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EUROPE'S NEXT POWERHOUSE?

CHELSEA UNDER EMMA HAYES

Foreword by Suzanne Wrack

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THE EVOLUTION OF CHELSEA
UNDER EMMA HAYES

A B D U L L A H A B D U L L A H

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The Project

ON SUNDAY, 16 May 2021, the world was about to witness a new era emerge in Sweden. There was excitement, anxiety, and intrigue brewing in the air. For the first time in five years there was no sign of the ‘Queens of Europe’ (Olympique Lyonnais Féminin) in the UEFA Women’s Champions League Final. It was a chance for a new team to engrave their name in European folklore and establish themselves as a new dominant force in the continent. For Barcelona Femení, it was a chance to avenge their humiliation of the 2019 final against Olympique Lyonnais and a reward for an incredible turnaround. For Chelsea, the final was an ascent that had been years in the making, supplemented by a most incredible season. Gothenburg was about to witness the start of greatness.

‘This is the house Emma Hayes has built’ –

Liam Twomey

Ever since Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea in 2003, he's turned the London club from mid-table mediocrity to serial champions. The change in fortunes may have come from the oligarch's immense riches, but he also brought a winning mentality that trickled from the top. Every manager who has taken charge of the men's team has brought some form of success, whether it be José Mourinho winning three Premier League titles, Carlo Ancelotti winning the Premier League and FA Cup double, or Thomas Tuchel delivering a second UEFA Champions League title. These coaches have created leaders in each of their squads. They had strong voices and tough personalities, but more importantly, they were players who propelled the team forward. John Terry, Frank Lampard, Michael Ballack, Petr Cech and Didier Drogba were the quintessential leaders of yesteryear who transferred this mentality from squad to squad until their inevitable swansong in 2012 that was capped with the club's first Champions League triumph.

There are many parallels you can draw between Chelsea's men's and women's teams, not least their insatiable desire to win. Ever since they were founded in 1992, Chelsea Women – or Chelsea Ladies as they were initially named – have had their own ups and downs. Between 2005 and 2010 they were fighting for their place in the FA Premier League National Division, even narrowly avoiding relegation in the 2005/06 season.

Soon after, they went through a couple of managerial changes and signed some top-class players in Siobhan

Chamberlain, Casey Stoney and Eniola Aluko. They even signed the United States player and World Cup winner Lorrie Fair, regarded then as one of the best midfielders in the women's game, in January of the 2007/08 season. This was the start of their upward trajectory.

After a fifth-place finish in 2007/08, Chelsea Ladies went on to finish third in 2008/09 behind Arsenal and Everton. The following season saw Aluko and Anita Asante leave for the new Women's Professional Soccer League (United States) in March 2009, while Fair missed the whole campaign with an unfortunate cruciate ligament injury sustained in May 2008. The manager Steve Jones then departed in January 2009, leaving Stoney to become a player/manager.

During the 2009/10 season, cuts to the team's funding were announced which threatened to derail the club but were then offset by the input of capital from John Terry and other Chelsea players. The club then appointed Matt Beard, on the recommendation of Stoney, who stayed on for three more years. Beard did well in his stint as manager and was there when Chelsea successfully bid to be one of eight founding teams in the Women's Super League in March 2011. While Beard took them to their first Women's FA Cup Final, it was the introduction of Emma Hayes in 2012 that kick-started the project. Though their first two seasons were underwhelming, a period of acclimatisation was necessary for Hayes to understand the needs and requirements of the squad. This signalled the beginning of Chelsea's most successful period and the first step towards

them becoming European giants, though most couldn't see that happening at first.

'Thanks to the resources committed to this team by Mr Abramovich, Emma Hayes has been able to build this recently amateur side into a European giant with a roster of the biggest names in women's football.

'As fans, we are so lucky to be able to watch Emma build her vision both on and off the pitch. This group of women are such a bright spot that so many Chelsea fans are proud of. They consistently win trophies and do it the Chelsea way. We are so lucky to have the one-club mentality,' enthused Brandon Busbee.

In Hayes's first season in charge, Chelsea finished third-last in the league. The following season, they fared worse and unfortunately finished second from bottom. The 2014 season signalled the start of an incredible turnaround for the club, and they've managed to finish in the top three of the WSL every season since. They've been crowned champions four times since then, along with winning two Women's FA Cups and two Women's League Cups. In 2015, it was announced that many of Chelsea's players would be becoming full professionals for the first time, signalling the club's intent. Though it is ultimately the UEFA Women's Champions League that they are yet to capture, they've reached three semi-finals and one final in seven seasons.

The 2020/21 season was their opportunity to slay their demons and banish the ghosts of yesteryear by going through their best transfer window. Alas, it wasn't to be.

Barcelona thoroughly outplayed Chelsea, dominating them in every phase of play. This wasn't the Chelsea we had seen throughout the season, so the question arose: was this merely a blip, or is there more to it? For Hayes, this was a nine-year project in the making. Her ultimate goal was not only to win domestic titles but achieve continental glory and see her side crowned the best in Europe. We've seen enough to know that Chelsea are on the verge of something special, but just who is this mastermind behind the curtain?