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ARM	23.7% DRAW	TUR	51.0% DRAW	RKS	39.4% DRAW	BUL	32.2% DRAW	SVK	44.1% DRAW	NED	29.0% DRAW
GEO	53.6% 22.6%	HUN	24.1% 24.9%	ISL	34.1% 26.6%	IRL	42.3% 25.4%	SVN	29.1% 26.8%	ESP	46.4% 24.6%



FOOTBALL

# Marco Asensio Can Show at Aston Villa He is So Much More Than a Supersub

MAR 6, 2025    ALI TWEEDALE / AUTHOR, ANA GONZALEZ / DESIGN, JONNY WHITMORE / DATA VIZ



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***Marco Asensio has scored yet again, this time in Aston Villa's Champions League win at Club Brugge. He is already proving his worth at his new club.***



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Certain things happen in football these days that make you feel like you're 10 seasons into an early 2010s version of *Football Manager*.

When players went that deep into the computer game, elements of the future were mapped out in ways that would – at the time – appear entirely unrealistic.

The thing about certain strands of Aston Villa's recent history, however, is that much of what is happening at the club now would have surely seemed impossible as recently as just a few years ago.

In 2021-22, Villa dived with the possibility of relegation from the **Premier League**, having only three years before that won promotion back into the top flight.

Now, they are winning **Champions League** knockout matches with a three-time winner, in what should be the prime years of his career, coming off the bench to put the icing on the cake.

Marco Asensio is more than just the proverbial icing on the cake, though. He is more than a sprinkling of stardust on what could end up being the most memorable season in Villa's recent history, and could add the quality to take this team to the next level.

The campaign might not end in qualification for next season's Champions League (the **Opta supercomputer** gives 10th-placed Villa just a 3.9% chance of finishing in the Premier League's top five), and winning the whole thing this season is even less likely. But 2024-25 has already taken in European adventures the club isn't accustomed to enjoying, and after Tuesday's **3-1 triumph at Club Brugge** they look set to continue their march into the quarter-finals.

That would set up a last-eight tie with Liverpool or Paris Saint-Germain, where Villa would need to be at their absolute best playing a calibre of match that few of their squad members would be used to playing in. Asensio isn't one of those players.

The PSG loanee – who would be allowed to face his parent club should they meet in the next round – has plenty of experience at the top of the game, and brings some useful know-how to the Villa squad.

So far at least, however, since moving to Villa Park, he has had to settle for a bit-part role. For some, the most remarkable thing about the move isn't that a player once seemingly destined for a long and prosperous career with **Real Madrid** is at Aston Villa at all. It's that he isn't getting into the team.

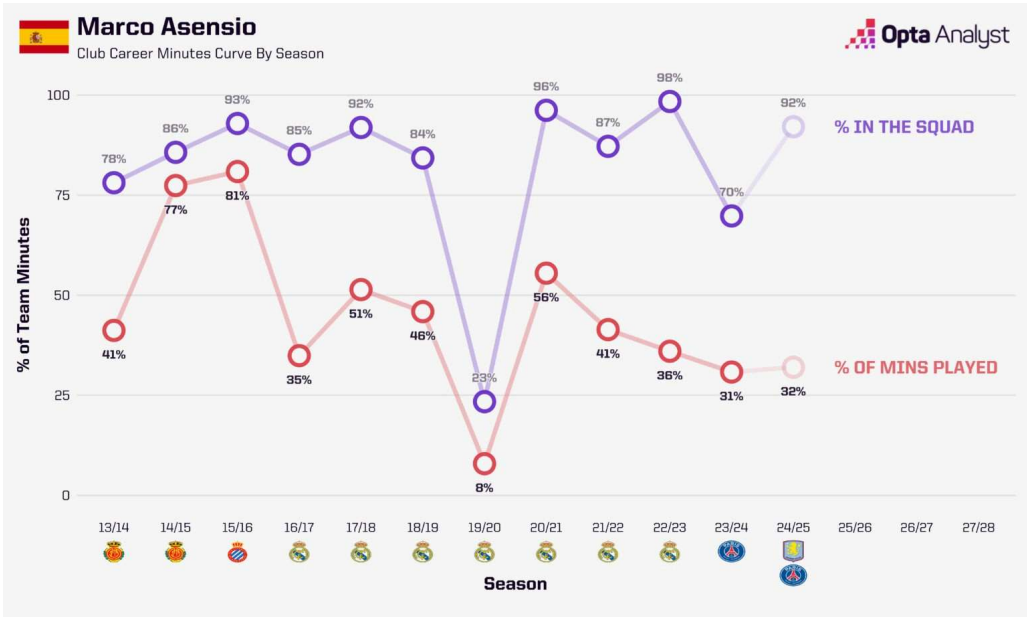
The Spaniard has started just three games in all competitions, one of which was the FA Cup tie against second-tier Cardiff City, while making four substitute appearances. He has completed 90 minutes just once.

It may well be that manager Unai Emery – who is a huge fan of his compatriot, reportedly making an unsuccessful attempt to sign him in his first season at Villa – is focusing on building up his match fitness. Asensio barely played in 18 months in Paris, starting just 26 of a possible 84 matches in all competitions, and Emery may want to get him up to speed properly before giving him a run of games.



But it also may be that Asensio just isn't suited to starting every single game. We are now into the 10th top-flight season of his career, and he hasn't been a regular first-team starter since the first of those: his final season at Espanyol, way back in 2015-16. He has started more than half of his team's league games in only one of the last nine seasons, and even then – for Madrid in 2020-21 – he only started just over half (21 of 38 games).

He has suffered intermittent injury problems, but aside from one cruciate ligament tear in 2019, injuries certainly haven't been the reason he has played so little. He has usually been available to play for most of the season – as the below chart shows – but has always been restricted largely to substitute appearances. Across seven seasons in Madrid, he started 144 games in all competitions and made 142 appearances off the bench. In his final season there, he was in the matchday squad for 98% of games but played just 36% of minutes.



Jonny Whitmore / Senior Data Editor

The problem at the Spanish giants was the competition in the squad. Asensio was never able to establish himself in the first team and was rarely trusted to start the biggest games. It's telling that just 17 of his 59 Champions League appearances for Madrid were starts. With his sub



appearance for Villa this week, he became the first player in the competition's history to reach 50 substitute appearances, with 71% of his appearances having come from the bench.

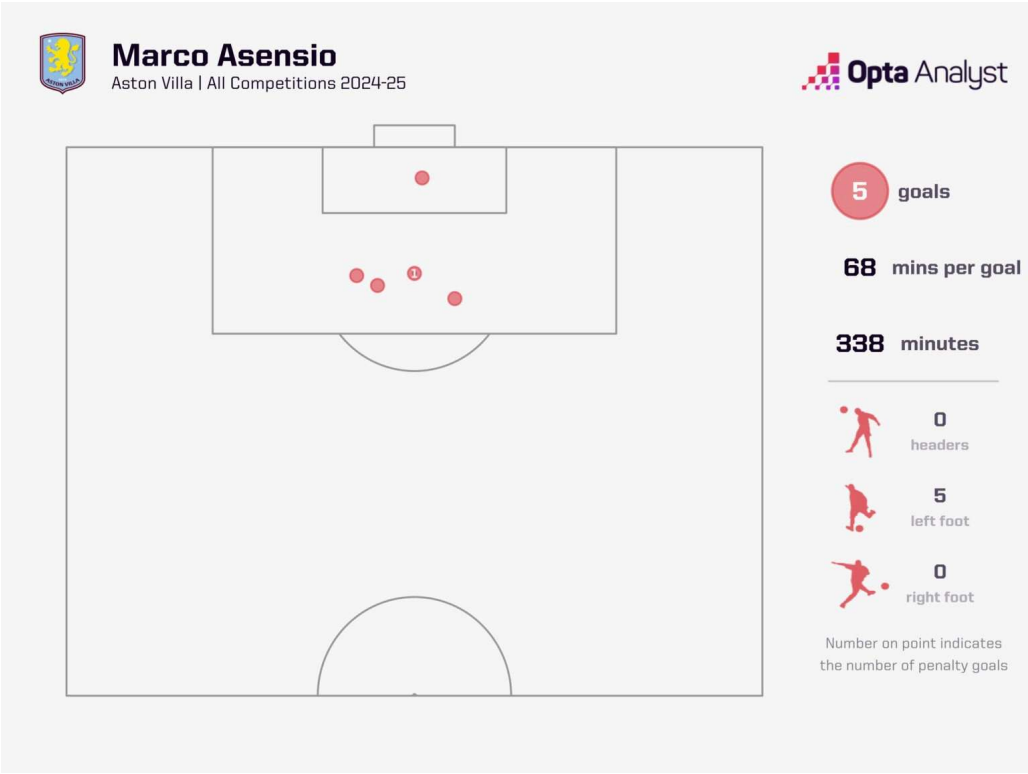


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That's not to say his impact wasn't significant at Madrid. He hit double figures for goal involvements in league games in three seasons there and popped up with some goals on huge occasions, including one in the 2017 Champions League final win over Juventus. He has more goals as a substitute (10) than any other player in the history of the Champions League.

He is and always has been so much more than a supersub, but perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that he is thriving in a limited role at Villa. After his strike from the penalty spot in the win at Club Brugge, Asensio now has five goals for the club. Across the top five European leagues in 2024-25, among players with at least three goals in all competitions, Asensio has the best minutes-per-goal rate for a single club, having scored on average every 67.6 minutes for Aston Villa.



He also adds an assured presence to the Villa front line. He has played in games of huge magnitude and isn't going to be overawed in pressure situations at Villa. He was the perfect player to call upon to take that penalty on Tuesday night, putting his effort perfectly in the corner to beat Simon Mignolet, who had saved from the spot against Ademola Lookman in the previous round and went the right way again this time. Asensio's success from the spot means Villa take a 3-1 lead back to England for the second leg rather than a much more precarious single-goal lead.

But as well as being more experienced at the top level than his other teammates – **Marcus Rashford** included – Asensio is also a different kind of player.

Rashford and Leon Bailey often provide most of their threat on the transition, but Asensio, while also able to attack at pace, is more comfortable on the ball and better at retaining possession. That makes him particularly useful late on in games, when teammates are tiring and the defenders on his team need the attackers to keep hold of the ball. With the pressure mounting as Brugge tried to complete the turnaround with a second goal, Asensio was a calming figure.

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Over his 30 minutes and 41 seconds on the pitch (including added time), Asensio completed every one of his eight passes and didn't lose possession even once. By comparison, Rashford (85.2% passing accuracy, nine possession losses) and Bailey (83.3%, six) both fared much worse in these metrics.

Simply keeping the ball isn't necessarily what you want from your forward players, though, and this isn't to say Bailey – who scored the opening goal – and Rashford didn't do their jobs adequately (though Villa looked a much better side after his introduction in Belgium). Losing the ball comes with the territory for creators. For example, Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold has lost possession more times (501) than anyone else in the Premier League this season.

But Asensio isn't just tidy in possession. In Premier League games, he is averaging 4.8 shots or chances created per 90, and of the 24 players with a higher such rate this season, nobody gives possession away so infrequently (10.1 possession losses per 90). That is, he tries to make things happen more than most while also giving the ball away less than his peers.

Of course, he has barely played for Villa, so one can only hope he'll have the chance to prove he can perform over a significant period of matches at the club.

As he builds up match fitness, we may well see more and more of him. In turn, Asensio could now have a chance he hasn't had many times before: to show there's so much more to him than impact off the bench.


For now, nonetheless, that impact is proving a huge help to Aston Villa.

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