

## What age do players in different positions peak?

Tom Worville Nov 15, 2021

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They say that age is just a number, but in football, that number is extremely important.

The notion of a “peak” player age — the time at which they are at the very best of their abilities — isn’t an overly new concept. Most fans recognise when players are raw, great or past it. Putting a number against that, however, isn’t overly straightforward.

For example, how do you find out when the peak happens? And don’t players develop at different rates, with some being early starters and others being late bloomers? Do players in different positions peak at different points?

It’s all a bit of a headache, but here *The Athletic* dives into the science of player ages, considering how to measure them and what they are.

To get an understanding of how player age impacts performances, it’s important to first decide on a good metric to encapsulate performance in the first place.

This is a far easier task in other sports — particularly baseball and basketball — that have better, publicly available top-down metrics that can give an overarching notion of a player’s impact on his team’s ability to win. Metrics such as Wins Above Replacement in baseball or Value Over Replacement Player in basketball have their flaws, but mapping player ability by these metrics across the years can show the impact of age on performance.

In football, it’s not as straightforward. For a start, the games are more fluid and the roles on the pitch are highly specific, even getting to the point when players that are playing in a given position do not play like someone who would traditionally play in that position at all (yes, [I’m looking at you, Joao Cancelo](#)).

Due to that positional variability, there’s not a single figure to explain performance for every role and position on the pitch in the same currency. Goals or expected goals per 90 are perhaps ideal stats to use to measure strikers, but that’s a poor stat to use for, say, centre-backs.

Different metrics could be considered per position to get an overall understanding of how things change from a stylistic point of view, however. For example, here’s how many take-ons per 90 wingers average at different ages in the [Premier League](#), inspired by previous work done by [Colin Trainor](#).

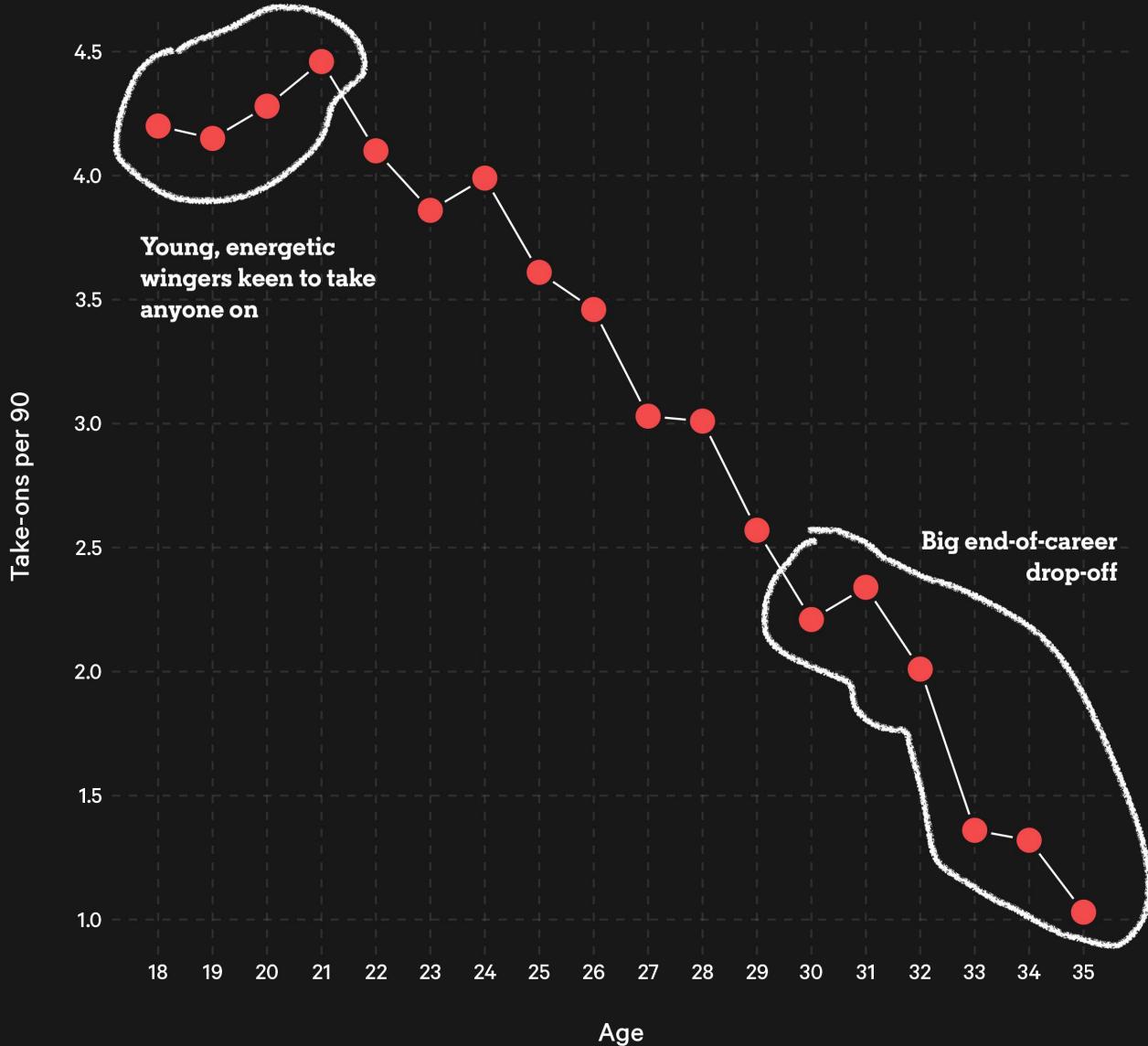
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## Wingers stop taking players on as they get older (and slower)

All take-ons by wingers in the Premier League from 2011-2021



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Notably, as wingers age and lose their explosiveness, their tendency to take on defenders plummets. The young, high-energy players in their teens and early 20s are keen to dribble past as many players as possible, but their roles have to change a lot in their early 30s as they offer less of a direct one-on-one threat.

But metrics such as those don't give a good indication of a player's general effectiveness. They only offer an insight into how much (or little) of a given action they did on the field at a given age.

[Expected threat](#) — and similar models that indicate how a player's actions increase their team's chances of scoring — might be a good alternative to use as it offers a common measure of value added across positions. Sadly, though, these possession value-type models only cater to the on-ball abilities of players, completely ignoring the defensive aspects of their performances.

The solution, then, isn't some fancy all-encompassing metric that tries to look at a player's true value on the pitch. Such a model doesn't exist, at least in the public sphere, and likely won't for many years. No, the best stat to use here is just plain, basic minutes played.

There are several reasons for that. For a start, part of the impact of ageing on players isn't just that their abilities drop off, but also that their bodies become less and less durable. It is a cliche, but the best ability is availability, and that's a big factor when it comes to rating a player's

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Second, there is some implicit notion of a player's quality captured in their minutes played. Managers pick their teams for many different reasons — form, injuries, suspension, player preference, tactics — but more often than not, they'll want to play their best players to win a game. The mere presence of a player on the pitch, therefore, says something about how good they are.

Finally, it's also something that is fairly accessible for the past few seasons in the Premier League, and to calculate anything to do with peak ages and age curves, plenty of data is required.

So in terms of minutes played, when do players look to peak? The chart below — inspired by the original work of [Michael Caley](#) — looks to answer that.

Both starts and substitute minutes are taken into account here from Premier League matches over the past decade, with the player ages on August 1 of every season taken into account. Players are split into one of seven different positional groups depending on where they featured in games.

The graphic below maps all ages between 18 and 38 years old, broken down by position. The colours on each scale denote the share of the total minutes played for each age, over the past 10 Premier League seasons.

The redder that the age is shaded, the higher the share of total minutes played for that age within their position.



Goalkeepers are the oldest positional group, with the latest peak age and plenty of players playing well into their early 30s too, as denoted by the lighter shading. It's a position in which fewer opportunities are given to younger players, and experience seems to be prioritised over younger, fitter goalkeepers.

Centre-backs also peak relatively late, at around 27, with plenty of players featuring heavily in their late 20s and early 30s. As with goalkeepers, the nature of the role isn't as comparatively physically demanding in terms of needing to hit top speeds or cover great distances. However, a player's ability to read the game will improve with time, sometimes making up for the speed lost in a player's later years.

On the other hand, full-backs peak far younger, with the majority of their minutes coming at 25. What's interesting with full-backs — and deserving of an article in itself — is how the increasingly demanding nature of the role has impacted the age curve at the position. Full-backs are now asked to get up and down the pitch far more. They also need to be technically gifted and have a high level of tactical understanding. For that reason, they are likely to be one of the most athletic players on the pitch, which explains why fewer minutes are going to players in their late-20s.

It's a similar story in central midfield, another position that requires plenty of ground to be covered at different speeds. The most common age for a player in this position is around 25, with a fairly large spread of players playing consistently between the ages of 24 and 30.

As shown in the take-ons example previously, wingers and wide attackers hit their peak earlier, reaching the height of their powers around 26. It makes sense, then, that they see plenty of minutes in their early 20s and fall out of the game or are required to change position to stay in it by the time they hit their 30s.

Central attacking midfielders — or No 10s in non-data-speak — are the least common playing position on the pitch, as fewer teams are playing with a single playmaker these days. There's a peak for them at age 26, but theirs is a position to take with a pinch of salt.

Due to their relative scarcity in the modern game, there's something of a sample bias here, with just 1,098 players in the last decade playing in that position in a single season and there only being 55 player records with 1,000 minutes or more. There's an early spike around 22 years old in the data thanks to this, with Ross Barkley, [Christian Eriksen](#), Oscar and Dele Alli to name just a few all featuring heavily in the Premier League at that age.

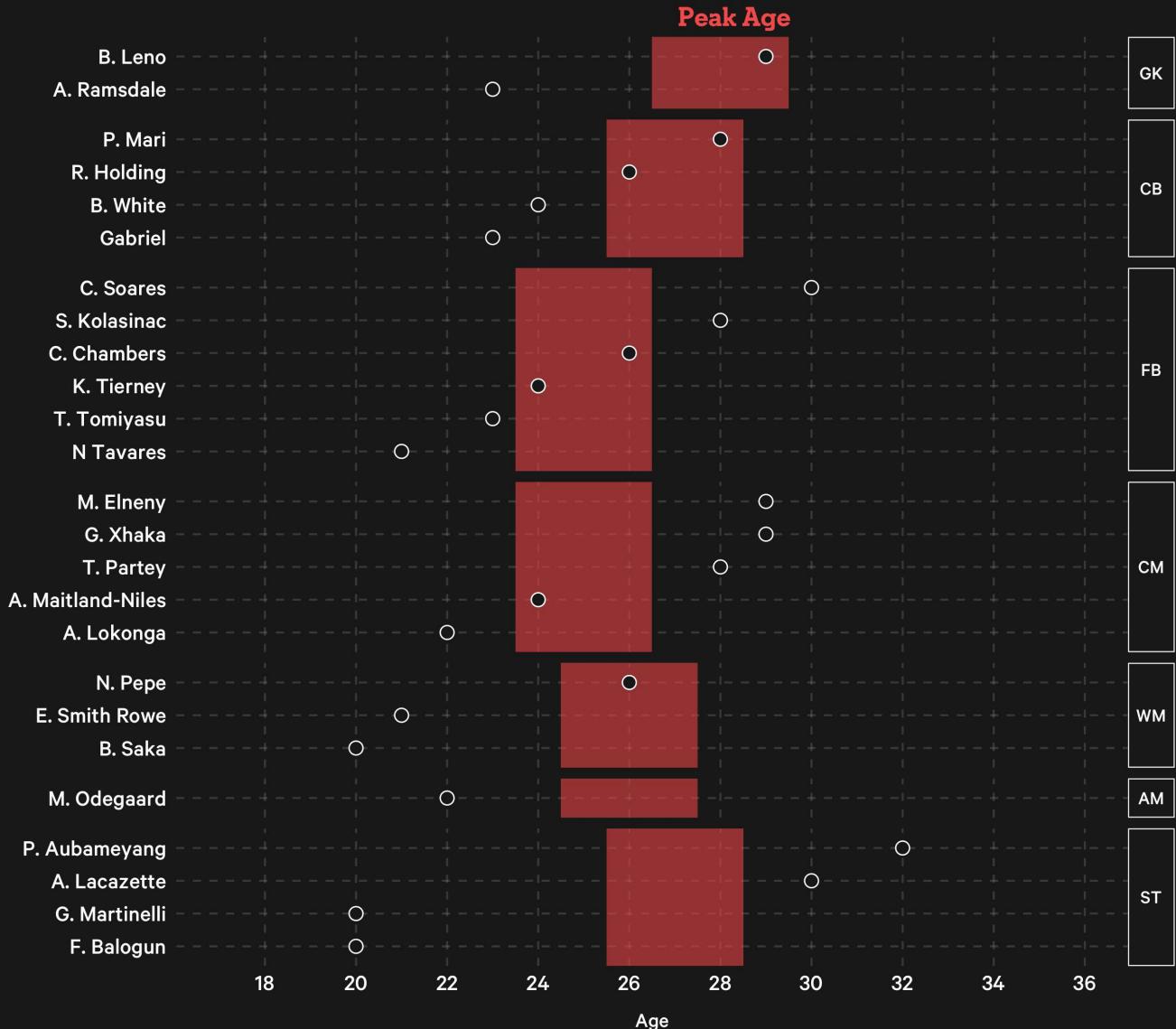
Finally, strikers seem to have the most well-defined ageing pattern of all the positions. They rise to prominence in their early 20s and peak around 27, with only the proper outliers able to sustain themselves in the game past their early 30s. Similarly to centre-backs, their feeling of the game increases over time, but they are limited more by the physical drop-off in their late 20s and early 30s.

Taking all of this into account means that a rough band of "peak ages" can be formed for each positional group. This is calculated by taking the peak year and adding and subtracting a year from either side. For goalkeepers, any player aged between 27 and 29 will be considered in their peak. For full-backs and central midfielders, that's any player aged 24 to 26.

With this data, a more custom squad profile can be built, showing a more appropriate peak age banding. Here's what that looks like for [Arsenal](#), with them having plenty of pre-peak players across the pitch.

## Arsenal's squad compared to peak age across positions

Arsenal players who've featured in the Premier League in 2021-22

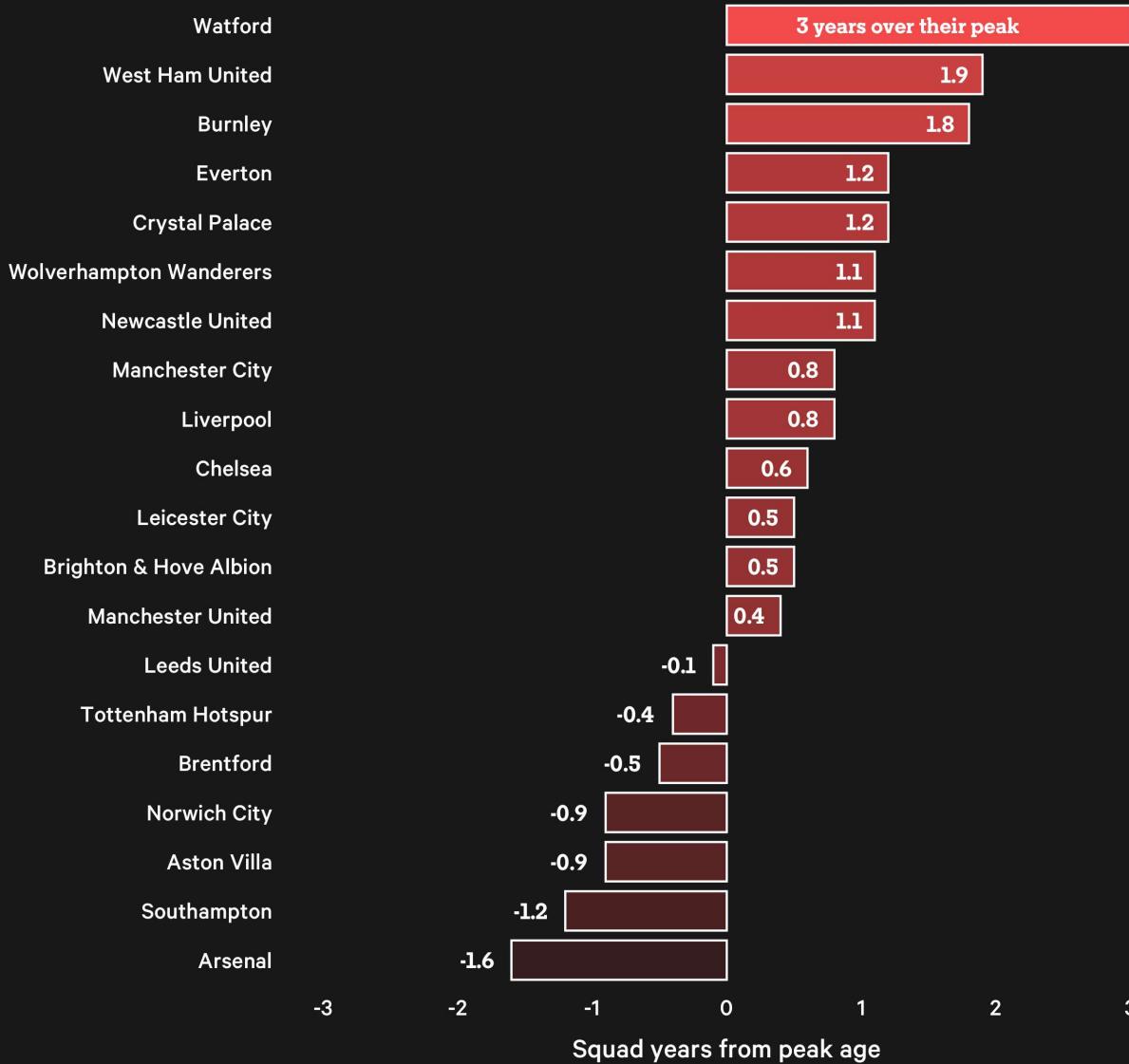


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Arsenal are a particularly pertinent team to consider because considering all players who've played 400 minutes or more in the league this season, Arsenal's are on average 1.6 years away from reaching their peak, the lowest of any side in the league and almost double that of Aston Villa's 0.9 years away from their hypothetical peak. At the other end of the scale are Watford, whose most common starters are 3.0 years beyond their peak on average, most likely dragged up by their veteran 38-year-old goalkeeper Ben Foster.

## How far is each Premier League squad away from their peak?

Average distance in years from peak age for each squad in the Premier League in 2021-22



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Over the next 10 days, we will be running individual pieces using the peak age of positions to look at the squad profiles of each Premier League club, and those we cover closely in the English Football League and [Scottish Premiership](#).

(Photos: Getty Images; Design: Tom Slator)

**Tom Worville** is a Football Analytics Writer for The Athletic. He agrees that football isn't played on spreadsheets, but they have their uses. Follow Tom on Twitter [@Worville](#)

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