

How Brentford flipped the script and staged a data revolution to become England's smartest club

How do you generate more than £120million on transfers over five years, but still maintain one of the most talented squads in the Championship?

"If David wants to beat Goliath, you can't do that by using the same weapons," Brentford's co-director of football Rasmus Ankersen tells talkSPORT.



Meet Rasmus Ankersen, one of the men at the forefront of football's data revolution

You've seen Moneyball, right? Well, [Brentford](#) are a bit like that. They understand that underdogs don't win by playing the same game as everyone else.

Their weapon of choice is football analytics, which helps them scour the globe for what Ankersen describes as 'whispering talents'.

Or, in other words, under-performing individuals with high potential, but no-one knows it yet. Sports history is littered with them.

Flamengo refused to pay the original Ronaldo's bus fare to get him to a second trial. It was worth about 50p. He went on to be named the world's greatest footballer three times.

Michael Jordan was kicked out of his college basketball team, Asafa Powell couldn't find an athletics club just years before becoming the fastest man on earth in 2005, and Paul McCartney's teachers failed to spot any musical talent.



Imagine overlooking Asafa Powell? Well, most of Jamaica did

Ankersen, Brentford's charismatic Dane who has written books on developing talent, reckons most companies spend two per cent of their time recruiting and 75 per cent managing their recruitment mistakes. Most of his days are spent ensuring he doesn't fall into that trap.

He knows that what you see is not necessarily what you get, especially when it comes to football.

Sure, Liverpool are top of the Premier League, but what's their shot conversion rate? Is it freaky? What's their expected points tally? Are they the best team, or have they simply been lucky?

Ankersen was one of the first men in football to realise that, contrary to cliché, the table *does* lie. And as a result, football's data revolution emerged from a small old ground with a pub on each corner.

"Football is such an overheated and irrational industry," Ankersen says.

Griffin Park is the only ground in the land to boast a pub on all four corners

"If you get on a bad run of results, what's the average lifetime of a manager? 16 months?"

"When we evaluate how well we do, we don't look at the league table. We look at these underlying ratings which we trust more. They're more predictive for where we're going to go.

"Because of all the randomness in football, you can overachieve with 15 points or underachieve with 15 points. The league table isn't always so reflective of how strong you actually are.

"Thomas Frank lost eight of his first ten games as Brentford head coach. We didn't panic and now things are going a lot better.

“It’s about knowing when to stick to the plan and when to drive change. We have a much more rational and objective approach than the classic emotional approach in football.”

He’s right, football is full of randomness and luck, more so than most other sports. A deflection can win a game for a team who had one shot and 20 per cent possession. But any wise gambler knows you don’t back that team next time, just because they won.

There are few wiser than Brentford owner Matthew Benham – one of the smartest men in football.



An Oxford physics graduate, Benham has spent decades becoming a football scientist, removing outcome bias and other wrong judgements we make without even realising.

“It might sound arrogant, but people do talk a lot of rubbish in the stadium,” Benham once said. “If the opponent ventures forward once or twice after we have dominated for five minutes, someone will immediately say, ‘They want it more than us!’”

Even in 2008, his mathematical methods of evaluating performance were more sophisticated than the current algorithm used for expected goals (xG).

He made his millions through a company called Smartodds: a team of genius statisticians who calculate the outcome of football matches to gain an edge over bookmakers.

So when he became majority shareholder of his boyhood club in 2012, he already had the perfect model to guide them from the third tier of English football to the edge of the Premier League.

When Ankersen met Benham in 2013, the Bees were third in League One with a few games remaining. Ankersen asked Benham whether he thought Brentford would go up. The reply? They had a 42.3 per cent chance.

Despite his career as a professional player and coach, Ankersen's whole outlook on football was instantly transformed. And suddenly, so was Brentford's recruitment model, with the help of co-director Phil Giles and technical director Robert Rowan, who sadly died at the age of 28 in 2018.

Matthew Benham went to his first Brentford match at the age of 11 and now owns the club

Benham's tools compare the relative quality of clubs around the world, helping Brentford find your classic Football Manager wonderkids, usually on the Continent, where the player market is less inflated than England.

"It's not that data tells you who to pick, data can tell you where to look," Ankersen explains.

"Using data and using models to compare the strength of different teams and different leagues, we've been able to identify some of the markets or some of the leagues that have a higher level than people think.

"This is what Matthew has been doing for the last 25 years – finding inefficiencies in the market and exploiting them."

Brentford have to generate £15m profit in the transfer market every year to function as a profitable business. This is the reality for most Football League clubs without a billionaire owner willing to cover their losses, but the Bees are up against it more than most of their Championship rivals.

Ankersen adds: "At Griffin Park, we have one of the lowest commercial revenues in the league.

"We don't have any hospitality facilities, so we've been relying on successful player trading. That's been the bread and butter of the club.

Brentford are currently five points off the automatic promotion spots

"The key is being able to identify undervalued talent in the market, develop them, and then sell them on for profit, gradually building more value into the squad and gradually increasing the level of the squad.

"Now we come to a place where we have a huge amount of value in the squad and we're good enough to compete at the top of the league."

If you haven't seen Moneyball, that's basically the plot right there. But Benham doesn't see it that way. He actively dislikes the comparison, because it removes all the human aspects to Brentford's model.

"I don't know why he doesn't like the Moneyball analogy," Ankersen says. "He sees all the nuance and all the other things that go into the process of getting deals done and evaluating players. I think he just doesn't like too much publicity."

But at the risk of oversimplifying, Brentford's success still derives from out-thinking, rather than out-spending the opposition.

Brentford's player trading profits (selected)

Neal Maupay to Brighton – **£18.2m** (bought for £1.6m, sold for £19.8m)

Chris Mepham to Bournemouth – **£12.2m** (B team product, sold for £12.2m)

Andre Gray to Burnley – **£10.65m** (Bought for £550k, sold for £11.1m)

Ezri Konsa to Aston Villa – **£9.5m** (Bought for £2.5m, sold for £12m)

Scott Hogan to Aston Villa – **£8.7m** (Bought for £750k, sold for £9.5m)

Ryan Woods to Stoke – **£5.5m** (Bought for £1m, sold for £6.5m)

Jota to Birmingham – **£4.5m** (Bought for £1.2m, sold for £5.7m)

They have the fourth-lowest playing budget in the [Championship](#), but they're fifth in the table. And according to xG, their performances make them the second-best team in the league this season, behind Leeds.

What's more, Benham and Ankersen have been doing the same thing at FC Midtjylland in Denmark.

Initially frustrated with the lack of change he could implement in a conservative Football League unwilling to change, Benham bought Midtjylland in 2014 and installed Ankersen, their former player and coach, as chairman.

They made wholesale changes overnight: transfers were inspired by mathematical models and obscure stats were sent directly to the touchline at half-time to influence tactics.

"At first, I thought it was all bullshit, because football is about showing heart," Midtjylland's then-captain Kristian Bach Bak said.

Henning Bagger

Midtjylland made headlines over here in 2016

The Danish club won their first-ever Superliga title in 2015 and beat [Manchester United](#) in the Europa League the following year.

If Midtjylland were the world's first truly modern football club, Brentford quickly became the second, and the Bees suffered their fair share of criticism, too.

But like Kingston for sprinters, or South Korea for female golfers, west London soon became a goldmine for undervalued footballers due to the club's unique understanding of potential.

There's no better example than Neal Maupay, the Brighton striker currently linked with a £40million move to Napoli.

Brentford picked him up from the second tier of French football for £1.6m just two-and-a-half years ago.

"Maupay was not a perfect player," Ankersen recalls. "If you ask people in France, they thought he was too aggressive, too angry.

"It's about understanding which problems you can fix and which problems you can't fix.

Brentford transformed Maupay's career and he's already thriving at Brighton

"If players were fully developed, Brentford wouldn't be able to buy them. You get an unfinished package, and you need to make it better.

“Maupay was a very talented player. He played in Ligue 1 when he was 16. The football potential was always there. He lost his way a little bit because of some bad career moves and an injury.

“You look for players that have potential and analyse the context: why have they not fulfilled their potential?”

Maupay, sold for £19.8m, was comfortably Brentford’s best player last season, and for most clubs, losing such a star on deadline day would signal trouble.

But departures at Brentford only pave the way for the next big thing. For example, Ollie Watkins and Said Benrahma are among the most highly-rated players in the Championship. Neither of them cost Brentford more than £2m, both are now worth eight figures.

“You try and find a stock that is undervalued, right? It’s cheaper than it should be, then you get the upside.” Ankersen has a knack for transforming complex ideas into simple analogies.

Rex Features

BMW – the front three driving Brentford’s success this season

Essentially, Brentford are fiercely determined to find young, hungry players who want to prove themselves. And they know where to look. It’s no coincidence that Maupay, Benrahma and Bryan Mbeumo all came from Ligue 2.

This season, the average age of Brentford’s starting XI is 24 years and 324 days – the second youngest in the Championship. Not bad for a club who were widely scrutinised for scrapping their academy and replacing it with a globetrotting B team.

“An academy exists for two reasons,” Ankersen explains. “Either you want to produce first-team players or it’s a profit-maker. We didn’t do any of those things.

“When a 17-year-old player finishes his scholarship, he’s basically a free player. So when we thought we had a good one who could make it here, big clubs came in and paid the player much more than we could afford. And we got a ridiculously small amount of compensation.

“You’ve got to be different. When you’re in London and you’ve got all these big clubs around you, you can’t do the same things they do. We wanted to flip the model.

Brentford have made their status as a small club work to their advantage

“Look at the number of players being released from Premier League academies. They’re being released at an age when it’s very difficult to see who’s going to make it and who isn’t.

“If we can pick up the rejects, we’re not competing against these clubs anymore, we become their friends.

“It was a strategic decision on how to create a model where we can produce first-team players and make a business out of it, rather than spending £2m a year on something that doesn’t work.

“Since we made the decision, we’ve had 15 debuts in the first team. We sold Chris Mepham [a B team product rejected by Chelsea] to Bournemouth for a lot of money.

“We’ve got some good stories this season, like Mads Roerselv, who came in from FC Copenhagen, started with the B team, and has now made two appearances in the Championship.”

The success of the B team, much like Brentford's overall model, was born out of necessity. But with a new 17,800-seater stadium arriving this summer, and the increasing possibility of Premier League football alongside it, what happens when it's not David vs Goliath anymore?

Brentford's stunning new stadium should be ready this summer

"The Premier League is a much more even playing field because of the TV deal," the Dane explains. "In that sense, the Championship is probably the most unfair league in the world.

"It would be easier to retain Premier League status than to get promoted to the Premier League.

"We will always be open to do good deals. If we're able to replace a player with a better player and pay less, we'll do it.

"I don't think the model will change, but we'll be in a much more stable financial situation.

"You can say 'no', you don't have to sell. You have a much more stable cash flow than in the Championship."

Brentford get a taste for what the future might hold on Saturday when Premier League high-fliers Leicester visit Griffin Park in the FA Cup

Leicester's remarkable Premier League triumph in 2016 was largely inspired by Steve Walsh's recruitment of N'Golo Kante, Riyad Mahrez, and Jamie Vardy. Three unknown superstars lying in wait, two of them learning their trade in Ligue 2. Sound familiar?

But Ankersen knows better than anyone that the events at the King Power were among sport's greatest-ever statistical anomalies. Rather, it's the high levels of performance since which truly impress him.

He adds: "I have a lot of respect for what's gone on at Leicester, especially what they've done after the title win. They're still there among the top teams in the Premier League. That's a remarkable achievement.

"They seem to be a club that's punching above its weight as well."

Brentford haven't experienced top-flight football since 1947, a 73-year exodus. But the Premier League hasn't seen anything like the Bees, either.

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