Premier League saw more teams win away from home, but no one is 100 per cent sure *why* that happened.

Nearly every Premier League game of 2020-21 was televised and we all slowly learnt that watching more than three games of football in a weekend can feel like gorging on too much cake.

The Champions League and Europa League had two-legged knockout games, but some of them had to be played in neutral locations due to travel restrictions and other rules that still make little sense now. It was a minor miracle we crammed all of 2020-21's fixtures into a timeframe several weeks shorter than a regular European league season, but we had to make space for Euro 2020. Which was held in 2021.

Oh, and the Euros may have been a lot of fun, but it had way too many host cities that probably gave a sporting advantage to nations that didn't have to travel much. Still, it was nice to watch England reach the final, even if they did lose on penalties.

Too Weird. Weirder than 19-20, which we thought would be the weirdest season in modern football. Doesn't count.

Now we come to the 2021-22 season, which had thicker lines for offsides on VAR decisions, and then the handball rule got tweaked again. Fans returned, in full voice and even fuller fervour. But there were also a bunch of games postponed due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Everyone was knackered after the Euros. There was a new European competition that was sort of fun in theory but didn't make for loads of fun in practice until the last eight stage. (Which feels different, but kind of tracks with how the modern-day Champions League works?)

Kind of weird. Some rule changes. Vibes were off. This might be the normal season? Might not count.

Apologies for writing every tweak that happened to football over the past few years, but sometimes one has to read it all in

August 26

Harry Kane confirmed he would be staying at Tottenham, after his attempts to force through a move to Manchester City proved unsuccessful. Kane had hoped to join the Premier League champions, but a series of offers were deemed insufficient by Spurs. 'I will be staying at Tottenham this summer and will be 100% focused on helping the team achieve success,' Kane said.

August 27

A blockbuster transfer from virtually nowhere: Manchester United agreed a deal to bring Cristiano Ronaldo back to the club from Juventus. Ronaldo had looked certain to move to Manchester City, who turned to him after failing to sign Harry Kane, but an intervention from Sir Alex Ferguson persuaded the hierarchy to move for the man who left them for Real Madrid in 2009.

August 28

Arsenal's start to the season moved into 'farce' territory after they were ripped apart by Manchester City, who shared around the goals in a 5-0 win after Granit Xhaka was sent off. Chelsea also had a man sent off, but they held out for a 1-1 draw against Liverpool at Anfield despite Reece James's dismissal for handball just before half-time.

August 29

Mason Greenwood scored the only goal in Manchester United's 1-0 win over Wolves, Son Heung-min sealed Tottenham's third 1-0 win in three games as they beat Watford, while Patrick Bamford scored a late equaliser for Leeds as they drew 1-1 with Burnley. In France, Lionel Messi made his debut for PSG, coming off the bench to play the final 24 minutes of their 2-0 win over Reims.

August 30

Another indignity befell Arsenal as Ainsley Maitland-Niles voiced his desire to leave the club on Instagram, posting: 'All I want to do is go where I'm wanted and where I'm going to play @Arsenal.' That seemed to be Everton, who were interested in taking him on loan for the season, but after a meeting with Mikel Arteta, Maitland-Niles ultimately stayed.

August 31

A relatively low-key transfer deadline day ended with Chelsea signing Saúl Ñíguez on loan from Atlético Madrid, Arsenal paying Bologna £15.5 million for Takehiro Tomiyasu, Salomón Rondón joining Rafa Benítez for a third time as he signed for Everton while Dan James moved to Leeds. Real Madrid didn't get Kylian Mbappé, but did sign promising 18-year-old midfielder Eduardo Camavinga.

September 1

Cristiano Ronaldo became the highest scorer in men's international football history with two late goals for Portugal against Ireland in a World Cup qualifier. Ireland looked set for a famous win with 89 minutes gone, but the Manchester United man popped up with two headers to seal the win, and take him to 111 international goals in 180 games, two ahead of previous record-holder Ali Daei.

September 2

England eventually recorded a comfortable 4-0 win in their World Cup qualifier against Hungary in Budapest, with goals from Raheem Sterling, Harry Kane, Harry Maguire and Declan Rice. But attention after the game was on the home fans, who racially abused Sterling and Jude Bellingham with monkey chants, prompting Gareth Southgate to demand more protection for his players.

interestingly* none of the remaining 30 players won exactly the same number of games as they lost. Once again our job here is to bin off outliers, so goodbye Adam Armstrong (W4 L11), Adam Webster (W10 L4) and a host of other players not called Adam. Things are getting real: like a badly planned international squad, we're down to 21 players.

Age

The ageing process harrows us all and footballers are no different. When we're handing out awards like 'Most Average Player of 2021-22' we have to avoid both youngsters and old timers. The former are just starting out and knowledge of how median their season was could be construed as . . . mean. Meanwhile the latter are old, and might take it badly and hunt me down. So no one born before the Premier League started in 1992 (farewell Marc Albrighton, Danny Welbeck, Christian Benteke, Stuart Armstrong, Big Phil Coutinho, Jonny Evans and Shane Duffy), and no one born in the era I have owned a mobile phone, so au revoir to Trincão, Valentino Livramento, Rayan Aït-Nouri and Mads Roerslev.

Advanced Metrics

That's right, even an award as primal as this one cannot escape the looming hand of the modern game, with its xG and its xA and all the other ones, specifically designed by fun-hating scientists to ruin the sport forever and/or help you work out what's going on. We are down to 10 players here and, I'll be honest, there's quite a lot of Leicester City players. Which passes the eye test, because they were pretty average in the 2021-22 Premier League, weren't they?

Other options remaining include Adama Traoré, but he is immediately disqualified because he left halfway through the season to JOIN FC BARCELONA, which is very much not the action of an

* is it? Not sure.

average man. 'How are we going to use your science stuff?' you ask. Well, we're going to look at expected goals and actual goals, and expected assists and actual assists and look at players who have very similar values in each. Because that's what the Average Man does, isn't it? He does exactly what you expect.

And when we do this a name surfaces. Perhaps not the name you were thinking of (alternatively: perhaps it was) but, on reflection, a name – and indeed a player – that is surely worthy of this most median of honours. Here are the raw facts:

- He played 28 times
- He scored one goal from an xG of 1.63
- He assisted twice from an xA of 2.57
- He won 11 games and lost nine
- He was born in September 1998, on the day before Belle & Sebastian released 'The Boy with the Arab Strap' as prophesied
- He had a duel success rate of 47% (yeah, pretty average)
- His name? Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall

And, let's be honest, his surname, which yes, does sound a bit like a stately home, gave rise to some of the most average tweets we saw in the entirety of 2021-22. So congratulations to Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall and remember: this doesn't mean you played badly and it doesn't obscure the fact that you played very well on occasion, but it does mean that in the midst of millions of data points collected during the 30th Premier League season, you were in the middle of many players who also played for mid-table sides. And do you know what? That's just fine.

Goalkeepers

- 1) What is the award given to the best goalkeeper in Spain every season?
- 2) As of 2022, who is the only goalkeeper to win the Ballon d'Or?
- 3) How did Manchester United goalkeeper Alex Stepney dislocate his jaw during a game in 1975?
- 4) What do Gianpiero Combi, Dino Zoff, Iker Casillas and Hugo Lloris have in common?
- 5) How much (in £) did Juventus pay Parma for Gigi Buffon in 2001?
- 6) From which team did Bayern Munich sign Manuel Neuer in 2011?
- 7) José Luis Chilavert, maverick goalscoring goalkeeper, played for which national team?
- 8) Which of these goalkeepers did not score a Premier League goal in their career: Peter Schmeichel, Tim Howard, Paul Robinson, Rob Green
- 9) Which goalie saved the crucial penalty against England at Euro 2004, after removing his keeping gloves?
- 10) Which two goalkeepers were involved when Louis van Gaal substituted one for the other for a penalty shootout at the 2014 World Cup?

Answers on page 309

Missing letters

- 1) S____ A____ scored the title-winning goal for M____ C____ in 2012
- 2) R____ M____ won the first E____ C____
- 3) J____ K____ has won league titles in E____ and G____
- 4) B____ C____ managed N____ F____ for 18 years
- 5) L____ M____ won the B____ d'____ in 2018
- 6) W____ H____ signed C____ T____ and J____ M____ in 2006
- 7) F____ T____ played 786 times for R____
- 8) O____ H____ managed B____ M____ and B____ D____
- 9) P____ J____ - ____ played 100 times for S____ K____
- 10) E____ t____ H____ was S____ M____'s assistant at FC T____

Answers on page 310

Missing letters

- 1) Sergio Agüero scored the title-winning goal for Manchester City in 2012
- 2) Real Madrid won the first European Cup
- 3) Jürgen Klopp has won league titles in England and Germany
- 4) Brian Clough managed Nottingham Forest for 18 years
- 5) Luka Modrić won the Ballon d'Or in 2018
- 6) West Ham signed Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano in 2006
- 7) Francesco Totti played 786 times for Roma
- 8) Ottmar Hitzfeld managed Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund
- 9) Park Ji-sung played 100 times for South Korea
- 10) Erik ten Hag was Steve McClaren's assistant at FC Twente

World Cup finals

- 1) Argentina
- 2) The winner that year was decided by a four-team group: it just happened that the last match was between the two teams that could win it
- 3) Mário Zagallo
- 4) Martin Peters
- 5) The Santiago Bernabéu, Madrid
- 6) Franco Baresi, Daniele Massaro, Roberto Baggio
- 7) Edmundo
- 8) Score after coming on as a substitute
- 9) Score a goal and an own goal
- 10) They were all decided in extra time