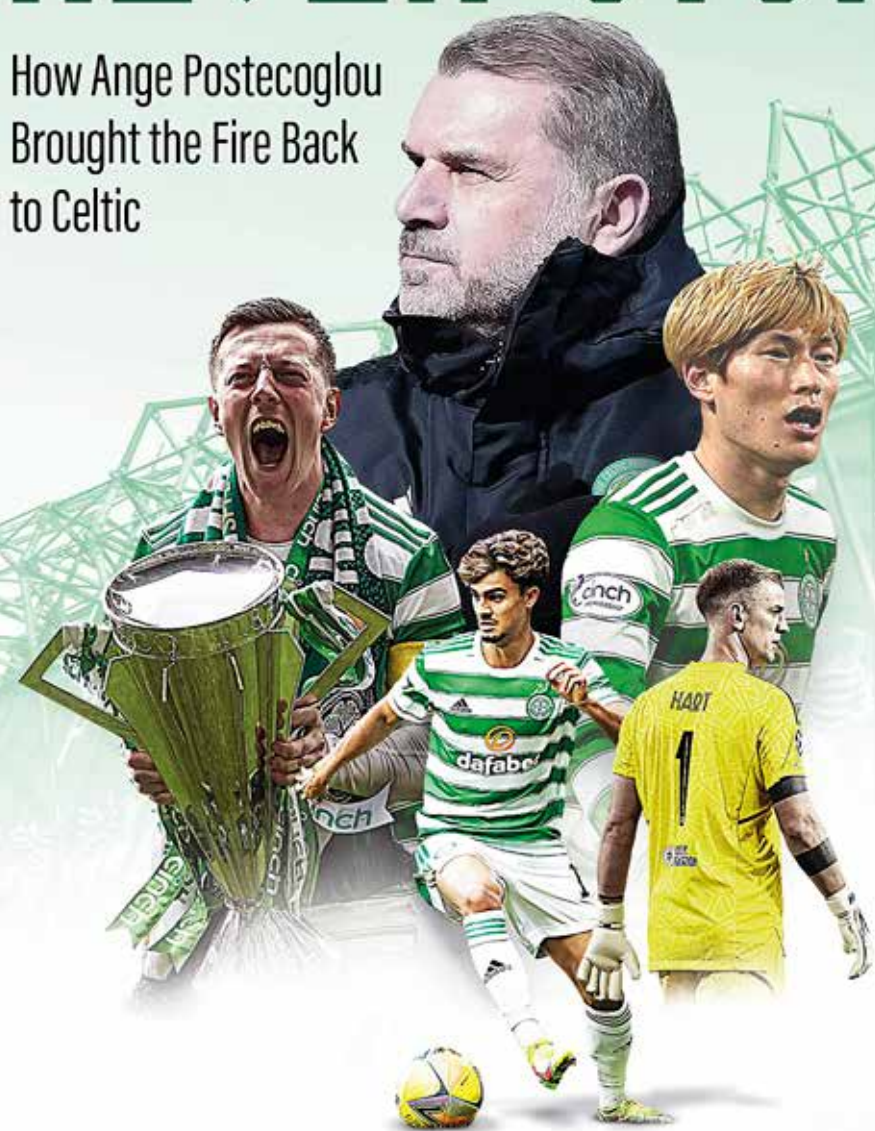


# NEVER STOP

How Ange Postecoglou  
Brought the Fire Back  
to Celtic



HAMISH CARTON

Foreword by Scott McDonald

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## CHAPTER 1

# These Are the Champions

*'I just feel the responsibility of bringing this  
football club to this level.'*

**Ange Postecoglou**

*Celtic 0-3 Real Madrid, UEFA Champions League, Celtic Park, Tuesday, 6 September 2022*

Celtic 0, Real Madrid 3. And yet Celtic Park is bouncing. The Hoops faithful have been singing songs in support of Ange Postecoglou and his players for 15 minutes at the end of a frantic Champions League contest that promised much and, in the end, delivered little. For 55 minutes, Celtic had more than held their own against the reigning Spanish and European champions – going toe to toe with a team featuring some of the best players in the world and managed by the imperious Carlo Ancelotti.

Celtic Park had been a hostile place an hour earlier when the hosts were taking the game to a team featuring 10 of the 11 starters from the Champions League Final victory over Liverpool months earlier. Only Casemiro, the Brazilian defensive-midfielder, had departed the scene in the 101 days since the Paris showpiece, being replaced by Aurelién Tchouaméni, the €100m summer arrival from Monaco. And yet Celtic had created the better chances against this immense collection of footballers.

Callum McGregor and Daizen Maeda had gone closest, with McGregor thumping the post midway through the first half and Maeda passing up a golden chance shortly after coming on as a substitute. Predictably, they were made to pay for this wastefulness minutes later. Two classy goals in four minutes from Vinícius Júnior and the peerless Luka Modrić took the match away from Celtic. A third from Eden Hazard 15 minutes later ended it as a contest.

The final goal, finished by the Belgium international, came at the end of a remarkable 33-pass move. Ancelotti's team worked the ball from side to side and back to front, keeping possession for a full minute and 38 seconds without a single Celtic player touching the ball. As per stat website The Analyst, the goal featured the third-most-extended sequence of passes since Champions League records began in 2003. The longest on record, scored by Barcelona's Cristian Tello, was also against Celtic. This was an altogether different level for Postecoglou's team.

Despite the unfavourable scoreline, Celtic had produced enough on the big stage to feel good about themselves. While the Spaniards could rely on world-class quality and immense experience – their starting XI with a combined 28 Champions League trophy wins between them – Postecoglou had seven players playing their first minutes in the tournament. Only Joe Hart, Callum McGregor, Jota and Giorgos Giakoumakis had previously played in the group stage, and only McGregor had done it with Celtic. Of the 16 players used in the match, 13 had been brought to the club by Postecoglou. The response from the Celtic support in defeat said as much about their efforts on the night as it did about the overall direction the team was headed.

*Die Meister*

*Die Besten*

*Les grandes équipes*

*The champions*

Before kick-off, the North Curve section unveiled a striking display alongside the words 'back with a bang', signifying Celtic's return to the competition after five years away. The tifo was raised while the iconic Champions League anthem bellowed from the PA system, not that you could hear it above 59,000 Celtic fans roaring at the tops of their voices. Matt O'Riley, one of the many experiencing a Champions League night at Celtic Park for the first time, couldn't help but smile.

Postecoglou had described the Celtic faithful as 'a Champions League support' in the lead-up to the match. Toni Kroos and Thibaut Courtois clearly agree with the sentiment as they turn to applaud all four corners of the stadium on their way off the pitch. Postecoglou shares a brief embrace with Modrić, the chief architect of his team's downfall, while most other smiles are reserved for those wearing black.

The Celtic players look weary as they shuffle around the pitch, applauding a support still singing as loud and proud as ever. They've no real reason to feel downbeat after going toe to toe with the best team in Europe for most of the match, although the final scoreline is a sore-looking one. Postecoglou follows them around in typical fashion. There's no pump of the fist or beating of the chest this time. Celtic's boss has no time for hard-luck stories. He looks gutted after the second-half capitulation.

'I just feel the responsibility of bringing this football club to this level,' he tells the press barely half an hour later. 'That's what these fans deserve. There is no starker reminder of that than the reception they gave us after the game. They deserve to see their football club competing with the likes of Real Madrid on a regular basis, and really competing. I feel that responsibility, and I want to get us up to this level so that this club and these fans get what they deserve.'

There's an argument that Postecoglou has already given the Celtic support what they deserve: a team to be proud of. Celtic Park is buoyant again, the kind of place where fans can escape

their daily struggles. Dreams aren't dashed when Postecoglou is around, only made.

'So you want me to burst people's bubbles, do you?' had been his response a day earlier when asked about managing expectations against Madrid. 'You want me to bring a downer to this whole experience? I'm glad our supporters are buzzing about it. I'm sure they get enough of their bubble burst in their normal lives on a daily basis. They don't need me to bring them down.'

The quote is an isolated example of Postecoglou tapping into what it means to be a Celtic fan. As a result, the fanbase hangs on their manager's every word. They believe that his way will bring success. In the lead-up to the Madrid clash, virtually every Celtic supporter fancied them to achieve an improbable result and do it by playing Postecoglou's expansive, attacking way.

Given the Australian's track record in Glasgow, why would any Celtic fan have any doubts? The club is back in the Champions League for the first time since 2017, rubbing shoulders with Europe's elite after a Premiership triumph for the ages. The League Cup is also in Celtic's cabinet, and if there was any doubt about the team's status in Scotland, the 4-0 dismantling of Rangers days earlier proves Celtic are by far the best in the country.

The squad is in the strongest place it has been since the early 21st century, with at least two good players for every position. There are stars in the making, such as Reo Hatate, Jota and Matt O'Riley, and reliable Postecoglou disciples such as Callum McGregor, Cameron Carter-Vickers and Greg Taylor, all buying into the greater good.

The club has a real long-term vision for the first time in decades, and the support fully believes in the manager to get them where they need to be. Postecoglou's masterplan involves turning Celtic into a team that plays in the Champions League every season and can compete with the likes of Real Madrid in one-off matches. Despite the scoreline, he's ahead of schedule. The turnaround since his arrival has been remarkable.

THESE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

**Celtic:** *Hart, Juranović, Carter-Vickers, Jenz, Taylor, McGregor, O'Riley, Hatate, Abada, Giakoumakis, Jota*

**Subs used:** *Maeda, Kyogo, Mooy, Turnbull, Hakšabanović*

**Real Madrid:** *Courtois, Carvajal, Militão, Alaba, Mendy, Modrić, Tchouaméni, Kroos, Valverde, Benzema, Vinícius Júnior*

**Subs used:** *Hazard, Rüdiger, Camavinga, Asensio, Rodrygo*