



# BEST OF THE BEST

When Arsenal, Manchester United and Manchester City were knocked out of the Champions League prematurely this year, it reignited the debate about which league in Europe can really be considered the best. Spain, Germany, Italy, France and Holland are all contenders. But can they match the money and prestige of the English Premier League?

BY BEN EAST

**S**CHALKE FANS ARE gathering in a Gelsenkirchen pub before their game against Dutch club FC Twente in the Europa League. There's enough boisterous singing, a full three hours before kick-off, to suggest large quantities of beer have already been consumed. But it's a celebratory atmosphere, not an aggressive one. The supporters feel so much a part of their team – in Germany most of the teams have fan groups that control 50% of the club – that Schalke fans call their new stadium their “living room”. The influence of the fans in this system – called the *Mutterverein* – means there are tickets available for even the biggest games at just €10.

“It gives the fans the feeling that they are special,” says Olivier Kruschinski, who runs one of Schalke’s many fan groups. And

this connection with the club extends to the pitch too. Kruschinski says many identified with Mesut Ozil, now one of the world’s most exciting players, when he first broke through at Schalke because they felt a sense of ownership surrounding the (compulsory) academy breeding young talent.

Ozil now plays at Real Madrid, but the production line continues. And it’s no surprise, therefore, that Germany are now one of the favourites for the European Championships in June. The players seem to appreciate how important the fans have been to this renaissance too: after every game they stay on the field and properly applaud the supporters, rather than giving them a cursory clap and disappearing quickly to the dressing room.

“You see,” laughs Kruschinski, “going to football is just better in Germany.”

He might have a point. The English Premier League (EPL)

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might be the one most regularly enjoyed on TV screens across the world, but its most successful team, Manchester United, were embarrassed by Barcelona in the Champions League final last year. There was no shame in that, but this season United were completely outplayed in the Europa League, this time by Athletic Bilbao, a side only halfway up Spain's La Liga. Afterwards, even Sir Alex Ferguson admitted Bilbao's football was a "wonderful thing to see".

The story we're often sold is that although La Liga might be the home of more technically proficient footballers – including, of course, Lionel Messi – the EPL is more exciting. The grounds are fuller, the games are more entertaining, and it's not just a competition between two mega teams and 18 also-rans.

But that's not strictly true. Of the top four leagues in UEFA's rankings – in order, the EPL, La Liga, the Bundesliga and Serie A – the average attendance at a German league game is 44 873, a staggering 10 000 more per game than in England and 16 000 more than Spain. And perhaps that's no surprise when

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**BIG SCALP** Athletic Bilbao's players celebrate after knocking Manchester United out of the Europa League.

the average number of goals in a match – a pretty good indicator as to a league's entertainment – is also higher in Germany than in England, Spain and Italy.

In fact, the Bundesliga is also closer. The difference between Germany's top four clubs with 10 games to go this season was just 11 points. In Spain it was 30. The Bundesliga is also more unpredictable: five different teams have won the title in Germany in the last 10 years – a greater spread than anywhere else in Europe.

All of which provokes the obvious question: why didn't everyone tune in to watch the big Ruhr derby in November between Borussia Dortmund and Schalke 04 at the top of the Bundesliga, where a staggering 80 000 people flocked to the Westfalenstadion to see Dortmund win 2-0? Why, instead, were the eyes of the football world that weekend fixed on Liverpool playing Manchester City in a humdrum 1-1 draw?

The first answer, strangely, comes from another Schalke fan. "Because there is a tradition in England," says Markhus Reise – so enamoured with English football he set up a Manchester City supporters group in Germany. "It just *feels* like the strongest

league, with fast, exciting matches. Some very good players, of course. I think if Schalke were in the Premier League, we would not do very well."

Watching Schalke destroy Steve McClaren's FC Twente in the second half of their crucial Europa League game, plenty would beg to differ. Klaas Jan Huntelaar, who scored twice, would grace any Premier League side, and his partner in attack is Raul, a former Real Madrid legend. But Markhus is right that, in general, the best players do tend to gravitate towards the bigger clubs in Europe's more prestigious leagues.

**“STILL THINK** Twente would do alright in the Premier League," smiles their coach Steve McClaren. "Maybe not at the top level, but halfway up perhaps." And he should understand the relative merits of the European leagues better than most. McLaren first came to prominence as Alex Ferguson's assistant during Manchester United's treble year in 1999, but it was his tenure as manager of Middlesbrough FC in the Premier League which confirmed him as a top coach in his own right,

leading the side to its highest-ever Premier League position for 30 years in 2005. After a somewhat ill-fated 16-month stint as England manager, he regrouped in the Dutch Eredivisie and led FC Twente to their first-ever championship in 2010. His success alerted VFL Wolfsburg, and McClaren became the first Englishman to coach in the Bundesliga. Not for long. Just seven months later, he was sacked. But after a brief dalliance with Nottingham Forest, he's now back at Twente.

We're speaking after the dust has settled on his club's defeat at the hands of Schalke – and the first thing we agree on is the incredible atmosphere at the Veltins Arena. It genuinely felt like the Schalke fans were willing the ball into the net.

"It's interesting you should mention that, because it's something you immediately notice if you're used to the English Premier League," he says. "It's the same in Holland. When I've had friends over they simply can't believe the atmosphere, the way the crowd get behind the team and stay with them for the whole game.

"Actually, it was probably the most memorable aspect of the two games between ourselves and Schalke. The relationship between the two sets of supporters was outstanding and in both cities there was a real party atmosphere. I don't know whether you would get that anywhere else in Europe. Going to a game in Germany is unique in my experience. The stadiums are magnificent on the whole and it feels like a special occasion every time."

When some of the more vociferous fans – known as 'ultras' – get going in Italy, it can feel a little like that there, too, although the atmosphere is possibly less amenable than in Germany. Napoli are a case in point; fans have to get to the stadium three to four hours before kick-off just to get a seat – and that's often at a game where there's nothing to play for.

Napoli and Schalke have both tasted relegation to lower leagues and enjoyed the good times too – so perhaps it means more to their fans. It is to European football's credit that there is no 'franchise' system in any of the leagues – if teams aren't good enough, they get relegated and someone else takes their place (although there are restrictions in some leagues if the stadiums aren't up to scratch). But it's pretty clear that for pure supporter experience, Germany is pretty much unrivalled. What's striking, though, is that nearly everyone I speak to in Gelsenkirchen also has an English team they support. They're pretty ambivalent about Spain and, intriguingly, Italian and French teams aren't mentioned once. McClaren understands why.

"In England, what gets you straight away is the tempo of the games, the physique, power and strength of the players. And now you're seeing the games becoming technically very good too, with the introduction of the best foreign players. In Germany, the football is much more organised and disciplined – it's interesting, because what I immediately noticed when I started coaching there is that the players were very athletic, but in a completely different way. They weren't as physically strong as in England, but my goodness, they could run all day. All the teams are incredibly fit."

What's fascinating is that every league has its own personality: the Italian league has always been characterised by its cautious, tactical approach. La Liga is technically adept and highly skil-



**MAGIC TOUCH** Englishman Steve McClaren coached Dutch side FC Twente to their first-ever league title in 2010.

ful. The French league is often seen as quite slow, but a breeding ground for young talent. And although there's only 100km between Gelsenkirchen in Germany and Enschede, where Dutch team Twente play, the differences are marked.

"The Dutch league is more technical and tactical, with a much slower tempo," says McClaren. "More of a thoughtful game, with a slow build-up from the back which involves getting extra men in midfield and having a game-plan specifically set up to nullify the opponent. But there is a great coaching set-up in Holland; players are taught from a very young age to be intelligent in the game, to read the game, to think more deeply about it."

Which, perhaps, is why McClaren won the Dutch league in his first season with Twente; he recognised all these traits and added in some of his own ideas he'd learned in England. The Twente fans I speak to noticed it straight away – they tell me he added more power, was more direct, got the players mentally attuned to what he wanted to achieve, and the other Dutch teams couldn't cope.

Unfortunately, for all the fine work McClaren does at Twente, his team simply can't compete with the big entertainers in European football. None of the Dutch teams can. The income from TV rights is a 10th of the EPL's, and the biggest club in Holland, Ajax, have a turnover of €97-million. By comparison, in the latest Deloitte Football Money League, Schalke received €202-million and Real Madrid made a staggering €479.5-million. FC Twente made a somewhat sobering €33-million, which is less

than the team which finishes bottom of the EPL is allocated just for competing in the league! Such spending power is why even the most middling of EPL sides can cherry-pick talent from the Dutch league: Fulham bought Bryan Ruiz from Twente at the start of this season for £10.6-million.

**S**O EVEN THOUGH McClaren points out that the race for the Dutch title is incredibly exciting, the fact remains that only four of the players called up for the 21-man national squad who beat England in February actually play in the Eredivisie. Nobody – not even the most rabid Dutch football supporter – would argue that it's the best league in Europe. So what is? Even McClaren has trouble answering the question.

"You know what was enjoyable about managing in the Premier League?" says McClaren. "The intensity surrounding every single game. And I mean every game," he laughs. "Every week felt like a cup tie, and it was physically and mentally very, very testing. A season in English Premier League is so difficult.

"I must say though, what was so eye-opening about the Bundesliga was the professionalism and discipline of the players – and it's breeding some great talent. It's a league that is growing in stature I think, and that's entirely because the players that are coming through have been coached from an early age to be intelligent, thoughtful human beings who can cope with the tactical and technical side of the game. We're doing it at FC Twente too, and I think English football could learn a lot from it."

In fact, one English footballer is doing just that. Elliot Kebbie had a typical upbringing – he joined his local club Leeds United and steadily began to make a name for himself at youth level, to the extent that he began to get noticed by some of big teams in the EPL. There was interest from Manchester United, Everton and Sunderland – but the 17-year-old had broader horizons. After a trial at Barcelona's famous La Masia academy, in January he was picked up by Atletico Madrid, also in the Europa League knockout stages, and signed a four-year deal. The differences between English and Spanish football were, for him, immediately noticeable.

"The hardest thing is to understand the different philosophy of football, and adapting to different methods of shape and formation," he says. "In Spain far more emphasis is placed on the technical aspects of the game and less on the physical side of things. And of course that takes time to get to grips with because there's an initial language barrier."

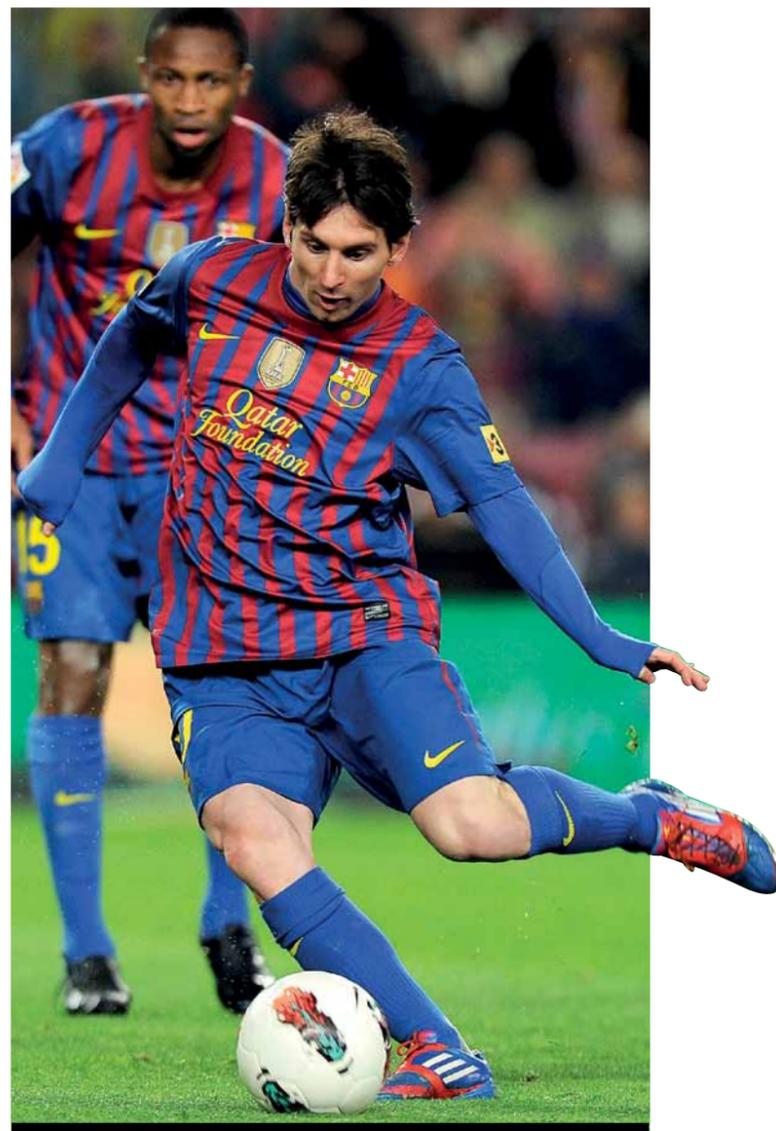
But Kebbie is hoping that will come. For him, it's the best place to be at the moment, particularly as the Spanish teams have done so well in the European competitions this year.

"By being in Spain I can really improve on technical and tactical skills – more so than I could have done elsewhere," he admits. "The Premier League is very quick and exciting, but you would have to say the way that Barcelona, Real Madrid and even Athletic Bilbao have performed this season suggests the Spanish are setting the benchmark."

And if he had to choose between them?

"That's a tough question. Too many things go into the equation. Coaching, players, finances, fans and of course the organisation and marketing of the leagues are all different across Europe. For

**"Real Madrid and Barcelona are 20 or 30 points ahead of everyone else nearly every season."**  
– Steve McClaren



**WORLD'S BEST** Having three-time Ballon D'Or winner Lionel Messi playing in La Liga gives rise to its description as the best league in Europe.

PHOTOS BY GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES/AFP

me, Spain is probably a better league but if you're talking about specific league matches over a season, the Premier League is probably more exciting."

It's telling that Kebbie has – if briefly – passed through Barcelona's La Masia, where Messi, Iniesta, Xavi and many more all learned to play the game. It's become such a beacon of excellence, other clubs are flagrantly trying to copy it. Barcelona are without question one of the best teams ever to play football, and they've done so by investing in youth rather than big-name players – although they can do that these days too.

Their battles with Real Madrid are so compelling, with Messi up against Ronaldo and, of course, Jose Mourinho pitting his wits against Pep Guardiola, it would seem obvious to suggest that La Liga is the best in Europe – particularly when Athletic Bilbao are cruising past Manchester United and Valencia are outclassing Stoke City. It's less a matter of opinion that Spain has the world's best players than a statement of fact: every winner of the FIFA Ballon D'Or since 2007 now plays in Spain. Incredibly, even if you count the players who came second and third in that time, there's still only one who doesn't play in La Liga – Fernando Torres.

But there's still the sneaking suspicion that while Spanish football may be great – inspirational even – and its teams largely dominant when they play sides from other nations, the league itself is not. Partly that's a consequence of the TV deal, which is not struck on a collective basis as it is in other leagues: essentially it means Real Madrid and Barcelona get 50 percent of the annual €618-million revenues, and the other 18 clubs have to share out the rest between them. There's a real sense that, on a weekly basis, many clubs in La Liga don't actually try that hard against the big two, because they know they cannot compete.

"If you look at La Liga, Real Madrid and Barcelona are 20 or 30 points ahead of everyone else nearly every season," agrees McClaren. "And to me, that's not the definition of a competitive league. In England, Germany and Holland it's much closer, which I think makes it far more interesting and exciting."

It's interesting that McClaren, like the Schalke and Twente fans, doesn't even mention Italy's Serie A or France's Ligue Un. The latter is undergoing something of a renaissance in interest – partly thanks to the fact that Lyon have stopped winning it every year and also due to the Manchester City-style influx of Middle Eastern money into Paris St Germain. But even with Carlo Ancelotti as the manager and unheard-of wealth in Ligue Un terms – PSG smashed the French transfer record with the €42-million signing of Javier Pastore – they still failed to attract a marquee signing to the club in February. The standard is high enough to develop some really exciting talent, but when the best young player in France, Lille's Eden Hazard, tells *L'Equipe* "I feel ready to make it to the next level at a big club", it says it all.

Meanwhile in Serie A, there's still the sense – clichéd or not – that it's a league for the football purist obsessed with defence. The stats tend to back that up – there are fewer goals scored per game in Serie A than in any other. Financial constraints prevent the opulent signings of the past, and it's difficult to believe, these days, that stars of the future would choose Milan over Manchester or Madrid. But perhaps such prudence can, as in



**RISING STAR** Lille's Eden Hazard is the best player in France's Ligue Un – and he's still chosen to play in one of the Europe's 'bigger' leagues.

Germany, encourage young Italian talent and new ways of thinking. After all, anyone who watches Napoli regularly can't help but be entertained by their dynamic front three of Lavezzi, Hamsik and Cavani.

In the end, it's almost impossible to compare leagues with such disparate styles and financial rewards. But perhaps this is one way of looking at it: the players love the challenge (and the rewards) of the English Premier League. Coaches admire the technical ability of the Spanish teams (but might prefer to watch them in European competition). Supporters will always pick the league their team plays in, but for the proper matchday experience, Germany is unbeatable.

And for the armchair fan who just wants to pick one league to entertain, excite and surprise every weekend? It's still the Premier League. Whether it actually provides us with the best football in the world is a moot point. But you can bet McClaren would like to manage there again one day. **SI**

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