

The
PARISIAN
Revolution

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**How PSG Toppled
European and
World Football**

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Chapter 1

Qatar buys Paris Saint-Germain

CAST YOUR mind back to 30 June 2011. Sepp Blatter was still the FIFA president despite bribery allegations, Lille had just won their third Ligue 1 title and completed the double by beating Paris Saint-Germain 1-0 in the final, while PSG themselves finished fourth in the league and earned a Europa League spot. In the grand scheme of things, a fairly standard day and moment in 2011. That was until the news broke that would change European football for ever: Paris Saint-Germain had new ownership. Qatar Sports Investments – established in 2005 by the son of the Emir and heir to the Qatari throne, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani – bought a 70 per cent stake in the club. But to understand that moment, you have to go back a few months to November 2010 and to a meeting between some of the most powerful people in France.

Qatar had the aim to become one of the world's leading forces in practically every industry, or at least partner up with and invest in major companies. In 2005, the Qatari Investment Authority was established to develop, invest and

manage state reserve funds and other assets, and in 2006 its operations officially began. It started investing into all sorts of areas such as real estate in London; as of 2017 the group owned 879 commercial and residential properties in the city and purchased the Canary Wharf Group which owns the building nicknamed The Walkie Talkie among others. QIA also purchased the HSBC Tower in Canary Wharf, along with Harrods, and has a 95 per cent stake in The Shard while another unit of the QIA named Qatar Holding owns a whole host of London hotels. Essentially, you cannot walk through London without seeing something that Qatar either owns or has invested in.

Yet, despite their rich portfolios of land in London, hotels and dealings with major banks like Barclays, one sector of the world was missing for the Qatars: sport, more specifically football. They had their eyes on the 2022 World Cup by registering their bid in 2009 and they knew that to secure the finals, they had to make promises to people in high places. One of those influential individuals was none other than UEFA chief and French football legend Michel Platini, whose vote in the World Cup bidding was crucial.

Picture this: you are, for the sake of this story, Michel Platini. You are one of the greatest footballers the world has ever seen, you are probably the greatest French sportsperson to ever live and you are currently the president of UEFA. If you play your cards right from this moment, you'll be a shoo-in to run FIFA. You're worshipped by French football fans and Juventus supporters and a multi-time Ballon

d'Or winner. You've been invited to a lunch at the Elysée Palace with president Nicolas Sarkozy. Unbeknownst to you, other guests have been invited including officials from *Qatar* and, most notably, the crown prince Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani. You don't realise it at the time, but this lunch will destroy your career, place you in the middle of a corruption scandal and change the course of world football for ever.

Nine days after that meeting, FIFA awarded the 2022 World Cup to *Qatar* with Platini casting the deciding vote in their favour despite initially leaning towards the USA. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Sepp Blatter alleged that shortly after the Elysée lunch, Platini informed him he would break a 'gentlemen's agreement' between FIFA's top leaders to award the competition to the USA: 'Just one week before the election, I got a telephone call from Michel Platini and he said, "I am no longer in your picture because I have been told by the head of state that we should consider the situation of France." Platini denied that Sarkozy directly influenced his decision to vote for *Qatar*, but did say, 'Sarkozy never asked me to vote for *Qatar*, but I knew what would be good.' *Qatar* would eventually pump billions upon billions upon billions into the French economy via aviation (in 2011, *Qatar Airways* purchased 50 aeroplanes from *Airbus*, the French aviation company), media and sports. Sarkozy, a bona fide fan of Paris Saint-Germain, had one more trick up his sleeve.

Among the many guests that were invited to the now infamous Elysée Palace lunch was Sébastien Bazin,

the majority shareholder and president of Paris Saint-Germain. Convincing Qatar to buy PSG outright was one of the main items on the agenda of this meeting. Qatar had previously tried to buy the club in 2006 but Colony Capital, the owners after Canal+, decided against the deal. However, after continuing to lose money year after year, Bazin tried to rekindle the Qatari's interest in June 2011 but it wasn't until Sarkozy got involved that the deal began to take shape. Initially, QSI wanted to buy Manchester United from the Glazers. That was deemed unfeasible so they bought PSG instead, as it was 'by far' the cheaper option. And just like that, in the span of seven months, the direction of football was changed. If that meeting in the Elysée Palace never happens, the landscape of world football is very different.

'We will work over the coming years to make PSG a great team and a strong brand on the international scene, one that will make all the fans proud,' said QSI president Nasser Al-Khelaifi, who had now become the head of the Paris Saint-Germain project while also being the head of al-Jazeera, a Qatari-owned broadcasting company. A month prior to the takeover, al-Jazeera had won the rights to broadcast some Ligue 1 games internationally, so it was a very busy time for Al-Khelaifi. But the reaction in France was mixed. Some felt the takeover was positive for the country and the footballing infrastructure; while al-Jazeera had won the international rights, they also paid to broadcast the domestic rights alongside Canal+, the French broadcaster and former owner of PSG, three

weeks after the takeover happened. At that time, Canal+ were the only bidders for the rights and therefore al-Jazeera's introduction gave life to an otherwise stagnant broadcasting landscape for Ligue 1 in France. After the rights had been sold for €150m a year from 2012 to 2016, the league said, 'This constitutes a very satisfying result despite the lack of competition in the French market.'

On the other side of the divide, not everyone was keen on state ownership. According to the French daily newspaper *Libération*, sports minister Chantal Jouanno was almost kicked out by Sarkozy for claiming on RMC radio that she would rather the club have been bought by 'French money'. The man nicknamed 'Président Bling-Bling' was ready to protect his favourite club and his favourite investors in the name of building the French economy, at least in his mind anyway. Many of the hardcore fans would go on to describe the Parc des Princes, PSG's home, as 'soulless' and 'for consumers' rather than ultras, who had been banned by the previous regime. Michel Platini also weighed in on the situation after the takeover and said to RMC, 'I'm not a fan. Football has been a big adventure based on identity. At the time, when there was Paris against Marseille, it was the people of Paris against the people of Marseille. Today the Qatars are coming, great, but I'm not a big fan. Today, they are here but when they leave the club will be bankrupt.'

The plan for Paris Saint-Germain was to take over football in a way that hadn't really been done before. They didn't want to just build a team that would win matches,

trophies and plaudits: they wanted to build a brand. They planned on being successful regardless of who was on the books. When the first signings from QSI came into the building in the 2011/12 season, it signalled their intent. Javier Pastore from Palermo was the marquee transfer at €42m, while Thiago Motta, Jérémie Ménez, Salvatore Sirigu and Mohamed Sissoko followed from fellow Serie A clubs Inter, Roma and Juventus respectively. Kevin Gameiro and Blaise Matuidi joined for a combined €19m from Lorient and Saint-Étienne, weakening Ligue 1 teams in the process. A young Belgian winger at Lille called Eden Hazard was linked with a move to Paris but the French champions were reluctant to sell to a domestic rival, no matter the price, while the central attacking midfield area was identified as a key position almost immediately. By spending so much on Pastore, PSG did a few things. They not only broke their own transfer record and French football's record – set back in 2000 when PSG re-signed Nicolas Anelka from Real Madrid – but they made a statement. They essentially said that while they were prepared to spend big, they wanted to spend big on younger players rather than go for star names immediately. Signing stars wasn't out of the question going forward but buying young just made sense. It was meant to show that they were going to spend the money wisely and build rather than 'do a Manchester City' and splash the cash on a big name who perhaps wasn't entirely sold on joining PSG, but couldn't turn down the pay rise or the signing-on fee or the chance to live in Paris. Those players would

be linked and those older, more recognised names would arrive at the Parc des Princes, but the marquee signing being Pastore was still an exciting one and actually gave PSG the chance to build their own star.

Pastore represented PSG's transfer strategy perfectly. He was young, exciting, extremely talented and straight out of Serie A – a Leonardo special. In total, €107m was spent and that figure jumped up to €150m with the arrivals of more experienced stars from Italian clubs – the idea of buying young had gone out of the window at this point, it seemed – Thiago Silva, Ezequiel Lavezzi, Marco Verratti and the first superstar of the project, Zlatan Ibrahimović.

Ibrahimović arrived from Milan alongside Thiago Silva for a fee believed to be €21m and with Carlo Ancelotti in the dugout in Paris, superstardom had finally taken over. 'It's a very interesting project,' said Ibrahimović upon his arrival. 'I don't know much about the French league, but they know who I am.' Putting aside the typical Zlatan showmanship, it highlighted a problem PSG and their new owners were going to have to navigate: Ligue 1 was definitely the most unknown of the top five European leagues and everyone knew it. The city of Paris is renowned around the world for its glamour, fashion, sights and romance. Paris Saint-Germain were not. Ligue 1 in general was seen as inferior to the Premier League, La Liga, Serie A and the Bundesliga. The Premier League had historic clubs, La Liga had the best players on the planet with Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, the Bundesliga was just about to embark on a renascence

that would propel Germany and German football to the top of the mountain once again and while Serie A was still recovering from the damage caused by the *Calciopoli* scandal, it had the glamour of Juventus, the two Milan clubs and much more. Ligue 1 had passionate fans, some good players (but no truly world-class ones) and their history across European competition was weak. In 1993, Marseille beat Milan to win the Champions League while PSG defeated Rapid Wien in the Cup Winners' Cup in 1996. They were – and still remain, as of the end of 2025 – the only two French clubs to win anything on the continent. Qatar wanted PSG to win more in Europe and dominate. Just on history alone, that was going to be a tall order with or without Zlatan Ibrahimović.

The 2012/13 season saw PSG win Ligue 1 for the first time in almost 20 years, 12 points ahead of fierce rivals Marseille. Spearheaded by 30 goals from Ibrahimović, PSG garnered 83 points which was the most anyone had accrued in Ligue 1 since 2005/06 when Lyon won the title with 84. In Europe, however, their struggles continued; they had failed to make a mark on European football at all since their formation in 1970. In the mid-90s they reached the Champions League semi-final but fell to Milan, despite a miraculous comeback in the quarter-final against Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team'. The mid-2000s saw them in the UEFA Cup/Europa League more often than not, failing to go further than the quarter-final stage. The 2012/13 season was their first in the Champions League since 2004 and they were unlucky to come up

against a fantastic Barcelona side containing the likes of Lionel Messi, David Villa, Xavi, Sergio Busquets and Andrés Iniesta. There was certainly no shame in going out on away goals, but it would become the start of a trend for Paris Saint-Germain in Europe: they always seemed to hit a proverbial brick wall at the vital moment.

Adding Edinson Cavani and Marquinhos to the ranks in the summer of 2013, they romped to the title this time under the managerial eye of Laurent Blanc. Blanc, who had just left the France job after reaching the quarter-finals of Euro 2012, was tasked with getting PSG past the quarter-final stage of the Champions League. The World Cup winner of 1998 had actually carved out a relatively impressive managerial career up until this appointment, winning Ligue 1 with Bordeaux in 2009 and carefully dealing with the post-2010 World Cup fallout of the French national team. He had been tasked with repairing the chaos of Raymond Domenech's reign at the 2010 finals. Player revolts and questions as to how the manager kept his job after failure at Euro 2008 overshadowed any preparation for South Africa. Their qualifying campaign was so bad that they fell into a play-off against the Republic of Ireland where Thierry Henry's controversial handball to set up William Gallas for the winner actually prompted the conversation of video technology in football. So if you hate VAR, you can find a way to blame Raymond Domenech.

Then came the World Cup itself. Karim Benzema, Samir Nasri and Patrick Vieira missed out, while Florent Malouda had to be held back by captain Patrice Evra after

squaring up to Domenech and was thus dropped from the dullest of 0-0 draws against Uruguay. The manager was annoyed at Malouda's tackles in training, with the Chelsea man saying to the media, 'The day before the match, I made two fouls in training and he [Domenech] raised his voice a bit. I did expect to start and was surprised not to but it's no drama. I'll accept whatever the coach decides. He's the boss.'

Somehow, it got worse. Zinedine Zidane came out and publicly said that Domenech had lost control of the team, and that he was 'not a coach'. At half-time of the 2-0 loss to Mexico in the second group game, Domenech subbed off Nicolas Anelka. Most assumed it was performance-related but in reality, Anelka and Domenech had had a blazing row at half-time, with Anelka refusing to apologise when the Fédération Française de Football president Jean-Pierre Escalettes asked him to. This resulted in the striker packing his bags and being sent home from the tournament. The very next day, as a protest against the Anelka decision, the squad refused to train. Evra got into an argument with the fitness coach, Robert Duverne, who stormed off and launched his accreditation to the ground. Evra himself then handed a letter to the media; he stormed off to the team bus, followed by his team-mates, and that was the end of act one of the day. It's also worth pointing out that none of the squad were wearing their boots, only trainers. Therefore, this mutiny was always going to happen. It wasn't a spur of the moment thing. Act two began with FFF national team director Jean-Louis Valentin resigning in disgust of the players' actions.

Valentin told reporters, 'Ask the players, they do not want to involve themselves any more. It's unacceptable. They don't want to train. It's a scandal for the French, it's a scandal for the federation and the French team. It is a shame. As for me, it's over. I'm leaving the federation. I'm sickened and disgusted. Under these conditions I've decided to return to Paris and to resign.'

So the media did ask the players – via the manager. As the players sat on the bus with their curtains drawn, refusing to come outside like a group of teenagers, Domenech read out their statement, 'All players in the France squad without exception want to declare their opposition to the decision taken by the French Football Federation to exclude Nicolas Anelka from the squad. If we regret the incident which occurred at half-time of the match between France and Mexico, we regret even more the leak of an event which should have remained within the group and which is quite common in a high-level team. At the request of the squad the player in question attempted to have dialogue but his approach was ignored. For its part the French Football Federation has at no time tried to protect the squad. It has made a decision [to send Anelka home] without consulting all the players, on the basis of the facts reported by the press. Accordingly, and to mark the opposition to those at the highest level of French football, all the players decided not to train today. Out of respect for the public who came to attend training, we decided to go to meet the fans who, by their presence, showed their full support. For our part we are aware of our responsibilities as those wearing the colours of

our country; also for those we have towards our fans and countless children who keep *Les Bleus* as role models. We forget none of our duties. We will do everything individually and also in a collective spirit to ensure that France regains its honour with a positive performance on Tuesday.'

The team bus then drove off into the distance, shining a prominent light on what is arguably the darkest and most embarrassing moment in the history of the French national team. Nicolas Sarkozy later condemned the scenes as 'unacceptable', and his advisor Henri Guaino said it was 'distressing'. *Liberation* went with the headline 'Shambles' while other outlets labelled the players as 'Mutineers'. Racial tensions were growing back home as a result as well, with various members of the media taking the controversy as an opportunity to stoke the fires.

The vast, vast majority of those back home blamed Domenech for this whole debacle and when you look through the timeline, the signs were there that he was not a manager and certainly not one to lead any team to any sort of glory. Before Euro 2008, he accepted an invitation from a sponsor to take part in a poker tournament in Las Vegas. In the build-up to the Republic of Ireland play-off game, he referred to them as 'England B' which, to the shock of absolutely no one with a brain cell, went down like a lead balloon in that part of the world. Robert Pires said he felt 'physically sick' when he was called up by Domenech and when Arsène Wenger questioned why Pires always came back from international duty pale and tense, Pires simply replied, 'It's Domenech, Arsène.' At Euro 2008 – after

he'd finished his poker stint in Las Vegas – when France were dumped out of the group stages, Domenech publicly proposed to his girlfriend Estelle Denis, a television presenter on the channel M6.

'I have only one plan at the moment, it is to marry Estelle, and it is only this evening that I ask for her hand in marriage,' said Domenech, who had been asked about whether he felt he had a future as France coach. 'I know that it is difficult, but it is in moments like these that one has need of everyone, and I need her.'

He then apologised for the gesture, 'Yes, forgive me. It was an error in communication. I felt a moment of humanity when I should have stayed cold and professional. Behind my outer shell, I felt the need to tell people that I love them. It was a moment of spontaneity, of sincerity, of total emotion. My son sent me a text message to tell me he loves me. I saw players crying, others throwing their [football] boots.'

Somehow, Domenech kept his job after this shambles. Despite the public outrage over what had gone on at the tournament, the FFF kept him and publicly backed him yet criticised him behind closed doors. Fast forward two years and the decision to not renew Domenech's contract was an easy one. Jean-Pierre Escalettes – now chairman of the FFF – refused to resign, stating, 'I can't leave a sinking ship ... We will meet at the beginning of July to see who is responsible.' Not long after this statement was made, Escalettes resigned from his position. 'After a weekend of reflection during which I consulted with my

elected colleagues and those close to me, I have decided that I must resign,' he said. At the same meeting where Escalettes resigned, the FFF board appointed Laurent Blanc as their new manager. Blanc had stepped down as Bordeaux boss with a year left on his contract with the intention of becoming the France manager after the World Cup. Bordeaux were far from happy with the FFF and claimed the governing body's meddling caused their drop-off in the Ligue 1 season and cost them the title. Even appointing a new manager was filled with controversy for the FFF. They couldn't do anything right.

Blanc found a way to steady the French ship heading into the 2012 European Championship, where they were beaten by Spain in the last eight. It was certainly a more respectable showing than the previous two tournaments. This is a detour from the story of PSG, but it adds to the context of why the club eventually appointed Blanc. Did they feel his ability to handle a crisis and rebuild was key to what they wanted?

Regardless of what the club thought of his work with Bordeaux and with *Les Bleus*, Blanc wasn't their first choice. In actual fact, the former Manchester United defender wasn't the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh choice. When Carlo Ancelotti decided to leave and return to Real Madrid to replace José Mourinho, president Nasser Al-Khelaifi started to shortlist a few names. Mourinho himself was placed atop the wanted list, alongside Arsenal boss Arsène Wenger, who had been approached in 2011 according to *L'Équipe*. Both managers turned the club

down. Wenger cited his love for and loyalty to Arsenal for his rejection, while Mourinho later admitted he rejected PSG twice.

'I knew about the project even before it began,' Mourinho said in an interview with *Telefoot*, the French television show. 'I was Leonardo's first choice [ahead of Ancelotti].' When discussing the second rejection in 2013, Mourinho claimed that the allure of managing Chelsea a second time was too good to turn down. Understandable from both Wenger and Mourinho. As for the other candidates, their reasons were slightly more embarrassing. Fabio Capello said no as he felt it would have been a 'betrayal' to Russia for him to leave in those circumstances (he was sacked in 2015, anyway). Guus Hiddink was seemingly very close to getting the job but decided to stay with Anzhi Makhachkala (the Dutchman would resign a month later amid links to Barcelona). André Villas-Boas turned them down in order to see in a second season at Tottenham Hotspur (he was also sacked not long after). Frank Rijkaard, who had just been sacked by the Saudi Arabia national team, also rejected PSG and claimed he didn't want to manage a club that season. That was Rijkaard's last managerial job in football. Manuel Pellegrini claimed that he also rejected an approach from PSG to take the Manchester City job instead, while Rafael Benítez and Roberto Mancini were both briefly linked, with *Gazzetta* in Italy claiming Leonardo had been in touch with Mancini after his departure from Manchester City. Leonardo, who at this point was the

sporting director at the club, had been a backup for Al-Khelaifi. Al-Khelaifi's plan was to appoint Leonardo as manager for a season then swoop back in for Wenger the following season. That was shelved because Wenger had made it very clear he didn't want to leave Arsenal, and Leonardo had just been given a nine-month suspension for shoulder-barging a referee after protesting a Thiago Silva red card after a 1-1 draw with Valenciennes.

The Qatari circus in Paris had pitched its tent and was firmly in full swing and just appointing a manager proved to be hard enough. Blanc was in the door, another Ligue 1 title was secured but Champions League progression was once again halted at the quarter-final stage. Despite beating Chelsea 3-1 at home in the first leg, PSG travelled to London with the advantage and a simple task at hand. Don't lose. Just get a draw, at the very minimum, or win. Achieve that and you face Atlético Madrid or Barcelona in the semi-final. What happened? Chelsea won 2-0 and went through via away goals thanks to a late Demba Ba effort that caused Stamford Bridge to erupt and PSG to crumble. They did manage to get their revenge a year later, however, by knocking Chelsea out of the last 16 with a Thiago Silva header giving them progression on away goals. The joy was short-lived, however, as Barcelona then dispatched them with ease in the quarter-final, 5-1 on aggregate. By this point, PSG's reputation in Europe was that of a team who had quality and could punish you from defence or attack but ultimately a truly top team could beat them. Barcelona with Messi, Neymar and Luis Suárez also

took PSG apart in 2014/15, while in 2013/14 Chelsea had exposed a mental fragility.

The 2015/16 season saw an eerily similar situation. Drawn against Chelsea in the last 16, again, PSG disposed of them with ease, winning 4-2 on aggregate including a victory at Stamford Bridge (against Guus Hiddink, naturally) which put them in the quarter-finals against Manchester City. *Qatar* vs the United Arab Emirates, the two richest clubs on the planet going head-to-head for a place in the Champions League semi-final. The first leg would be in Paris, where PSG were awarded a penalty within the first 15 minutes and an early chance to grab the advantage. Zlatan Ibrahimović stepped up, usually so reliable, but had his spot kick saved by Joe Hart. Kevin De Bruyne then gave City the lead on 38 minutes before Fernando essentially handed Ibrahimović a reprieve to send the teams in level at the break. On the hour, Adrien Rabiot – who had also scored in the previous round against Chelsea – tapped in from a rebound at close range to give PSG their lead back. A defensive mishap at the back presented Fernandinho the chance to draw level and his scuffed effort rolled past Kevin Trapp to make it 2-2, a huge result in the away goal age which essentially gave City a goal-lead heading back to the Etihad. In that second leg, both teams traded chances early on before Sergio Agüero mirrored Ibrahimović in the first leg and missed a penalty. De Bruyne curled in an effort from the edge of the box on 76 minutes to more or less wrap the tie up in City's favour, and yet another Champions League campaign had ended

in disappointment for Paris. This time, however, there would be repercussions for Laurent Blanc.

The club felt he had been given adequate resources to progress further than the quarter-finals at least once, and his team selection in the second leg against Manchester City proved to be his undoing. He set up with a back three formation with Serge Aurier filling in as a central defender next to Marquinhos and Thiago Silva, with Maxwell and Gregory van der Wiel providing width in a four-man midfield with Motta and Rabiot in the middle. It was a baffling formation to play in the biggest game of the season and it ultimately cost Blanc his job. Nasser Al-Khelaifi said in June 2016, weeks before Blanc was officially sacked, 'I've been here for five years and this is the first time we have had this sense of failure,' which was essentially the writing on the wall for the former France and Bordeaux boss. Thanks for the domestic success, Laurent, but you can't manage in the big games. Bye!

Blanc's successor was picked almost immediately; this time PSG avoided the embarrassment of being rejected by every manager and their dog, and they had one goal in mind: European success. So they appointed the man who had just guided Sevilla to an incredible hat-trick of Europa League wins, Unai Emery. A solid choice, perhaps not fitting with the usual glitz and glamour expected from PSG but one that made sense at least on paper. They wanted success in Europe, so they hired a manager who just delivered success in Europe. Yes, it may have been in a different competition but success is success no matter what level, right?

Managers are often divided into two categories – man-managers and tacticians. Both are effective. Carlo Ancelotti has won the Champions League multiple times based on ‘vibes’ in the past (not to diminish his tactical acumen), while Pep Guardiola, arguably the greatest manager of all time, is a renowned tactician, not happy until everything fits into his perfectly devised setup and even then he’ll probably find a fault with it. Unai Emery is very much a tactician. The man lives football and is obsessed by every ounce of it. He’s incredibly detailed in his organisations and drills this into every player in his squad. ‘Emery put on so many videos I ran out of popcorn,’ former player Joaquín joked. ‘He’s obsessed by football, it’s practically an illness.’ At Valencia, Emery’s video ‘homework’ was delivered to the players on a USB drive. Emery had a feeling that one player was not following his advice, so he gave the player a blank USB stick. ‘Did you watch it?’ Emery asked. ‘Yes, don’t worry boss,’ was the reply.

Emery had rightly earned his crown as the Europa League king, a maestro of the competition and someone who relished working with the underdog (something that would continue throughout his career). The powers that be at PSG saw his CV and assumed he would be the right man to lead the club to European glory. The one glaringly obvious issue with that logic is simple: he won the Europa League, not the Champions League. Before joining PSG, he had only progressed from the Champions League group stage once, in his first Champions League campaign with Valencia in 2010/11. Excluding that first

season, Emery had won just five games in three separate Champions League campaigns and *this* was the guy PSG appointed to win them the big one?

He arrived with a reputation of staying patient with talent and getting the best out of the players at his disposal. And at his disposal was a talented group. Zlatan Ibrahimović had departed to join José Mourinho at Manchester United, while new sporting director Patrick Kluivert – an appointment that was made with star power in mind, seeing as the Dutchman had never held this position at any level before – was brought in to help oversee transfers. Kluivert, who was once described by his own friend Jean-Michel Vandamme, Lille’s former deputy managing director, as ‘not a leader of men, I don’t see him as someone who’s going to sort everything out’, helped bring in players like Hatem Ben Arfa, Jesé and Grzegorz Krychowiak, but failed to adequately replace Ibrahimović. PSG made the right decision in bringing in a new sporting director, but perhaps not the right candidate.

Emery’s preference in formation was 4-2-3-1, first deployed against Bastia in a 1-0 win. Ben Arfa played as the lone frontman, while Marco Verratti was left on the bench for the first two games and returned as a starter against Monaco in a 3-1 defeat. In truth, nothing felt settled at first; if Emery hadn’t found his feet and hadn’t figured out his best team or best formation. It differed between 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-3, also using a 4-4-1-1 in both Champions League group stage games against Arsenal. PSG dropped points against Monaco, Saint-Étienne, Toulouse, Marseille,

Montpellier, Nice and Guingamp all before Christmas and eventually this run would cost them in the Ligue 1 title race as Monaco stormed to the title on the back of an incredible team set up by sporting director dynamo Luís Campos including the likes of Bernardo Silva, Fabinho, Radamel Falcao and a teenager who made his debut the season prior but made his mark on both France and the continent the following season: Kylian Mbappé.

But Emery's and PSG's problems would not stop with their domestic failure. The Champions League last 16 would call them again, and once more Barcelona were the ones knocking on the Parisian door. The two legs would encapsulate everything about Paris Saint-Germain. It showed what they could do when everything clicked in a perfect game plan while showing the mental fragility that would for ever be linked with this era of the club. What they were about to encounter was *La Remontada*.

La Remontada is so famous that it's in the exclusive club of a football match having its own Wikipedia page. It became the comeback that people thought of in football. Yet the incredible thing is PSG won the first leg 4-0 and the preverbal obituaries were being written for this era of Barcelona, the 2015 champions. On 14 February 2017, Barcelona travelled to Paris and were swiftly met with the most incredible performance of a Parisian generation. The press was intense, the passing was free-flowing and crisp, it was scintillating football and it excited the fans, it devastated Lionel Messi, it shocked Neymar and it debilitated Luis Suárez. All three of theMSN were left

floating among the waves of Parisian pressure and they were helpless to do anything about it: 4-0 to Paris Saint-Germain. This was the night they finally made their mark on the Champions League. They had faced their own European kryptonite and struck it down with four mighty swoops. Ángel Di María scored two, Julian Draxler and Cavani were also on target. This was Unai Emery's Paris Saint-Germain. Finally, they had played the way he dreamed of. No team had ever come back from four goals down in a Champions League knockout tie. Luis Enrique had a tall task on his hand to overturn this deficit.

For the next few weeks, *Remontada* was everywhere. Barcelona fans and media started to talk the comeback into existence. The differing opinions from within the PSG camp were briefly shown to the public in one short video that was posted online after the first leg. Thomas Meunier, Marco Verratti, Blaise Matuidi and Julian Draxler were filmed having a meal for a show or documentary and were discussing the seemingly unlikely possibility of a Barcelona comeback in the second leg. 'If we lose 5-1, do you think we would be happy?' asked Verratti. 'No, I would be annoyed,' replied Meunier. Draxler and Matuidi both said they would be happy. Meunier, clearly perplexed by the opinions of his two team-mates, replied with: 'If we lose 5-1, people will mock us. People talk and criticise them for being thrashed by PSG and we know they are a great team, but losing 5-1 to Barcelona? That's not good.' Matuidi and Draxler were happy with the prospect of simply making it out of the tie alive, while Meunier and Verratti admitted that if they

were to be thrashed yet still advance, they'd be unhappy. Clearly, they weren't on the same wavelength. At the time, it felt like professionals just discussing an upcoming game but in hindsight, it was much more than that. It felt like the PSG players had actually contemplated the idea of a Barcelona comeback. In Barcelona, they were dreaming of the recovery and they were trying to speak it into existence. Over in Paris, they were dreading the very same thing.

What was a dream slowly started to become a spoken reality. Paris had a 4-0 lead, but their approach to the game was still up in the air. They weren't comfortable with sitting back and defending a lead, yet opening up and attacking Barcelona with an intense press felt off the table as they'd get carved open. So they settled on sitting back and defending their comprehensive lead. That plan was dealt a huge blow after just three minutes when Suárez opened the scoring; 4-1 on aggregate but there was a sense of impending doom for every Parisian in the Camp Nou. The press that had wowed Europe had gone, with PSG hanging on to dear life despite having a three-goal advantage on aggregate. For a period of time they did manage to hold on. It wasn't so much a plan to stifle Barcelona, more like parking a cavalcade of buses in front of their own goal. Just before half-time, however, Layvin Kurzawa mistimed his clearance and gave Barcelona a 2-0 lead. A gigantic gulp emanated from Unai Emery, who had to rally his troops during the interval.

Whatever Emery said, it failed. Five minutes after the break Messi added a third and it looked like the comeback

was going to be complete. It wasn't a case of if, but when. That being said, this was back when away goals were in play. One goal for PSG would almost certainly turn the tie on its head and quieten down any Barça momentum. Just after the hour, Cavani fired home and got that vital away goal; 3-1 on the night, 5-3 on aggregate with Barcelona having to score three more in the last 30 minutes to go through.

At half-time, Luis Enrique spoke to his side and said, 'Boys, even if there are only five minutes left, you'll still be able to score three goals.' Some felt like it was destiny that Barcelona would do it. It was inevitable. There were 88 minutes on the clock when Neymar stepped up for a free kick and rifled it into the top corner; 4-1 on the night, 5-4 on aggregate. In the first minute of added time, Suárez went down under minimal contact from Marquinhos. Penalty to Barcelona. Neymar scored and suddenly the Camp Nou was about to lift off; 5-1 on the night, 5-5 on aggregate. The stadium had been chanting 'Si, se puede' for the game, meaning 'Yes, we can', and things were about to reach boiling point. Neymar had a free kick on the right and could only whip in a cross as it was too far for an audacious shot. PSG's stars, clearly rattled by everything that was transpiring, were lost and out of focus. Three Barça players were left free in the box. The ball evaded Messi and trickled past Gerard Piqué, but Sergi Roberto was on hand to throw his entire body at a chance of completing history; 6-1. *La Remontada* was complete. Barcelona had not only beaten Paris Saint-Germain, but had crushed their spirits and doomed them to eternity as the chokers of a generation. For Barça, Messi,

Neymar and Luis Enrique, it was ecstasy. For PSG, it was a living nightmare.

Almost immediately, the mental mindset of the club changed overnight. Blaise Matuidi told RMC Sport that he was ‘ashamed’ of himself, while Lucas Moura admitted afterwards that he was up all night crying. PSG lodged an official complaint with UEFA over the performance of referee Deniz Aytekin and provided a video dossier of at least ten ‘errors’ (it must be noted that it wasn’t only PSG who were publicly complaining about Aytekin; pundits and media across the continent also noted the bizarre decisions in such a high-profile game). They also had to deny that Matuidi and Verratti had been in a private nightclub with pop star Rihanna 48 hours before the game. Years later, Emery would chat about the night and his feelings on being on the wrong side of this historical moment. Speaking with *France Football*, Emery admitted that he felt the main reason they were eliminated was ‘because VAR did not exist yet. We were clearly eliminated by refereeing decisions.’ Emery would also go on to say, ‘I saw that one of our important players, who had had injury problems during the season, was hiding. Maybe, I would substitute him now.’ Many believe that he was speaking about captain Thiago Silva, who had been criticised in the aftermath by former defender Dominique Bathenay, saying Silva ‘is not a leader. He’s incapable of getting his team-mates to surpass themselves in difficult moments.’

Little did anyone know, however, that this game was about to change world football perhaps for ever. The

seismic changes caused by this win for Barcelona would still be felt almost ten years after the event. There's a clear butterfly effect that can be pinpointed to one precise moment. It wasn't Sergi Roberto wheeling away as the Camp Nou erupted, it wasn't that Unai Emery looked stunned and shocked on the sidelines, nor was it the look of stone across the face of Al-Khelaifi. No, it was Lionel Messi standing on the advertising hoardings and producing one of the most visually pleasing images of an athlete. He was held aloft in front of adoring fans and if you hadn't watched the game you would have assumed that he was the one who inspired the comeback. Neymar had. This was Neymar's game. Neymar, who had longed to step out of the shadow of Messi, had finally put in a performance worthy of world acclaim. And yet Messi was the one who got the focus. This adulation put Neymar's nose out of joint and finally made it clear to him what had to happen. To fully step away from the Messi shadow, he had to leave Barcelona. And his departure would cause shockwaves across the world.