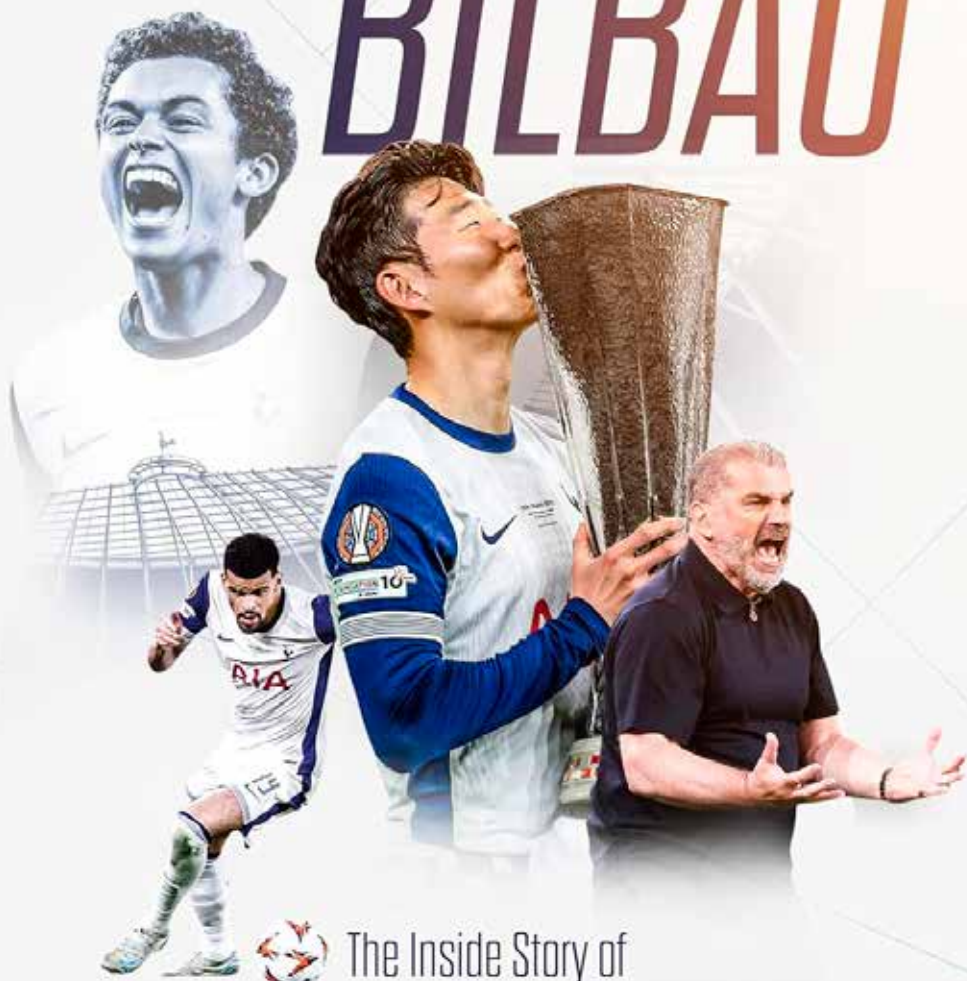



"Revealing, forensic and entertaining examination of an epic Spurs season."

Henry Winter, football writer

MIRACLE IN *BILBAO*



 The Inside Story of
the Europa League Triumph
Tom Barclay

MIRACLE IN *BILBAO*

The Inside Story of
the Europa League Triumph

Tom Barclay



Contents

Introduction	9
Prologue: Ange Postecoglou's first season	13
Chapter 1. Pre-season.	37
Chapter 2. August	52
Chapter 3. September.	64
Chapter 4. October	85
Chapter 5. November.	98
Chapter 6. December	117
Chapter 7. January	142
Chapter 8. February	165
Chapter 9. March	181
Chapter 10. April	192
Chapter 11. May	211
Epilogue	247

Chapter One

Pre-season

IT IS 6 June, the season having only finished 18 days ago, and yet James Maddison is already back at Tottenham's Hotspur Way training ground. The reason is not for his club but for his country, though he will not be needed for much longer. England manager Gareth Southgate has his provisional 33-man squad for Euro 2024 training at Spurs but must whittle it down to 26 by the end of the day. Maddison is one of the first to go.

It leaves the midfielder 'devastated', though it is hardly a shock given the wealth of creative options at Southgate's disposal and Maddison's poor form since coming back from injury in January. Far more of a surprise are the omissions of Jack Grealish and Harry Maguire that follow swiftly afterwards. Alpha male Maddison had told the media during a previous international camp how he likes to be the main man at a roast dinner, carving up the turkey. But the fact is that his insipid 2024, as he struggled to return to the form he showed before damaging his ankle ligaments in *that* 4-1 loss to Chelsea, made it an easy decision for Southgate to cut him from his squad.

Southgate defends his decision by claiming 'other players had stronger seasons'. Maddison, in a typically honest reaction on X, previously Twitter, appears to almost agree with his manager. 'Devastated doesn't quite cut it. Trained well and worked hard all week but if I'm honest with myself, my form at Spurs when coming back from injury in the second half of the

season probably wasn't at the levels I had set which gave Gareth a decision to make,' the playmaker writes. 'I'll be back, I have no doubt. Wishing the boys all the luck in the world out in Germany, unbelievable group and lads that I literally call some of my best friends. I genuinely hope football comes home.'

One of those best friends is Declan Rice, part of a quartet also including Grealish and Chelsea's Ben Chilwell who holiday together, and the Arsenal man cannot hide his disappointment at seeing his pals ditched. Midfielder Rice tells the England press pack: 'I told them I was gutted. I said to Madders and Jack I love them both, because they're really, really good friends of mine. Even though it's hard to miss out, they've both had really long seasons, so try and switch off now and have an enjoyable summer.'

That is exactly what Maddison does, jetting off to Portugal with his partner, Kennedy Alexa, and their twins for some well-deserved R&R. He has already clocked up thousands of miles in the weeks preceding, having jetted off to Australia for Spurs' controversial post-season friendly against Newcastle.

In an age when managers consistently moan about fixture overload and when football's impact on the environment is supposed to be considered more seriously, it was hard to justify the Melbourne exhibition that came just three days after the end of the season, regardless of how lucrative it may prove to be. Newcastle legend Alan Shearer called it 'madness'. The trip was believed not to be universally popular within the dressing room. Some of the staff were watching the Tyson Fury versus Oleksandr Usyk boxing fight in a hotel the night before the final game of the season at Sheffield United when it emerged Cristian Romero would not be going on the trip Down Under due to a personal matter. Pierre-Emile Højbjerg, likely to leave the club in the summer, pulled out through injury the next day. The players were understood to have been told by some that if they qualified for Europe, then they would not have to do a post-

season friendly next year. Postecoglou said publicly he did not see it as ‘something that would happen on a regular basis unless we felt the benefits would outweigh the costs’.

The game took place at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground and was played in front of 78,419 supporters. But it was pretty much a non-event, barring a brief injury scare ahead of the Euros for England defender and former Spurs man Kieran Trippier, which turned out to be just that – a scare and nothing more. Newcastle won on penalties after the game ended 1-1 in regular time, with Maddison and Alexander Isak trading goals in the first half.

Spurs’ squad stayed on message before and during the trip to the far side of the world for what seemed a completely unnecessary game. But the mask appeared to slip in the aftermath, thanks to Dejan Kulusevski. The Swedish winger said: ‘It was hard, but sometimes you just have to accept that you can’t decide everything in life. The club made the decision that we go there and then I had to make the best of the situation. Of course, it was tough. It was hard to accept but nothing can be done. Others decide.’ At least they were in and out of there. Newcastle, on the other hand, had another game to play against an A-League All Stars XI. Eddie Howe’s side lost 8-0.

Now, Kulusevski, like Maddison, has the summer off to recuperate, with Sweden failing to qualify for the Euros. The Tottenham representation at the prestigious competition in Germany ends up being minimal, as only Højbjerg, Radu Drăgusin and Micky van de Ven feature. Guglielmo Vicario is in Italy’s squad but does not play, with compatriot Destiny Udogie knowing for a long time he would miss the finals following surgery on his left quadricep in April.

Højbjerg, used sparingly by Postecoglou during the season, is named man of the match as he helps Denmark to a 1-1 draw against a ponderous and unimaginative England in Frankfurt. Somehow, Southgate’s Three Lions make it all the way to the

final, losing 2-1 to Luis de la Fuente's outstanding Spanish side, which includes 17-year-old sensation Lamine Yamal. Van de Ven goes the furthest of any Spurs player, as the Netherlands reach the semi-finals, but he can only watch on from the bench as his side are left heartbroken by Ollie Watkins's last-gasp winner in Dortmund.

* * *

THE Copa América provides a more successful major tournament as far as Spurs are concerned, as defender Romero's Argentina go all the way. The reigning world champions see off Colombia in the final at a pulsating Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida, where kick off has to be delayed by 82 minutes after fans break through one of the main entry gates. The match goes the distance, too, with Ángel Di María scoring the only goal of the game, 22 minutes into extra time. Di María had been linked with a move to Spurs from Real Madrid back in 2013, when Gareth Bale went in the other direction for a massive £86m, but seemed, to put it mildly, less than enthusiastic about the proposed switch. 'It hurts when you're always doing your best for your club and then you hear that you might be going to Tottenham,' he reflected a year later to Spanish newspaper *Marca*, in words that would come to be immortalised in social media memes by gleeful rival fans.

If the supporter scenes are raucous for the final, they are nothing on the downright ugly events of the semi between Colombia and Rodrigo Bentancur's Uruguay in Charlotte, North Carolina. Trouble brewed in the stands at the full-time whistle following Colombia's 1-0 win, with supporters located near the Uruguayan players' families getting dangerously out of control. Liverpool's Darwin Núñez was among a few players to jump into the stands to confront the fans. Footage of the incident appeared to show Bentancur hurling a bottle from the touchline, striking his own team's fitness coach, Santiago Ferro, who had

also climbed into the stands. A second video also appeared to catch Bentancur lobbing another object into the crowd before staff members ushered him away. It would later land the Spurs man a four-match international ban – beginning a disciplinary theme for the midfielder for the coming season.

The 26-year-old and Tottenham have already been left bracing themselves for a severe punishment from the Football Association for a separate incident. It involves Bentancur making an offensive comment about club team-mate Son Heung-min and South Korean people in the build-up to the Copa América. Bentancur had given an informal interview ahead of the tournament to a journalist who asked if he could ‘get me a shirt from the Korean’. The midfielder responded ‘Sonny?’, the reporter said ‘Or any other champion?’, to which Bentancur replied: ‘Or any cousin of Sonny. They all look more or less the same.’ His words prompt a backlash, as they are widely viewed as racist.

Anti-discrimination campaigners Kick It Out receive ‘a significant number of reports’ over the regrettable slur, which they say highlight ‘a wider issue that heavily affects East Asian and wider communities’, and they send on these reports to Spurs and the relevant authorities. Bentancur apologises to Son on Instagram for the ‘very bad joke’, adding: ‘You know that I love you and I would never disrespect you or hurt you or anyone else.’ Captain Son, conscious of the flak his team-mate is receiving, intervenes. The 31-year-old says: ‘I’ve spoken with Lolo. He made a mistake. He knows this and has apologised. Lolo would not mean to ever intentionally say something offensive. We are brothers and nothing has changed at all. We’re past this, we’re united and we will be back together in pre-season to fight for our club as one.’

Son’s magnanimous reaction prevents the incident from being a major problem within the dressing room but it has the potential to escalate externally, given Spurs’ millions of fans in

South Korea. Tottenham release a statement in which they say they are ‘providing assistance in ensuring a positive outcome on the matter’. ‘This will include further education for all players in line with our diversity, equality and inclusion objectives,’ it adds, and that: ‘We are extremely proud of our diverse, global fanbase and playing squads. Discrimination of any kind has no place at our club, within our game or within wider society.’ Spurs know that Bentancur deserves to face the music for his transgression and are already expecting a lengthy ban. It will mean yet another pause on an already stop-start career in north London since the midfielder joined from Juventus for £15.9m in January 2022. A cruciate ligament tear in February 2023 had kept him out for eight months. Then, soon after his comeback, a heavy challenge from Aston Villa’s Matty Cash damaged his ankle ligaments, sidelining him for another month. It is a headache for manager Ange Postecoglou, too, given both Son and Bentancur are central to his plans for the season. The same cannot be said for a number of other players in the Australian’s squad, though, whose days are looking numbered.

* * *

ASK anyone to compile a list of the Premier League’s biggest flops and Tanguy Ndombele is likely to be on it. The Frenchman’s big-money arrival in 2019 was supposed to herald a new era of loosened purse strings after years of prudence while the new stadium was built. But, sadly, he just ended up being an enormous waste of money. Spurs splashed a club record £55m, with more in add-ons, to bring the midfielder over from Lyon, with reported wages of £200,000 a week. He was signed by Mauricio Pochettino, who saw Ndombele as the ideal man to reinvigorate his squad after two transfer windows without a signing. But Pochettino was sacked just four months into the France international’s time at Spurs.

It did not take long before successor José Mourinho and Ndombele did not see eye to eye, with the Portuguese publicly criticising the playmaker's productivity. Ndombele held a clear-the-air meeting with chairman Daniel Levy in one of the more memorable scenes from the Amazon series *All or Nothing* that documented Spurs' 2019/20 season. The midfielder admitted he was 'not concentrating as I should be' and moaned about his lack of playing time, despite 'everybody saying I trained really well' for three months. Levy attempted to motivate him by referencing close friend Moussa Sissoko's reversal of fortune at Spurs, as well as his own personal comeback success story. 'When I was at school, when I was 16, at a parents' evening, my headteacher told my parents I should leave school,' the chairman recalled. 'The next day, I said to myself "I'm not going to be beaten". From that moment onwards, I got As in my exams and I went to university. I'm a fighter.'

Ndombele replied that he, too, was a fighter, that he had never given up on anything in football and in life. Yet, four years on, having spent three successive seasons loaned out to Lyon, Napoli and, finally, Galatasaray, Spurs are ready to give up for good on Ndombele. Postecoglou appeared willing to give him a clean slate when he took over. But newspaper reports persisted of poor time-keeping, general attitude and application on Ndombele's behalf and the Frenchman quickly fell out of favour. The club agree to mutually terminate the 27-year-old's massive deal, which still has one year left to run, and, in a brief statement, wish him all the best.

Ndombele is not the only major signing to walk out of Spurs for nothing this summer, though. Eric Dier and Ivan Perišić also say goodbye following the expiry of their contracts, as do younger pair Ryan Sessegnon and Japhet Tanganga. For the latter pair, it is an unfortunate story of persistent injuries hampering their chances of success. Sessegnon is only 24 and cost £25m back in 2018 but relentless hamstring problems have limited him to just

57 appearances in five years and, despite having the option to extend his deal by another year, Spurs cut him loose. Knee issues have been Tanganga's curse, meaning the homegrown defender has played even fewer games in his five seasons since breaking into the first team, tallying an even 50. The 25-year-old has managed to play regularly during a loan spell at Millwall, who are waiting in the wings to sign him permanently as his Spurs contract ends. Spurs also agree to sell young Irish striker Troy Parrott to AZ Alkmaar in the Netherlands for £6.7m, meaning a reunion could be on the cards later in the season in the Europa League, given the Eredivisie side, like Spurs, have qualified for the competition.

As for exits the club were not planning, there is one that has a considerable impact on the team. The departure is not of a player but of Chris Davies, Postecoglou's senior assistant coach, who leaves to take over as manager of League One giant Birmingham City.

After making the early mistake of a glamour managerial appointment in Wayne Rooney, the Blues and their American owners – who include NFL god Tom Brady – are desperate to make a smart one. They feel the highly rated Davies ticks all the boxes, despite the 39-year-old – who had to retire as a player as a teenager due to an arthritic condition in his foot – having never before been a No.1.

Postecoglou, who often does not take coaching staff with him to new jobs, put together a fresh backroom team when he arrived at Spurs. One of the new arrivals, Mile Jedinak, already had a connection with Postecoglou, having captained his Australia side, and also played in the Premier League. Matt Wells and Rob Burch were highly thought of and brought a deep-rooted connection to the club, as did the already present Ryan Mason. Brendan Rodgers's former right-hand man, Davies, signed on as Postecoglou's senior assistant but is known to harbour ambitions to be a No.1 one day. His

old club, Swansea, failed in an approach in December 2023 but now he has been granted a switch to the Second City. Davies goes with the blessing of Postecoglou, who describes Davies as ‘outstanding’, and the switch forces a brains trust reshuffle.

The presumption from the outside is that Mason will be the one promoted, given he has already managed the team on an interim basis twice before following the exits of José Mourinho and Antonio Conte. Instead, it is Wells who is selected by Postecoglou to step up.

He is elevated from general assistant coach to senior assistant – essentially the Australian’s No.2 – thanks to his ‘great work ethic and attention to detail’, as Postecoglou puts it. Two more coaches are also brought in to boost the staffing numbers in the form of Nick Montgomery and Sergio Raimundo. The Englishman and Portuguese had been, respectively, manager and assistant together at Hibernian in Scotland, where they had struggled, and Central Coast Mariners in Australia, where they had won the league. Postecoglou has his rejigged coaching staff complete. Now it is time to build on last season’s fifth-placed finish – achieved without Harry Kane – with some business in the transfer market.

* * *

POSTECOGLOU is believed to be keen on recruiting experience in this window. Top of his wishlist are understood to be Conor Gallagher, Pedro Neto and Dominic Solanke, though, as ever, it is down to the recruitment team to source the fresh blood, with Postecoglou having the final say on who comes in. With Richarlison having injury issues the previous season and managing only 12 goals, a new premier centre-forward seems an absolute necessity; hence the interest in Bournemouth’s 19-goal striker, Solanke. But with a European campaign upcoming, a really solid central midfielder and an elite winger would

significantly bolster the team, too. It is believed all three players could be prised away from their respective clubs.

Gallagher is a player whose relentless energy seems a good fit with the Australian's high-pressing approach. His future at Chelsea looks over, despite regularly captaining his boyhood club last season under Pochettino, and is believed to be open to the switch from west to north London. Business between the two capital rivals rarely happens, though, and the England midfielder ends up leaving these shores to join Spanish side Atlético Madrid in August.

Neto had ripped apart Postecoglou's side in February when Wolves won at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. But while the Australian may want him, club sources insist the Portuguese is not under serious consideration from the hierarchy due to concerns over a number of muscle injuries throughout his career, plus doubts over his suitability to Postecoglou's style. The following month, Neto takes Gallagher's place at Chelsea for £54m. An alternative winger is Spain's Euros star Nico Williams, who has a release clause at Athletic Bilbao. Technical director Johan Lange and chief scout Rob Mackenzie, it is understood, even travel over to the Basque city for meetings on what would be a blockbuster transfer but it never materialises.

Instead, Postecoglou sees his squad, which has the extra rigours of European football to cope with this season, beefed up with wonderkids. Their exciting potential is obvious, of course, and their arrivals continue the focus on rejuvenating the team. But they are not ready-made replacements that can help the team kick on right now.

* * *

THE first of these – and, arguably, the best of the lot – Lucas Bergvall, was supposed to join Barcelona. Sporting director Deco, who had won the Champions League with the Spanish giants as a player, gave the hard sell to the 17-year-old over dinner

in the mountains. The Catalan press were writing about the Swedish startlet being the heir to Andres Iniesta and a player who could shine under manager Xavi. It should have been an easy deal to get over the line – and, at £8.5m, a relatively cheap one. But then Postecoglou's Tottenham came calling and everything changed.

Bergvall, the bleach-blond midfielder with the chiselled jawline and movie star looks, had emerged some time ago as one of the most exciting prospects in Europe. Manchester United had him on trial twice, first in 2020 and then again in 2022, but failed to complete a deal. Instead, the Stockholm sensation signed for Djurgårdens from his academy side IF Brommapojkarna for just under €1m – a record fee for a Swedish teenager. One season there was enough to convince Barca he was the wonderkid for them. But Spurs hijacked the move during the January 2024 transfer window, having quietly made their own persuasive pitch to Bergvall.

Lange and Mackenzie had flown over to Stockholm earlier that month and gave an impressive presentation to the player and his family over his strengths and weaknesses. A few weeks later, Bergvall came to London for a tour of Spurs' training ground, where he met with Postecoglou and chairman Levy. And, on 1 February, deadline day for the winter window, he signed a five-year contract with the north Londoners thanks to a gut feeling – a decision which left Barca reeling.

Explaining his thought process to *Sportbladet* months on from the move, Bergvall said: 'It felt better in the stomach. They are both incredible clubs. It was a very difficult choice, it was 50-50 for a very long time, but it felt like the next step for me was Tottenham. It was not very easy to say no to Barcelona. It took a very long time to decide. It was a tough decision.' Djurgårdens sporting director Björn Gustafsson revealed Barca's frustration at Bergvall slipping through their grasp at the 11th hour, commenting: 'I think Barcelona was quite surprised, because you

don't go to Barcelona just to look, to have tapas and see if it's nice. I think they were very disappointed that he chose Tottenham.'

It is a big coup for Lange, who had arrived in November 2023 from Aston Villa following an exhaustive recruitment process for the technical director role which saw around 70 candidates from around the world considered. The Dane is said to be calm and analytical, employing a data-driven approach and has previous experience of a behind-the-scenes overhaul at Villa, which Spurs are themselves carrying out in a number of departments.

The Bergvall transfer was done in the winter but only now, in June, does the youngster pitch up at the club for the first time as a Tottenham Hotspur player. His arrival sparks a rejuvenation project of Spurs' squad that sees a number of other teenagers join the first team – either through transfers from other clubs or via promotion from the Under-23s. Next to arrive is Archie Gray, whose £40m transfer from Leeds makes him the fourth most expensive 18-year-old in the history of the game. The three above him are all Brazilians who all signed for Real Madrid; Vinicius Jnr, Rodrygo and Endrick. Technically, Gray's fee is £30m plus £10m-valued centre-back Joe Rodon, who goes the other way and heads up to Elland Road. Whether Gray's capture will affect the prospects of signing a more experienced central midfielder remains to be seen.

Just like with Bergvall and Barcelona, Spurs are snatching a top young talent from the clutches of another club at the last minute. Gray had been so far down the line with a switch to fellow Premier League side Brentford that he had undergone a medical at the west Londoners' training ground. The teenager had a release clause in his contract allowing him to go for a fixed fee if Leeds failed to return to the Premier League at the first attempt following relegation the previous season. That transpired in brutal circumstances as the Yorkshire side disappointed its hardcore following by losing the Championship play-off final 1-0 to Russell Martin's Southampton. Brentford verbally met

the clause, allowing Gray to travel south to start the necessary physical checks that all moves require.

But a disagreement over the payment structure of the deal saw Leeds subsequently reject the Bees' offer. Spurs, waiting in the wings, then proposed their own move for the Durham lad and Leeds reluctantly accepted. It is believed they may have even used the results from the Bees' medical for their own purposes when signing the England Under-21 starlet. The move is a repeat of the Brennan Johnson scenario from 12 months earlier, when Brentford came close to signing the Wales winger from Nottingham Forest, only for him to end up in N17.

Gray comes from rich footballing stock, most notably his great uncle, Eddie Gray, who was an iconic winger for Leeds during the late 1960s and 70s, helping the club to two First Division titles. Uncle Frank Gray, a left-back who was also a Scotland international, played alongside Eddie over two lengthy spells at Leeds, with a European Cup-winning stint at Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest sandwiched in between. Dad Andy, a striker, also turned out for Leeds in the Premier League before a fairly nomadic career spent largely in the second tier throughout the 2000s. He now acts as an agent to his son Archie, as well as his promising younger brother Harry, also in the Leeds academy.

Given his and his family's connections to the club, Leeds are aware of how selling Gray will go down with a fanbase still smarting from their Wembley woe. 'Whilst we understand that supporters will be hugely disappointed to lose such a homegrown talent and a family name so synonymous with Leeds United, the move improves the club's chance to compete for automatic promotion next season by increasing our ability to build a competitive squad within the league's financial control regulations,' the Championship side say in a statement. 'Everyone at Leeds United is heartbroken to see one of our own depart and would like to thank Archie for all his efforts and professionalism.'

Spurs announce the deal on 2 July, a day after Bergvall's arrival, and Gray quickly shows his versatility by playing the first half of the club's first official friendly of pre-season, away at Scottish Premiership side Hearts, at centre-back. One particular full-blooded tackle gives a taste of the teenager's competitiveness as Spurs run out 5-1 winners. Other youngsters to emerge in pre-season are striker Will Lankshear, a 19-year-old named the Premier League 2 player of the year the campaign before. He scores against Hearts and a K-League XI in South Korea and impresses with his energy. Close mate Mikey Moore, two years Lankshear's junior and seen by many as the best talent to come out of the Spurs academy since Kane, nets a late winner against Vissel Kobe during the club's trip to Japan before they head to Seoul.

Tottenham have cut the number of Far East countries visited in pre-season from three last year to two this summer, making it marginally less gruelling. Postecoglou's first pre-season had been tricky, from having to train on the WACA cricket pitch in Perth, to their game in Thailand being called off due to inclement weather, to playing weaker-than-expected opposition in Singapore on a rock hard pitch. But even with one fewer country to visit this time, the heat in Korea makes training far tougher than back in England.

Still, Spurs look well stocked with wonderkids – and attempt to lure a talent who would top them all, making a ballsy move for Rennes starlet Désiré Doué. The French teenager even makes a clandestine visit to Spurs' Enfield training ground, having had his interest piqued by Postecoglou's thrilling football the season before. But, in the end, Doué opts to stay in France and switches instead to the mighty Paris Saint-Germain. The decision will be well and truly vindicated nine months on when the graceful attacker lights up the Champions League Final and helps PSG batter Inter Milan 5-0 in Munich to complete an historic treble. Still, the intent shows the scale of Spurs' ambition in their search for youth.

* * *

BUT with their focus lasered on emerging talents, the hierarchy risk taking their eye off the ball over experience. A Europa League campaign under a revamped, extended format means Spurs will play a minimum of 48 matches this season. They decide to let seasoned campaigner Højbjerg leave for Marseille, initially on loan but with an obligation to make the move permanent for £15m the following summer. Granted, the steady Dane never seemed an ideal fit for the progressive style of 'Ange Ball' and Spurs have been open to letting him go for the last 12 months. He wants to go, too, desiring regular game time. But while Postecoglou only started Højbjerg in eight Premier League games in the 2023/24 campaign, he also brought him on another 28 times, clearly valuing the former Southampton captain's nous when seeing out matches. Letting him go and replacing him with two midfielders, talented as they are, who have never played in the Premier League seems a gamble.

Postecoglou has, by this point, been handed one experienced new signing – albeit a familiar face. The re-loaning of Timo Werner from RB Leipzig for a further year had been announced in May, with Spurs borrowing him again, rather than taking up their £15m option to sign him permanently. Two goals and four assists in 13 Premier League games had been a decent return, with Werner describing the feeling of opening his account as like having 'boulders off my shoulders'. But it is safe to say his renewed stay does not rock the world of the supporters, who are still hoping for a stellar new face out wide to take the team on to new heights.