

Data-Driven Player Recruitment for Manchester United

1. Introduction

Manchester United is one of the most successful and historic clubs in English football, boasting a rich legacy of domestic and international triumphs. With **20 English league titles, 12 FA Cups, and 3 UEFA Champions League trophies**, the club has consistently been among the biggest names in world football. However, in recent years, United has struggled to sustain its supremacy, citing issues with squad cohesion, tactical identity, and consistent performances. Under many management changes, the club has shifted between different playing styles, threatening its long-term stability. The club presently relies on a combination of established stars and exciting young talent, although there are clear voids in several important positions. Concerns include defensive flaws, a lack of inventiveness in midfield, and uneven finishing in attack. With fierce rivalry in the Premier League and the rise of tactically sound clubs such as Manchester City, Arsenal, and Liverpool, Manchester United requires a well-thought-out recruitment strategy to reclaim its competitive edge. Strategic player additions, based on data-driven insights and tactical appropriateness, will be critical to the club's future success.

In today's football landscape, recruitment plays a pivotal role in determining a club's long-term success. Unlike past eras where signings were based primarily on scouting intuition, modern football relies on advanced data analytics, tactical compatibility, and financial feasibility to make informed transfer decisions. Clubs use detailed performance metrics to assess potential signings. Strategic recruitment ensures that clubs do not overspend on ill-fitting players but instead identify talents who align with the club's tactical system and long-term philosophy. Moreover, the financial implications of recruitment have increased, making it imperative to consider player resale value, injury history, and market trends when making transfer decisions.

The **main objective** of this recruitment project is to identify and acquire **two key players** who will strengthen Manchester United's squad while aligning with the club's playing style, tactical needs, and long-term vision. The project follows a data-driven scouting approach to analyze recent team performances, tactical weaknesses, and positional gaps to ensure the recruited players provide the maximum impact.

- **Identify two positions that need reinforcement** based on team performance analysis.
- **Shortlist five potential players per position**, ensuring they align with the club's tactical style and values.
- **Ensure financial feasibility**, keeping total expenditures within the **€60M budget**.
- **Consider realism in transfers**, ensuring targets fit the **club's transfer history and spending patterns**.
- **Use advanced analytics** to justify recruitment decisions.

2. Team Performance & Weakness Analysis

2021-22 Season

- **Premier League:** Finished 6th with 58 points, marking their lowest points tally in the Premier League era.
- **FA Cup:** Eliminated in the Fourth Round.
- **EFL Cup:** Exited in the Third Round.
- **UEFA Champions League:** Reached the Round of 16.
- **Managerial Changes:** Ole Gunnar Solskjær was sacked in November 2021 due to inconsistent results. Michael Carrick served as caretaker manager briefly before Ralf Rangnick was appointed interim manager until the season's end.

2022-23 Season

- **Premier League:** Secured a 3rd place finish, showing significant improvement from the previous season.
- **FA Cup:** Reached the Final but lost 2–1 to Manchester City.
- **EFL Cup:** Won the competition with a 2–0 victory over Newcastle United, marking the club's first major trophy since 2017.
- **UEFA Europa League:** Progressed to the Quarter-Finals.
- **Managerial Appointment:** Erik ten Hag took over as manager at the start of the season, implementing a more structured and disciplined approach, which contributed to the team's improved performances.

2023-24 Season

- **Premier League:** The team struggled, finishing 8th—their lowest league finish since the 1989–90 season.
- **FA Cup:** Despite league challenges, Manchester United won the FA Cup, defeating Manchester City 2–1 in the final, securing their 13th FA Cup title.
- **EFL Cup:** Exited in the early rounds.
- **UEFA Competitions:** Did not qualify for European competitions due to their league position.
- **Managerial Changes:** Erik ten Hag was sacked in October 2024 after a poor start to the season, with the team sitting 14th in the league. Ruben Amorim was appointed as the new head coach in November 2024.

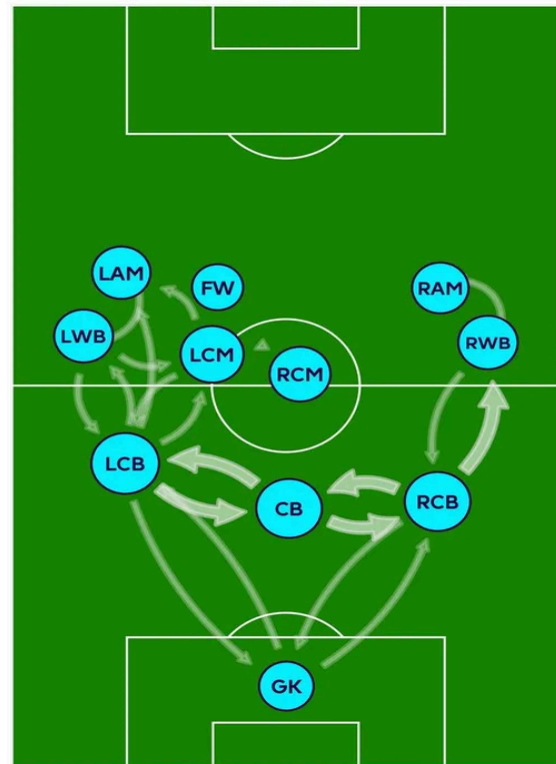
Tactical system and Formation

Ruben Amorim, appointed as Manchester United's manager in November 2024, has introduced a tactical system that emphasizes flexibility, ball progression, and positional play. His approach is designed to enhance the team's offensive capabilities while maintaining defensive solidity.

Formation: 3-4-3



Current Man Utd Setup



Player Position in Amorim Setup

Amorim predominantly employs a 3-4-3 formation, which transitions fluidly between defensive and offensive phases:

- ➔ **Defensive Phase:** The team operates with a back three, providing a strong defensive foundation. The wing-backs drop deeper to form a five-man defense when out of possession, ensuring width and coverage against opposition attacks.
- ➔ **Offensive Phase:** Upon regaining possession, the wing-backs push higher up the pitch, transforming into wingers. This shift creates a 3-2-5 structure, allowing for numerical superiority in attacking areas and effective exploitation of wide spaces.

Tactical Principles:

➔ Ball Progression and Build-Up Play -

- ◆ In the initial build-up, Amorim emphasizes beating the opposition's press by finding attacking midfielders in the spaces between the opponent's defense and midfield. These players can then link up with holding midfielders to progress the play forward.
- ◆ The team is also prepared to adopt a more direct approach when necessary. For instance, if the opposition employs a man-to-man press, goalkeeper André

Onana is encouraged to deliver longer passes to attackers like Rasmus Højlund, who are adept at winning individual duels and establishing possession higher up the field.

→ **Positional Play and Overloads -**

- ◆ In advanced build-up phases, the wing-backs position themselves high and wide, effectively creating a five-man forward line. This tactic stretches the opposition's defense horizontally, generating spaces for midfielders and forwards to exploit.
- ◆ The central midfielders, often staggered on different vertical lines, ensure stability and facilitate quick ball circulation. This positioning disrupts the opposition's defensive structure and opens up passing lanes, enabling effective progression through the central areas.

Player Roles:

- **Wing-backs:** Crucial in providing width and depth, they are responsible for delivering crosses, creating overloads on the flanks, and tracking back to support the defense.
- **Central Midfielders:** asked to control the tempo, recycling possession, and offering defensive cover. Their staggered positioning enhances passing options and aids in bypassing opposition lines.
- **Forwards:** Expected to be versatile, engaging in pressing, creating space through intelligent movement, and capitalizing on goal-scoring opportunities.

Key Weaknesses Identified

Defensive Gaps

Despite adopting a three-man defense, United has struggled with defensive solidity. The team has been vulnerable during set-pieces, particularly against teams like Nottingham Forest, indicating a need for improved organization and communication among defenders.

- Conceding a high percentage of goals from corners and free kicks. Poor marking and lack of aerial dominance in defensive situations.
- The high defensive line leaves gaps against teams that play quick counter attacking football. Centre-backs often exposed due to wing-backs pushing too high in transitions.
- Miscommunication between the back three, leading to positional errors. Full-backs and midfielders failing to track runners effectively.

Midfield Transitions

The effectiveness of United's midfield transitions has been inconsistent. While the team has shown the ability to dominate possession, there have been instances where the midfield has failed to effectively link defense and attack, leading to a lack of fluidity in play. This inconsistency has sometimes resulted in the midfield being bypassed, putting additional pressure on the defense.

- Midfielders taking too many touches, allowing opposition to reset defensively. Lack of quick vertical passing options to break defensive lines.
- Midfield often caught out of position, leaving spaces behind. Struggles in recovering second balls, leading to quick counterattacks from opponents.
- Bruno Fernandes is often the sole creative outlet, making the attack predictable. Lack of a proper deep-lying playmaker to control tempo and dictate transitions.

Attacking Inefficiencies

United's attacking prowess has been a mixed bag under Amorim. There have been matches where the team has struggled to convert possession into clear-cut chances, leading to periods of offensive stagnation. However, there have also been games, such as the recent Europa League match against Real Sociedad, where the attack has been prolific, with Bruno Fernandes scoring a hat-trick.

- Rasmus Højlund struggled with composure in front of goal in big games. High number of shots but low conversion rate compared to expected goals (xG).
- Wingers often cut inside, making the attack too predictable. Crosses into the box failing to connect due to lack of a strong aerial presence.
- Team lacks creativity when opponents sit deep, resulting in passive build-up play. Over-reliance on individual brilliance rather than structured attacking patterns.

3. Transfer Strategy

Budget considerations (€60M cap for top targets)

As per the **hackathon guidelines**, Manchester United's recruitment must be **financially realistic**, adhering to the **€60M budget constraint** for the **two top transfer targets**. This means:

- **Transfermarkt values must be referenced** to ensure that players fit within the allocated budget.
- The **combined market value of the two main signings cannot exceed €60M**.
- **Historical spending patterns** and **club wage structure** should be considered to avoid unrealistic signings.
- The **budget constraints align with Manchester United's recent focus** on sustainable recruitment and adherence to **financial fair play regulations**.
- **Strategic player selection is crucial**, ensuring **high-impact, cost-effective signings** rather than overpaying for marquee players.

Historical transfer trends (Preferred player profiles, recruitment philosophy)

Manchester United's transfer strategy has evolved over the years, reflecting a blend of marquee signings and nurturing young talent. Notable trends include:

- **Marquee Signings:** The club has a history of acquiring high-profile players to maintain its competitive edge.

- **Youth Development:** Emphasis on promoting academy graduates has been a cornerstone, aligning with the club's philosophy of nurturing homegrown talent.
- **Recent Strategic Shifts:** Under the current financial climate, there's a noticeable pivot towards more sustainable spending, focusing on players who offer both value and potential resale opportunities.

Playing style & tactical requirements for new players

Manchester United's recruitment must align with **Ruben Amorim's tactical philosophy**, ensuring that signings fit his **structured, pressing, and possession-based approach**.

- **Tactical Flexibility & Intelligence:** Players must be adaptable to fluid positional play, especially in attacking and midfield rotations.
- **High-Intensity Pressing & Work Rate:** Amorim demands aggressive pressing, meaning attackers and midfielders must track back and press efficiently.
- **Ball-Carrying & Progressive Playmakers:** The system requires players comfortable in possession and who can break lines with dribbling and passing.

4. Recruitment Targets: Position 1 & Position 2

- **Position 1: Central Midfielder**
 - **Key requirements:**
 - **Technical Proficiency:** A high level of skill in ball control, passing accuracy, and the ability to operate under pressure is essential [box-to-box ability, progressive passing, defensive coverage].
 - **Versatility:** The ability to perform in multiple roles or adapt to different tactical setups provides strategic flexibility.
 - **Transfer Target:**
 - **Key Performance Metrics Focused:**
 - Pass completion %, Progressive Passes per 90, Final Third Entries or Key Passes per 90
 - Progressive carries per 90, Pressures per 90
 - Duels won, Tackles + Interceptions per 90
 - **Top Shortlists Players:**
 - **Carlos Alcaraz - Southampton FC (14M)**
 - **Jakub Moder - Brighton FC (12M)**
 - **Asher Agbinone - Bournemouth FC (5M)**

- **Position 2: Central Defender**

- **Key requirements:**

- **Physical Attributes:** Stamina, strength, and agility are crucial, especially given the demands of a high-pressing system [high xG conversion, link-up play, pressing intensity].
- **Mental Resilience:** A strong mentality to handle the pressures of top-flight football and recover from setbacks is vital.

- **Transfer Target:**

- **Key Performance Metrics Focused:**

- Progressive Passes per 90, Aerial Duels Won %
- Tackles + Interceptions per 90, Clearances + Blocks per 90
- Errors Leading to Shots per 90, Pass Completion % Under Pressure

- **Top Shortlist Players (Market Value):**

- **Caleb Kporha - Crystal Palace FC (1M)**
- **Eiran Cashin - Brighton FC (8M)**
- **Nasser Djiga - Wolves FC (10M)**

5. Data-Driven Insights

- **Statistical comparisons:**

| Player | Squad | Score | League Avg Score | Above Avg Diff | Transfer Value |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Caleb Kporha | Crystal Palace | 0.475077 | 0.267136 | 0.208 | 1M |
| Eiran Cashin | Brighton | 0.434178 | 0.267136 | 0.167 | 8M |
| Nasser Djiga | Wolves | 0.390583 | 0.267136 | 0.123 | 10M |
| Chadi Riad | Crystal Palace | 0.357861 | 0.267136 | 0.091 | 15M |
| Woyo Coulibaly | Leicester City | 0.35531 | 0.267136 | 0.088 | 2M |
| Michael Kayode | Brentford | 0.352824 | 0.267136 | 0.086 | 18M |
| Kostas Tsimikas | Liverpool | 0.350639 | 0.267136 | 0.084 | 20M |
| Rúben Dias | Manchester City | 0.344264 | 0.267136 | 0.077 | 70M |
| Trent Alexander-Arnold | Liverpool | 0.341957 | 0.267136 | 0.075 | 75M |
| Pedro Porro | Tottenham | 0.341668 | 0.267136 | 0.075 | 45M |

| Player | Squad | Score | League Avg Score | Above Avg Diff | Transfer Value |
|------------------|-----------------|--------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Carlos Alcaraz | Southampton | 54.61% | 18.57% | 36.00% | 14 |
| Jakub Moder | Brighton | 53.23% | 18.57% | 34.70% | 10 |
| Asher Agbinone | Crystal Palace | 37.88% | 18.57% | 19.30% | 5 |
| Philip Billing | Bournemouth | 26.76% | 18.57% | 8.20% | 12 |
| Jeremy Sarmiento | Brighton | 25.13% | 18.57% | 6.60% | 7 |
| Kevin De Bruyne | Manchester City | 24.67% | 18.57% | 6.10% | 27 |
| Bruno Guimarães | Newcastle Utd | 24.58% | 18.57% | 6.00% | 80 |
| Romain Essende | Crystal Palace | 24.07% | 18.57% | 5.50% | 12 |
| Cole Palmer | Chelsea | 23.27% | 18.57% | 4.70% | 130 |
| Enzo Fernández | Chelsea | 23.19% | 18.57% | 4.60% | 75 |

- Comparative analysis of targets vs. current squad players:

| Player | Score | Build-Up Play | Defensive Solidity | Distribution & Composure | Build-Up Play (vs MU Avg) | Defensive Solidity (vs MU Avg) | Distribution & Composure (vs MU Avg) |
|----------------|----------|---------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Caleb Kporha | 0.475077 | 0.161413 | 0.444444 | 0.60461 | -0.109521 | 0.227731 | 0.226876 |
| Eiran Cashin | 0.434178 | 0.75 | 0.111111 | 0.948667 | 0.479066 | -0.105603 | 0.570933 |
| Nasser Djiga | 0.390583 | 0.134886 | 0.583333 | 0.606401 | -0.136048 | 0.36662 | 0.228668 |
| Chadi Riad | 0.357861 | 0.374503 | 0.138308 | 0.724352 | 0.10357 | -0.078405 | 0.346618 |
| Woyo Coulibaly | 0.35531 | 0.303986 | 0.196806 | 0.533288 | 0.033053 | -0.019908 | 0.155555 |

| Player | Score | Progressive Play | Ball Retention | Defensive Work | Transition & Pressure | Progressive Play (vs MU Avg) | Ball Retention (vs MU Avg) | Defensive Work (vs MU Avg) | Transition & Pressure (vs MU Avg) |
|------------------|----------|------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Carlos Alcaraz | 0.546061 | 0.666667 | 0.961538 | 0.375 | 0.358627 | 0.583762 | -9.313997 | 0.340595 | -0.525184 |
| Jakub Moder | 0.532311 | 0.633333 | 0.909 | 0.25 | 0.5 | 0.550428 | -9.366536 | 0.215595 | -0.383811 |
| Asher Agbinone | 0.37875 | 0.266667 | 0.525808 | 0.5 | 0.324074 | 0.183762 | -9.749728 | 0.465595 | -0.559737 |
| Philip Billing | 0.267637 | 0.1825 | 0.454538 | 0.28125 | 0.266994 | 0.099595 | -9.820997 | 0.246845 | -0.616817 |
| Jeremy Sarmiento | 0.251335 | 0.2 | 0.730769 | 0 | 0.327123 | 0.117095 | -9.544766 | -0.034405 | -0.556688 |
| Kevin De Bruyne | 0.246651 | 0.19445 | 0.547731 | 0.184875 | 0.223138 | 0.111545 | -9.727805 | 0.15047 | -0.660673 |
| Bruno Guimarães | 0.245756 | 0.084833 | 0.563462 | 0.30825 | 0.225563 | 0.001928 | -9.712074 | 0.273845 | -0.658248 |
| Romain Esse | 0.24069 | 0.233333 | 0.415385 | 0.25 | 0.153229 | 0.150428 | -9.860151 | 0.215595 | -0.730582 |
| Cole Palmer | 0.232727 | 0.13615 | 0.507154 | 0.280375 | 0.168587 | 0.053245 | -9.768382 | 0.24597 | -0.715224 |
| Enzo Fernández | 0.231868 | 0.104467 | 0.549654 | 0.275625 | 0.188468 | 0.021562 | -9.725882 | 0.24122 | -0.695343 |

- Expected Impact - Midfielders:

- Caleb Kporha – A composure-first defender with reliable ball circulation
 - Kporha stands out for his **calmness under pressure** and ability to maintain structure in build-up situations. While not flashy in buildup numbers, his **above-average distribution and defensive positioning** suggests he can **anchor the backline** during high-tempo transitions. He fits best in systems that prioritize **controlled build-up** over aggressive pressing.
 - Eiran Cashin – A ball-dominant centre-back who aligns with modern defensive systems
 - Cashin offers **top-tier involvement in initiating play**, making him a great fit for teams looking to evolve into **possession-heavy models**. His potential role would be to act as a **deep-lying outlet**, relieving midfielders and helping bypass first-phase pressure — crucial against high-pressing opponents.

- **Nasser Djiga – Physical presence with dual impact**
 - Djiga combines **defensive solidity with decent distribution**, making him ideal for **dual-role CB duties** — covering physical battles and stepping into midfield when required. He's especially useful in back-threes or flexible back-fours where **defensive transitions** are a challenge.
- **Expected Impact - Midfielders:**
 - **Carlos Alcaraz – Multi-phase engine with elite retention**
 - Carlos is likely to be the most impactful signing in terms of transition play and ball security. He'll instantly raise the team's ability to sustain pressure, connect zones, and recover quickly in transition. His skillset points to a box-to-box hybrid, linking defense and attack while offering press resistance — something the current midfield lacks.
 - **Jakub Moder – Tactical depth and versatility**
 - Moder's profile complements systems that need rotational flexibility in midfield. He isn't the most aggressive defender, but brings structure to midfield shapes and can operate in multiple tactical set-ups — from double pivots to advanced interiors. He allows a manager to experiment with possession shapes while maintaining composure in the second phase.
 - **Asher Agbinone – Underdog high-ceiling project**
 - While not as complete as Alcaraz or Moder, Agbinone brings raw athleticism and pressing intensity that aligns with teams in rebuilds or those who want to inject verticality and pressure triggers. His development will rely on structured coaching, but his ceiling could give the side a future-proof transition enforcer.

6. Conclusion

A **comprehensive, data-driven recruitment plan** for Manchester United to support the club's return to elite competitiveness under new manager **Ruben Amorim**. The project followed a **structured analytical process**, including:

- **Historical and Tactical Analysis:** Reviewed team performance across the 2021–2024 seasons, identifying fluctuations in league finishes, tactical instability, and recent FA Cup success despite league struggles.
- **Managerial System Breakdown:** Analyzed Amorim's tactical philosophy and 3-4-3 system — focusing on ball progression, positional play, and a fluid build-up structure that emphasizes wing-backs and central midfielders.

- **Squad Gap Identification:** Pinpointed **two key positions** requiring reinforcement:
 - **Right Centre-Back (RCB):** To enhance ball-playing ability and defensive coverage on the right side.
 - **Right-Sided Central Midfielder (Box-to-Box CM):** To support tempo control, pressing, and transitions.

- **Scouting Criteria Set:** Established filters including tactical fit, age profile, injury history, financial feasibility (within €60M), and realism based on United's recent transfer behavior.

Based on the analysis performed on Manchester United's current squad and the players available across the league in those required positions, I have concluded that below midfielders and defenders perfectly align into the requirements and can significantly improve the squad going forward in the future.

Midfielders:

- **Carlos Alcaraz - Southampton FC (14M)**
- **Jakub Moder - Brighton FC (12M)**
- **Asher Agbinone - Bournemouth FC (5M)**

Defenders:

- **Caleb Kporha - Crystal Palace FC (1M)**
- **Eiran Cashin - Brighton FC (8M)**
- **Nasser Djiga - Wolves FC (10M)**

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