

BATSHUAYI'S RESURGENCE

AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT CONTE, CHELSEA, AND THE PREMIER LEAGUE.

■ By Axel Metz

As a Chelsea fan, when Michy Batshuayi arrived before the 2016/17 Premier League season, I was decidedly hopeful. That hope came from the knowledge that this 22-year-old had the second-highest combination of goals and assists in Ligue 1 the previous season, a tally surpassed only by Zlatan Ibrahimovic no less. Now, after almost two seasons, my faith in the self-proclaimed 'Batsman' has been renewed, and I'm not alone.

After a disappointing start to his tenure with The Blues, Batshuayi found some resemblance of form in a string of league cameos and established cup performances. Before departing on a loan-spell to Borussia Dortmund in January, the Belgian managed 19 goals in 52 matches of English football, netting 3 of those in his last 3 games. Since arriving in Germany, the now-24-year-old has scored 8 goals in 11 games for the Westfalen club, 4 of which have been winners, and also netted his second for Belgium. In the same period following his departure, his Chelsea teammates Alvaro Morata, Eden Hazard, Willian and Pedro have managed just 12 goals between the 4 of them.

Once digested, this plethora of statistics points to a number of possible conclusions.

The first is that Antonio Conte is not one for patience, or worse, he just didn't much like the

Belgian. In truth, Batshuayi clearly struggled to integrate himself into Conte's style of play, and vice versa. The Italian's 3-4-2-1 approach to most games focuses on working the ball wide and relies upon a central target-man with aerial ability, which, until only recently, has proved extremely successful.

Batshuayi, however, does not fit that mould, and Conte has proven himself stubborn and often unwilling to adapt tactics to his playing style. The striker has started just 4 Premier League games out of a possible 55. For a £33 million forward fresh from hitting 31 goals in 44 starts for Marseille, notably a team that finished a measly 13th that season, starting an embarrassing 7% of league matches for Chelsea could do nothing but damage to his confidence. In fairness, Conte had at his disposal Diego Costa for the entirety of the 2016/17 season, and he did win the title after all, but to start your number-two striker only once in the league all campaign; Batshuayi received nothing but red-lights from his manager since his arrival. Despite increasing his league starts the following season to an impressive 3 matches, and Conte's ongoing refusal to play Batshuayi even when the preferred Morata was out injured, it is commendable that the young player didn't demand his own exit.



■ Batshuayi celebrates scoring against Nottingham Forest in the Carabao Cup



For Batshuayi, there could only be one thing worse than an impatient manager, and that is an impatient club. Unfortunately for him, he found himself with both. Of all the biggest clubs in European football, Chelsea is perhaps the most-renowned for its conveyor-belt approach to buying and selling players. In 2017 alone, the club signed 10 new players and sold 8. In recent years, acquisitions have included De Bruyne, Schürrle, Salah, Cuadrado, Falcao and Pato, all of whom enjoyed less-than fleeting spells at Chelsea.

The club's reluctance to tolerate player development is emphasised by Kevin De Bruyne and Mohamed Salah in particular, who are both, ironically, in contention for the league's Player of the Year award. Both, in fact, have scored against their former club this season. Poetic justice at its finest. What this means for Batshuayi, then, is that he must hit the ground running upon his return from Dortmund (if he does at all). But if he fails to do so, would Chelsea be right to sell him, as they surely would? If so, he would undoubtedly grow to become the greatest striker in the world as soon as he parts ways with The Blues, as history is teaching us.

Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that it's unlikely Batshuayi will ever fit into a Conte-Chelsea team, but as it stands, it is the Italian's future at the club that looks in far greater peril.

Irrespective of managerial tensions or club reputation, Batshuayi's struggles and subsequent foreign rise is a testament to the quality of the Premier League itself. England's top-flight is a difficult league, and it is renowned for being so, so for a player as athletic and enthusiastic as Batshuayi at Marseille, this became brutally evident. Disciplined defenders, crowded penalty areas and uncompromising officiating is a far-cry

from the so-called 'farmer's league' of French football, and Batshuayi is not alone in his struggles to adapt. Paul Pogba and Anthony Martial, for example, have not yet replicated the ability they demonstrated overseas, and Erik Lamela is amongst those that have not managed to do so in at least three seasons in England. The feat is not impossible, however. Didier Drogba, like Batshuayi, transferred from Marseille to Chelsea, and became one of the Premier League's most formidable strikers, once he was given time to adapt and develop (hint, hint, Abramovich).

In fairness to Batshuayi, his aforementioned goals to game ratio is a relatively misleading statistic, and risks suggesting he lacks the quality required of English football. In his first season at Chelsea, he netted 5 league goals in just 239 minutes of football – the best in the league at the time. That same statistic, however, turned into a goal every 176 minutes the following season; a testament to the need for consistency in the Premier League, as well as its zero-tolerance policy towards complacency.

I hope Batshuayi can one day become the prolific Chelsea forward he has the genuine potential to be.

If Dortmund manage to retain his services going into next season, which is less than unlikely, I expect he will go on to produce a goal tally reminiscent of the Lewandowski's and Aubameyang's that have graced the Signal Iduna Park in recent years. Regardless, he is a prime example of the importance of confidence in a professional footballer, and has experienced first-hand both the quality of the Premier League and Chelsea's cut-throat approach to a learning curve.