

Five accomplishments and five challenges ahead for Real Madrid

Right now, Real Madrid look like the cream of the elite. League leaders in Spain, breaking records left, right and centre and prime candidates to become the first team to retain the Champions League. They're perhaps even in a group of only three, at best four, sides -- with Bayern, Chelsea and perhaps Barcelona -- capable of lifting that famous trophy next June in Berlin.

But they ran out of gas domestically last season, right at the crucial point of La Liga, and there have always, always been clubs who look not only capable but near banker bets to win consecutive Champions Leagues before failing to do so.

As a guide to what's made them strong and what obstacles must be overcome if Madrid are to add the quartet of trophies within their grasp, here are five of Los Blancos' big achievements thus far -- and five of the big challenges which stand in their way.

Achievement 1: Signing and settling Toni Kroos

If you could find a fanatical Bayern Munich fan who's been collecting and cataloguing rare butterflies somewhere down the Amazon -- totally out of contact with the world for the past four months -- and fly him in for the next couple of Real Madrid games, here are the questions he'd ask you. "How on earth does it look like Kroos has been at Madrid for three or four years already!" and "How has Carlo Ancelotti taught him to excel in a position which was patently neither his favourite nor his best while at Bayern?"

That Bavarian butterfly collector would be quite legitimate in asking how the heck his own club managed to let this absolute diamond of a player wriggle free with so little fuss -- but that's another question.

If it weren't for Cristiano Ronaldo's utterly spectacular form and his transformation into a team leader rather than just an individual phenomenon, you'd be free to call Kroos the guy who "bosses" Madrid's performances. Asked by Ancelotti to play much deeper in front of the back four, and to compensate for the positional and organisational vacuum without Xabi Alonso -- a player who Pep Guardiola thought

lacked intensity of concentration and who tended to drift too far in search of the ball -- Kroos has become a metronome.

Not only does he rarely give the ball away, he uses that palate from which only the great artists paint -- a mix of short, medium and long passing and an ability to change tempo when he judges the game needs it. Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow.

Perhaps he's been aided by the fact that Germany, current world champions, also needed him to "step up" in authority with Philip Lahm retired and Bastian Schweinsteiger out injured. Maybe that requirement has helped accelerate his development.

Equally, Kroos is now under the tuition of Ancelotti, a fabulously successful ex-midfielder who has morphed into one of the great modern manager/coaches. However you figure it, when Johan Cruyff expresses his frustration and annoyance that Barcelona didn't beat Madrid to Kroos' signing, you know that Los Blancos have come up with a double whammy: the perfect man for Madrid and the perfect midfielder that Barcelona will now never have.

Achievement 2: The team spirit

Whatever you think of Jose Mourinho's era -- his tactics, the reasons for his departure -- there's no escaping that his was a scorched earth philosophy. Burn relationships between Barcelona and Madrid players, burn relationships between Madrid and the media, burn relationships between Madrid players if it "helped the cause."

He took them to consecutive Champions League semifinals, won the title, lifted the cup and, gradually, began to hurt Barcelona's supremacy. Yet there was a high cost. Mourinho left behind him ill-feeling and no major trophy in his final season. Now the difference is startling.

Last season Ancelotti's team was capable of exceptional peaks -- not just in quality but in effort, all-for-one spirit ... and confidence. Without those jags of intensity and "we-will-not-be-defeated" attitude, the really big wins over Barcelona in the Copa del Rey Final, Bayern in both legs of their Champions League semifinal and then in Lisbon against Atletico wouldn't have been feasible.

Now that belief, that confidence, that "one for all" and that evident team spirit have created a side that fights for every ball and is never beaten until the final whistle has been blown, the fans have gone home and the groundsman has turned out the lights.

OK, against Eibar you could legitimately ask the linesmen to get his eyes tested for both Madrid's first and third goals. But in each case Ronaldo, Marcelo and James Rodriguez considered that the ball was never "dead" until the whistle was blown. The team's instinctive reaction was to fight for every millimetre, to keep going even though it looked like the ball was out of play -- the result was two goals.

Those examples -- plus the thumping Clasico win despite being 1-0 down, the eight goals scored at Deportivo, the hook-or-by-crook win at Ludogorets, the way in which horrible defeats to Atletico and La Real were made to look like blips, or the overhauling of a big points gap to Barcelona -- all these and more speak of a team with a marvellous fighting spirit.

Achievement 3: The renaissance of Iker Casillas

Ancelotti played his part in the demoralisation of Real Madrid's captain. Whether it was fair or otherwise -- and remember the huge role which his "guru" goalkeeping coach Villiam Vecchi plays -- the stress, embarrassment and sporting "rust" imposed on Casillas last season when he had to sit out the La Liga campaign in favour of Diego Lopez, only finding inspiration and form every so often for the Copa del Rey and the Champions League, came at a huge cost.

Not only to Casillas psychologically and physically, but in terms of his lack of readiness for the World Cup that became humiliation for Spain and their captain. Yet despite signing the excellent, in-form and en-vogue Keylor Navas this summer, Ancelotti nevertheless decided that Casillas was not only recuperable but vital.

Admittedly, the captain has played a role in his own resurrection. He's happier in his private life, he's working hard at rediscovering his hunger for daily work and the decision, by Ancelotti, to restore him to No. 1 keeper have all combined. So right now we're seeing a Casillas who is greatly revived, happier in his skin, enjoying the daily training, sharp, having fun and (almost unnoticed by the Spanish media) suddenly producing a trademark crucial one-on-one save against Eibar's Saul Berjon, which could have made the score 1-1 in the Basque country on Saturday night.

One hundred percent restored? Perhaps not. Up at the level of Thibaut Courtois and Manuel Neuer? Maybe not yet. But drastically restored, important to the team, far less exposed at defensive set plays and, quite obviously, "up for it" again.

Chapeau, Signor Ancelotti: you've brought San Iker back from the dead.

Achievement 4: The quality of play

There are very few clubs where winning is not enough, but Madrid is one. There must be élan. There must be class -- flair, a flourish and fun. These have been heavy weights for many of Los Blancos' coaches to bear over the years. Win games, win trophies and it can still be not enough. These were phrases (hugely unfairly, I believe) that hung over Madrid last season, mostly emanating from Presidential mutterings. Now, however, I'd argue that Madrid have been the most entertaining, most scintillating team in the world over the past couple of months.

With no disrespect to Juventus, Roma, Bayern, Dortmund (only in the Champions League), PSG, Shakhtar Donetsk, Chelsea or Barcelona -- there have been numerous times (el Clasico, at Depo, at Anfield, at Levante, at Granada) when it's simply a thrill to watch Madrid play.

A couple of examples stuck out this past weekend. Ronaldo's little dink over Eibar left-back Abraham as he dived in, a move that helped set up the first goal, plus Gareth Bale's inside-of-the-foot flick to make a 1-2 pass with Daniel Carvajal en route to the second goal -- those were not simply evidence of quality but evidence that there's an atmosphere at the club where creative risk is encouraged and endorsed.

They pass with accuracy and they constantly seek to push the opposition onto the back foot, the combination interplay is reminiscent of the best of Guardiola's Barcelona -- they repay the viewer, whether on television or in the stands.

Achievement 5: The talented "Terror Twins"

Among the clutch of players at Madrid who have never played better football in their lives -- Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Kroos et al -- Isco and James stand out.

There were times, during Isco's debut season and since James' signing, when Ancelotti would have been deemed suicidal if he argued in favour of putting both Isco and James in a four-man midfield or, still more, both of them in a starting in a 4-3-3 midfield.

Isco might have seemed a little too slow, short on defensive work, committed to creativity. Ditto James - attacking in spirit, keen to get in and around the lead striker to pick up scraps but perhaps not disciplined enough to chase back and tackle or strong enough to then surge forward again.

All those things have not only been disproved but Ancelotti's coaching has turned each of them into more complete, more valuable and more intelligent players. Isco is the new darling of the Bernabeu and has started the last 12 games. Where are the voices which, in the summer, were speculating that he might leave or be sold? James scores exceptional goals, produces assists but has developed into a right little worker, too.

Their creativity, their intelligence and, perhaps least appreciated, their incisiveness with the ball (rarely wasting possession) has given a flair and a zip about Madrid's elegant brand of football.

But this is only November. Physical, psychological, personnel sporting and off-field challenges lay ahead. Is this a false dawn, or can Madrid produce the grit and staying power which could make them not just treble-winners elect but a "special" champion team?

The challenges for Real

Toni Kroos: This will be his most intensive season ever. New language, new culture, new position and the gradual after-effects of having played all summer while winning the World Cup. When should he be rested? How often? And will he be able to cope with, then overcome, patches of lower form, lower confidence?

Cristiano Ronaldo: In my view he's enjoying by far the most complete, most compelling and most convincing form of his already outstanding career. Leader, scorer, team player, driver of the team atmosphere -- mature. Let's hope this challenge doesn't come, but what would happen if Madrid (as with Barcelona and Messi last season) needed to do without him for a couple of months? His goals are startling in quantity but he's added authority and leadership -- could Madrid thrive without him?

Gareth Bale: There's just the slightest impression that Bale, having been stellar last season, has reduced the intensity of his work in the "blue collar" tasks. Does he track back as effectively? Does he regain defensive positions as rapidly as he did from January onwards? Is there a risk that he, subconsciously, believes he's on a par with Ronaldo in terms of how much pressing, tackling and tracking back he is required to do? An exceptional player who intends to become the best in the world. An exceptional first season. But sufficiently intense this season? Not yet.

Sami Khedira: His impact this season has been minimal thanks to injury and to the form being shown by other midfielders. His contract is up in the summer, and it's clear that clubs like Bayern, Chelsea and Arsenal would benefit from his arrival on a free transfer. Some think that Bayern have persuaded him. But not Carlo Ancelotti. "He's told me he'd like to stay and we'll try to keep him," the Italian announced last week. But it's always a tense and potentially destabilising time when a footballer is running down his contract and asking his current club to agree to a huge salary rise in order to retain him. A delicate task for the Madrid bean counters which will have implications for Ancelotti.

Marcelo: Totally unrecognisable from the Brazilian humiliation against Germany during the World Cup, this is a vital player in Madrid's ability to press right up the pitch and make the opposition feel like they are swamped by white shirts. He's given incredible liberty by his coach; opposition teams take advantage of his attacking positions incredibly rarely this season. But he has a habit of going off the boil, of beginning to look physically less enduring as the season rolls on -- to pick up a kilo or two and a resulting niggling injury or two. Can he make this his excelsior season, full of discipline, rigor and maturity? Big question, big consequences.