

MARK METCALF AND SIMON MULLOCK

A full-page photograph of Erling Haaland in a light blue Manchester City long-sleeved shirt and white shorts. He is smiling and has his arms outstretched. The background is a stylized blue and white graphic featuring a large 'V' shape and a diamond shape, with a cityscape silhouette at the bottom. Lightning bolts are visible in the upper part of the background.

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Leaving Germany

WHEN SUPER-AGENT Mino Raiola negotiated the deal that took Haaland from RB Salzburg to Borussia Dortmund in the summer of 2019, he drove a bargain so hard that Manchester United decided against pursuing the Norwegian striker.

Dortmund paid €22.5m (£19.23m) to trigger a clause in Haaland's contract, just a year after the Austrian club had signed him from Molde.

The Germans also agreed to pay a €10m commission that was shared between Raiola's company and the player's father, Alfie. The agent then lived up to his nickname of 'Mr Three Hundred Million' by pushing the envelope a little further – and was rewarded when Dortmund declined to walk away again despite being told that Haaland wanted another release clause and that his arrival would also hinge on Raiola taking a cut of any subsequent transfer fee.

His buy-out at Signal Iduna Park would be €60m, a significant sum – but a bargain should Haaland take a wrecking ball to Bundesliga defences in the way he had done to those in Norway and Austria. The only slither of leverage Dortmund were able to negotiate was that the clause could not be triggered until the summer of 2022.

Manchester City, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Chelsea, Arsenal and Atlético Madrid were among

the 20 clubs who felt that Raiola was asking too much for too little.

And so did United, despite the urgings of manager Ole Gunnar Solskjær, a man who had been instrumental in Haaland's rise to prominence at Molde and might have been able to recognise a natural-born goalscorer when he saw one given his own impeccable pedigree. United didn't want to do business with an agent who had played them like the proverbial fiddle in the past.

Raiola was also Paul Pogba's adviser. In the summer of 2012 he took the Frenchman away from Old Trafford when his contract expired. At the turn of that year, United manager Sir Alex Ferguson had persuaded Paul Scholes to come out of retirement rather than put his faith in Pogba as his team unsuccessfully tried to overcome rivals City in the closest title race in Premier League history.

When Raiola met Ferguson to discuss a new contract, he knew Juventus were willing to meet his demands because the midfielder would cost them nothing more than a €1m compensation fee because of his age.

Raiola recalled, 'Mr Ferguson thought that our value of Paul was exaggerated and that he should be happy to sign. I told him that for this money my chihuahua would not walk on the grass of the training centre.' Ferguson called Raiola a 'shitbag' as the meeting came to a close – and Pogba duly left for Turin.

When he returned to Old Trafford in the summer of 2016, it was to play for new boss José Mourinho. United were so desperate to keep Pogba out of the clutches of new Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola that they paid a world-record price.

According to Juventus director general Giuseppe Marotta, speaking at the club's AGM in October 2016, United agreed to pay €105m, including add-ons, to re-sign

their academy graduate. Raiola's cut of the deal was an eye-watering €27m.

Solskjær, who was sacked by United in November 2021, later claimed that he urged his former club to sign Haaland for just £4m when he was his manager at Molde and Raiola had not yet ingratiated himself with the striker and his family.

Speaking at the 'An Evening with Ole Gunnar Solskjær' event in Manchester, the Norwegian said, 'I got in contact with United because we had this talented striker who they should have had. But they didn't listen, unfortunately. Four million, I asked for. But they never signed him. Four million! Don't ask.'

Haaland's escape clause at Dortmund was the worst-kept secret in football – because Raiola wanted it that way. It appeared the German club would be forced to cash in as early as the summer of 2021 when it seemed they would not qualify for the following season's Champions League – and a transfer then would have banked them in excess of €100m.

But they ended the campaign by winning their last seven games to finish third in the Bundesliga, with Haaland scoring six times in that sequence. He also scored twice in a 4-1 victory over RB Leipzig in the DFB-Pokal Final.

Dortmund were knocked out of the Champions League in the quarter-finals by Manchester City, losing both legs 2-1. Haaland was so well marshalled by City defenders Rúben Dias and John Stones that he didn't have an effort on goal in either game, with Guardiola's side limiting Dortmund to just over 38 per cent possession in both matches.

But that didn't stop City's players from starting a charm offensive that would last for a year, with Phil Foden covering his mouth with his hand as he gave the striker his opinion at the final whistle at the Etihad.

Haaland recalled, 'I'll be completely honest, when we played City about 15 people came to me and said I should

join them. Stones, Rúben Dias and [İlkay] Gündoğan said so. Foden as well and [Kevin] De Bruyne. So many of them.

‘Then I met [Riyad] Mahrez on holiday that summer and he started talking as well. It’s nice when players want you to join their club. It is the club that is the most important thing [when you’re making a decision], but it’s also important when the players want you.’

Mahrez really did crank the rumour mill into top gear when he tweeted a short video of him dancing with Haaland in a restaurant on the Greek island of Mykonos in June 2021 with the message ‘Agent Mahrez on duty’.

Raiola met with Dortmund’s sporting director Michael Zorc at the end of the season to determine whether there was a potential escape route for his client that summer. Dortmund had already banked £73m by selling Jadon Sancho to Manchester United after refusing to budge on a commitment to only sell the England winger for an even higher price when the Old Trafford club first registered their interest 12 months earlier. Their stance on Haaland was just as steadfast.

‘I can confirm I was in Dortmund to talk,’ said Raiola. ‘Michael Zorc let us know very clearly that Borussia Dortmund don’t want to sell Haaland this summer. I respect that opinion but it doesn’t mean that I agree with it. Borussia were very clear about their mindset and approach.’

That gave Team Haaland 12 months to plot their next move with absolute precision. Raiola and legal adviser Rafaela Pimenta would be the go-betweens for Haaland, Dortmund and interested clubs. The player, his father, and fixer and confidante Ivar Eggja would then weigh up which clubs and lifestyle would offer the best fit. Egil Østenstad, the former Southampton and Blackburn striker who also had a brief loan spell at Manchester City, was available for financial advice having moved into banking after hanging up his boots.

Eggja's role in Haaland's rise cannot be underestimated. Alfie's best friend is a personal trainer who also acts as a facilitator, arranging all the small details in the player's life from grocery deliveries to car insurance so that Erling can concentrate totally on what he does best.

When Haaland signed for City, he moved into the same city-centre apartment block that was also home to Jack Grealish, Rúben Dias and Julián Álvarez. It was fully furnished, the fridge fully stocked with the best food, while a chauffeur-driven car had been arranged to take him to City's state-of-the-art £200m training ground the next morning.

Haaland's tastes have become more expensive as he has progressed. When he signed for Dortmund, Eggja simply called into the local IKEA store to stock up on furniture. 'I think if I had been all alone and had to choose my own apartment and go shopping in IKEA, I wouldn't have scored three goals against Augsburg on my Dortmund debut,' admitted Haaland.

* * *

Pick of the top clubs

When Raiola gauged the level of interest it was clear that his client would have his pick of the top clubs in the summer of 2022. Viaplay, a Swedish video streaming service which held rights to screen Premier League games at the time of publication, was given access to the process that would determine Haaland's future for a documentary called *The Big Decision*. It would be part of an official long-term media link-up between the company and the Norwegian striker, including an arrangement that would see Alfie Haaland employed as a pundit for Premier League games shown in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and the Netherlands. Formula One world champion Max Verstappen had a similar agreement.

Alfie would also play a starring role in the documentary after drawing up a points system to help his son determine which club would be the best fit. Former Norway striker Jan Åge Fjørtoft, who became a respected broadcast journalist following his own playing career, was given fly-on-the-wall access to the Haaland camp. *The Big Decision* was compelling viewing.

Haaland senior outlined how seven serious contenders – Manchester City, Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain, Bayern Munich, Liverpool, Chelsea and Barcelona – were initially whittled down to three. ‘I would say there are five or six options,’ he admitted on 21 February. ‘But, to be honest, I can cut it down to three.’

‘We ask who is the best team at this moment. The next criteria is who needs a number nine? We have Liverpool right up there, but they don’t need a nine. City scored ten for that one. They need a number nine.’

‘Real Madrid score only five or six because they have [Karim] Benzema. And also, will they get [Kylian] Mbappé? Bayern Munich have one point. They don’t need a number nine because their best player is a number nine. But if he [Robert Lewandowski] goes, they have no one else.’

‘It would be controversial to go to Munich. But when we went through the points system, they are one of the best teams. Right now, they are number two on our list. I think City is the best team, Munich is second. We have Real Madrid at number three and Paris Saint-Germain as number four.’

Other factors were also considered. Alfie added, ‘Some of the things we looked at were consistent. Like the size of the club, the stadium and the fans. Then there is the quality of the league. We consider England as the best league and Spain as the second.’

‘Then there is the economy of the club – and this can change. What type of a team are they? This can also change.’

Do they need a number nine? This changes with injuries or transfers. I think it was one point separating the top two after our last calculations.'

One thing that Team Haaland were wary of taking into account was who would be Erling's next manager. But the prospect of lining up for Pep Guardiola and working with the best coach in the world was tantalising – even if the player allowed himself to do some thinking with his heart rather than his head. Erling said, 'It is better that a club is eager to get you rather than a manager. In the end, it is the club you transfer to. I have never joined a club because of the manager. He can get fired three weeks later and I would be sat there thinking, "What now?"'

'But it is a big plus that Guardiola is at City. He is the best manager in the world. Ultimately, it is how well I can do in the team and how well I can deliver the goods over the next five years. The Premier League is the hardest in terms of tempo – and there are more matches in England due to the League Cup and FA Cup, as well as the Champions League.

'If you play for a top team, you have 60 matches a year, plus more for the national team. That makes it 70 matches if you play them all – which I hope to do. But if you play in every match, you can get injured if you can't handle it.

'There is nothing that can go wrong. It is going to be damn good whatever I choose. I think in the end, it's a gut feeling that has to decide – a bit like when I signed for Dortmund. I think what it would be like to wear the shirt? I ask myself if I score and celebrate, how good would it feel? I try to visualise things like that.'

Fjørtoft asked Haaland how he could reject an offer from Real Madrid. 'It is a good question,' was his answer. 'It is really not possible.' But the Spanish giants already had Ballon d'Or winner Benzema and were continuing to court PSG's brilliant Frenchman Mbappé. Haaland would only

go where he felt wanted – and that meant Bayern Munich or Manchester City.

Bayern tried to distance themselves from the bidding, briefing several German newspapers and media outlets that they weren't interested in signing Haaland. The Bundesliga champions had made a habit of taking Dortmund's best players to Bavaria. In the build-up to Bayern's Champions League Final meeting with Dortmund at Wembley in 2013, they announced they would be triggering the €37m clause in Mario Götze's contract that summer. Defender Mats Hummels made the same move in 2016.

In between, Bayern also signed Dortmund's brilliant Polish striker Robert Lewandowski at the end of his contract – and while Haaland was deciding on his next move, they were in talks about extending the two-time Ballon d'Or Striker of the Year winner's contract.

Alfie Haaland insisted at the time, 'Bayern are interested. I understand that clubs will position themselves so that if he doesn't end up with them, they can say he was never an option. Lewandowski is still the best striker in the world, I think. But he is 34 years old.'

Lewandowski knew Bayern were courting Haaland behind the scenes – and it was a huge blow to his pride. But he was also galvanised. He went on to break the 40-goal barrier for the seventh successive season, topping the Bundesliga goal charts for the seventh time with 35 to equal the record of Bayern legend Gerd Müller.

Lewandowski was not interested in taking the record for himself. Just a few days after it was confirmed that Haaland would be going to Manchester, the Pole took his revenge by telling Bayern his time at the club was over, 'After what has happened, I cannot imagine a good cooperation between me and the club in the future.' Barcelona wanted to take him to the Camp Nou – and he departed in a €50m deal to score

23 La Liga goals to help the Catalan club become Spanish champions in 2022/23.

Erling Haaland understood what had transpired, ‘Inside Lewandowski’s head, I don’t know how many goals and titles he has, but you start to feel sorry for him. Seriously. I think it’s disrespectful. But at the same time, it’s actually also another opportunity for him.’

* * *

Mino Raiola

Mino Raiola was instrumental in brokering an agreement with Manchester City during negotiations with the club’s chief executive Ferran Soriano, director of football Txiki Begiristain and Omar Berrada, the chief football operations officer. But he was also fighting a losing battle against cancer.

The former pizza restaurant owner who was born in Italy and raised in the Netherlands passed away in April 2022 at Milan’s San Raffaele Hospital, aged 54, less than a month before the transfer was confirmed. Two days before he died, Raiola had taken to his Twitter account to assure the world that reports of his demise were premature.

City would trigger Haaland’s £51m release clause – and even though the Premier League champions also agreed to pay a further £34m in agency fees, it was still regarded as value for money just a year after they had made it clear they would pay Tottenham Hotspur in excess of £100m for England captain Harry Kane, seven years Haaland’s senior.

Rafaela Pimenta, the 49-year-old Brazilian lawyer who worked at Raiola’s side, inherited a stable of stellar names that included Haaland, Pogba, Zlatan Ibrahimović, Mario Balotelli, Matthijs de Ligt, Marco Veratti and Gianluigi Donnarumma.

She would split the commission for Haaland’s arrival at the Etihad Stadium with Alfie, whose counsel the striker had relied on heavily while deciding his future.

Pimenta spent the first few weeks after Raiola's death fending off enquiries from several agents she later described as 'lowlives' for the underhand tactics they used trying to take clients away from her. 'One agent called Walter Benitez rang the day that Mino died. His wife picked up the phone and gave him a tongue-lashing, telling him he should be ashamed of himself,' she said.

'Even before Mino died, they called [French goalkeeper] Alphonse Areola. Thousands of people called Erling. Thousands of people called Paul [Pogba]. They also called me and said, "If you need help, I can run the business for you."'

Pimenta needed no assistance. Haaland was one of the first to call to offer his sympathies before telling her it was business as usual. A signed shirt from the player, originally presented to Raiola by Haaland, went up on the wall of her office. The inscription read 'From a Viking to a Viking'. Haaland assured Pimenta she wouldn't have been out of place in a long ship and told her to keep the shirt.

Haaland said, 'In the last period [before signing for City], Rafaela, who is in many ways the female version of Mino, knew what she was doing.

'I don't like to talk about Mino's death. It is a very sad story since he was such a good man. It is tough and such a shame. He did a lot for me, of course. When I went to Salzburg he managed to get the clause and I also got the clause in Dortmund. That's why I am where I am today, because of him.

'A big part of what I have worked with his team for many years is that they are very good and skilled people who have helped my dad a lot – both with and without Mino.'

Raiola did the groundwork for Haaland's agreement to join City, and Pimenta completed the deal. It was done with the same efficiency with which Kevin De Bruyne would load

the bullets for Haaland to fire in a sky blue shirt. But the role that Alfie Haaland played in plotting his son's future can't be underestimated.

City portrayed the transfer as a homecoming. Team Haaland furnished the club's social media team with numerous photographs of their new signing as a toddler and teenager, wearing a sky blue City shirt in the days when a successful season meant securing 40 points and Premier League safety.

Haaland was born in Leeds in July 2000, just a month after his father completed a £2.5m move from the Yorkshire club to Manchester City following the Blues' promotion to the Premier League under Joe Royle. Just 12 months earlier, City had played a season in the third tier of English football for the only time in their history and had only been promoted thanks to an incredible comeback in the play-off final against Gillingham at Wembley, when they scored twice in injury time to take the game into extra time before winning a penalty shoot-out. That was the club's first appearance in front of the Twin Towers since they had lost to Chelsea in the Full Members' Cup Final 13 years earlier.

City's return to the top flight lasted for just a single season. Haaland senior made 35 Premier League appearances and was made captain ahead of a 2-1 City victory at Elland Road in September. But he was injured in a 1-0 win over West Ham United at Maine Road and missed the final two games. A 2-1 defeat at Ipswich Town in the penultimate match of the season confirmed City's relegation.

The midfielder underwent knee surgery at the end of the season, but only made three substitute appearances as City won promotion under Kevin Keegan a year later. He was eventually forced to retire in the summer of 2003 after City opted to trigger a clause in his contract, stipulating that they could terminate his employment on medical advice.

His young son was already developing his skills wearing a replica kit with 'DAD' on the back. Erling retained faded memories of being taken to Maine Road – but was unable to recall whether he was there when City played their final game at the 80-year-old stadium against Southampton in May 2003. 'I don't remember,' Haaland admitted after being asked if he had been at Maine Road's last stand in his first interview with the City website after joining the club. 'But I was at a lot of games with my mum, sister and brother, watching my father.'

Haaland also told reporters, 'I like City and Leeds because my dad played for both clubs. Earlier in his career, he played for Nottingham [Forest], so my brother and sister support them a bit more. But I have followed City and Leeds all of my life.'

Leeds had actually turned down an invitation to bid for the striker when he was leaving Molde in 2018. They opted to spend their money on Patrick Bamford instead.

Erling had briefly accepted an invitation to join a Norwegian Manchester City fan page on Facebook the year before he signed for the club, so the Blues made the most of his old loyalties.

But Alfie insisted, 'I have always said that it is one thing supporting a club and another to be a professional footballer. You must put your feelings aside when choosing where to play. You have to choose what is right for you, not the club the family supports.'

'I couldn't have played for any club, since some of the family supported Tottenham, some Arsenal, some Liverpool, some Man U, some City and others Leeds. We have to put that aside and choose what is right for Erling.'

One UK newspaper report in April 2021 claimed Raiola was demanding a £1m-a-week wage for Haaland. German publication *Bild* pitched his asking price at £820,000 a week.

The player insisted, ‘When I was a young boy, like everyone else, I dreamed about becoming the best footballer in the world and making a living out of it. I think money is important for everyone in the world. To make the most money is not my main focus, but if you can get 5,000 Norwegian Krone to do a job and get 10,000 Norwegian Krone to do the same job, then you take the 10,000. Everyone would do that.

‘Money has never been my main motivation, but I have dreamed about making a living from football and living on that money for the rest of my life.’

Haaland was on holiday in Marbella when news leaked out on 20 May 2022 that he would be joining City at the start of July. ‘It was a lot of relief and a lot of joy,’ he said. ‘It was not easy because it has been a difficult few months. But it was a good choice in the end and I am happy about it.

‘The reason I chose City is that I think I can develop best at that club. And, yes, I think it’s the best sporting project in the world right now. It’s where I think I will do best. It’s the best league and a cool club.’

Find out how much the wage agreement was in chapter 25.