

How Marcelo Bielsa transformed Leeds United

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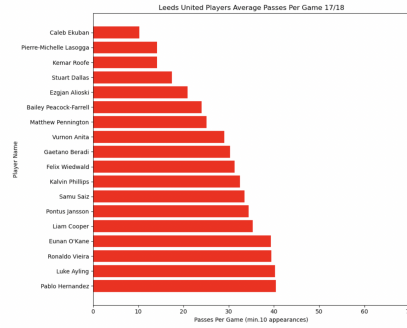
1 Introduction

In recent years, Leeds United have become somewhat of a fallen giant of English football. From the heights of a Champions League Semi-final in 2002, the Yorkshire club plummeted through the tiers of English football, finding themselves at a record low when the club entered administration in 2007 and were relegated to League One. Although the spell in the third tier of English football only lasted two years, any thoughts of a Premier League revival were stamped out through displays of lacklustre football, unimaginative ownership and a constant flow of managerial changes. Come the end of the 2017/18 season, and Leeds had found themselves cemented as a mid table Championship club, seeming to lack the resources, ownership and desire to even threaten breaking into the leagues' Play-off places. However, a change of ownership, was about to lead to an appointment which would send shock waves throughout the footballing world.

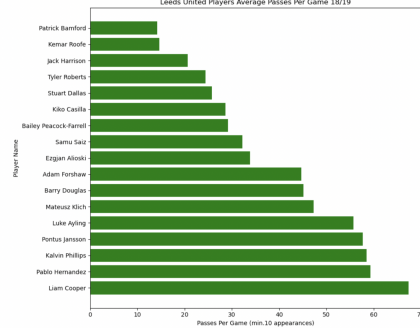
Marcelo Bielsa was the quintessential football manager. Often considered the inspiration for modern day greats Guardiola and Pochettino, the Argentinian man believed in fast flowing, possession based attacking football, the antithesis of what had been on show for the past years at Leeds United. He had a true passion for the game and the fans; "If there is something that makes this profession attractive to me, is the power to be in contact with the public", (Bielsa, 2020), so when offered the chance to become Leeds United manager in June 2018, he set off on a transformation in an effort to restore a fallen giant of the English game.

2 On the Pitch

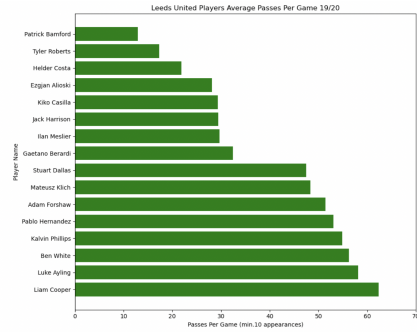
The most obvious change that Bielsa had on Leeds United was their play style. The figure below shows the average amount of passes made per game by all players who had made ten or more starts that season. The graph in red highlights the season before Bielsa arrived, whilst the green shows Bielsa's first two seasons at the club. Each of the graphs use the same scale so its easy to see that in the year prior to Bielsa being hired, the average passes per game are much lower than the following years. In the season prior to Bielsas arrival, the



(a) Leeds PPG in 17/18



(b) Leeds PPG in 18/19



(c) Leeds PPG in 19/20

Figure 1: Leeds PPG across the seasons 17-20 (min 10 starts)

average ppg sits at 28.41, and the highest average passes per game was 40.4 for Pablo Hernandez, who primarily plays as a right winger. However, over the next two seasons, Bielsa introduced his new style of play, which is primarily based on possession based football, where the ball is played out from the defenders and carried up the pitch. The evidence of change was dramatic and instantaneous, in 2018/19, Bielsa's first season in charge, Leeds' average passes per game rose to 38.77, over 10 more passes per player than the previous season. The highest average ppg was recorded by Liam Cooper, the club captain and centre back, which highlights the change to playing the ball out from the back. During that season, three of Leeds' main back four all averaged above 55 ppg, further highlighting the shift to playing out from the back. This trend continued into Bielsa's second season, where the average ppg for the team was 39.55, a further increase on the previous season.

The graph above shows the huge change in average possession per game that Bielsa brought to the club. Coming out of the 2017/18 season, Leeds averaged 49.72 percent possession per game. This changed dramatically after Bielsa was hired, he quickly transformed Leeds into the best possession based side in the Championship, where they topped the possession stats two years running, before

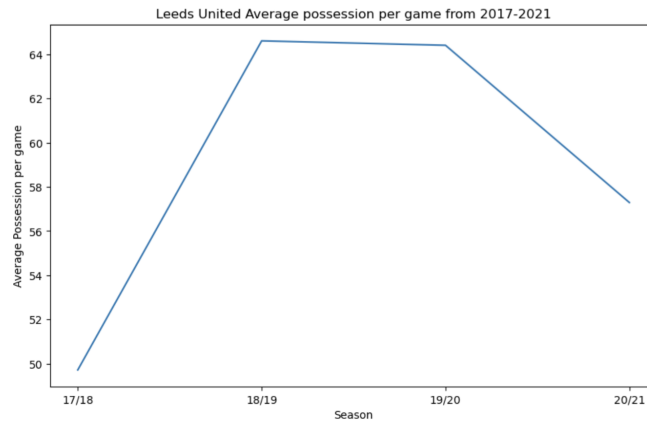


Figure 2: Leeds average possession through the seasons 17-20

a remarkable come back season in the Premier League, where the side were only out possessed 7 times all season, and ended the year as the second best newly promoted side in Premier League history (see figure below).

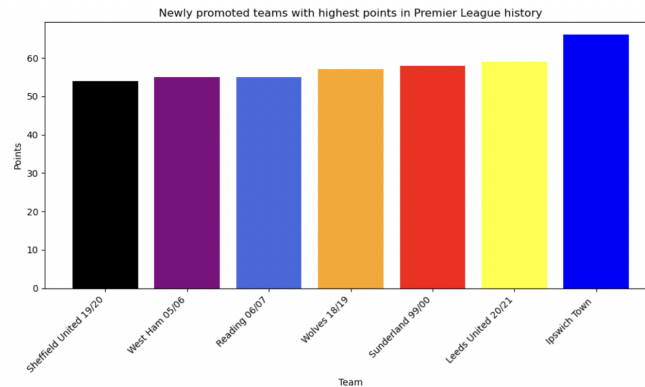


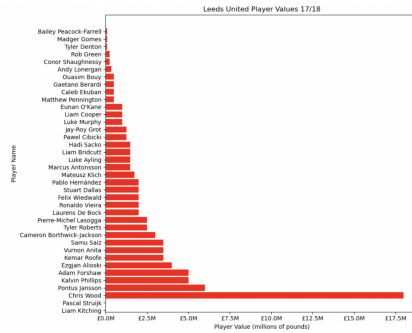
Figure 3: Record debut Premier League seasons (38 game seasons)

Overall, Bielsa’s new tactics, combined with his gruelling training methods, helped a Leeds team that had had very little change in terms of players, and transformed them practically overnight into a side which played free flowing, possession based, passing and attacking football.

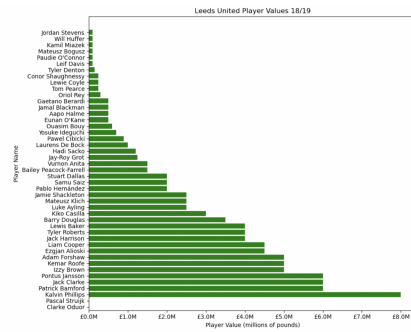
3 Player Values and squads

Bielsa was known to like having small squads that he knew well, and when he took over in 2018, many fans found it remarkable that the club made such little

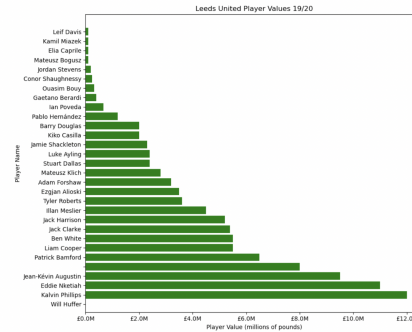
action in the transfer market. It was even more remarkable that Bielsa was able to take a group of players, most of those who had been a part of many of Leeds mid table campaigns, and turn them into such a strong side. The figure below (Figure 4) is a list of each of the players in the Leeds squad from 2017-2022 and their corresponding transfer market values. The red graph again indicates the year when Bielsa was not a part of the club, and the green graphs represent his time as the manager of Leeds. The first notable thing, is that in Bielsa's first season, the squad size was 44 players, however, after he'd been in charge for a year, the squad size had been decreased to 29. This remained pretty constant, with the squad size having only increased to 31 by Bielsa's last season in charge, even with Leeds being in the Premier League. Other than Chris Wood, who was valued at £17.5 million at the beginning of the 2017/18 season, the remainder of the players were below £5.5 million. Another remark to make on this data is that by the end of Bielsa's tenure, the number of players in the Leeds squad that were valued over £5.5 million had increased to 15, with 9 of those players being present in the original 17/18 squad. This demonstrates the transformation that Bielsa made to a group of what were seemingly mediocre mid-table players. By the end of his tenure, Leeds top 2 players were valued at a combined £95 million, which is £0.55 million more than the entire squad he inherited at the beginning of the 2018/19 season. The increase in player value during Bielsa's tenure was immense, he completely transformed many players careers. The squad value increase between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (the year Leeds were promoted) was 69.48 percent, going from £95.35 to £161.60, however this does include the values of some players who were signed after the promotion. Nevertheless, the turnaround Bielsa was able to carry out on Leeds United's squad was immense. This transformation is best shown by looking closer at four players: Calvin Phillips, Patrick Bamford, Stuart Dallas and Luke Ayling (see figure 5). The graph shows the steep increase in value for these four players, all of who have been present for the entire of Bielsa's tenure. Whilst it looks like the value of Ayling and Dallas hardly increased, their market value actually more than doubled, both of them going from £2 million to £5 million in the first two years that Bielsa was in charge. However, this still was a huge transformation of both of their careers, with Dallas quoted saying "A wonderful, special man who has been pivotal to my career and words probably can't thank him enough." Bielsa was able to take two players who were at crossroads in their careers, and transform them into proper Premier League quality players. However, this looks insignificant on the graph compared to the prodigious rise of Calvin Phillips. Having graduated from the Leeds academy as a box to box player, Bielsa converted him to a holding midfielder, a move which saw his market value increase by 900 percent, from £5 million to £50 million during Bielsa's tenure. Bamford saw a similar rise, with his market value reaching a height of £22 million, which was the same year he scored 17 goals in the Premier League.



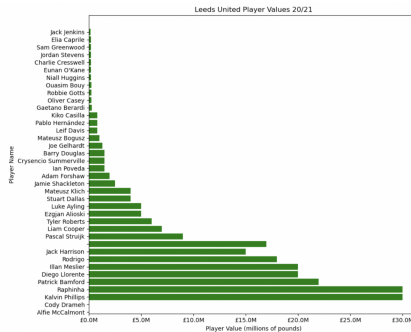
(a) Leeds squad value 17/18



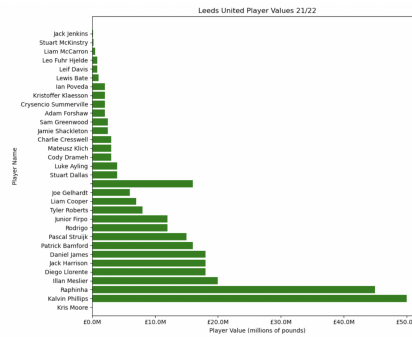
(b) Leeds squad value 18/19



(c) Leeds squad value 19/20



(d) Leeds squad value 20/21



(e) Leeds squad value 21/22

Figure 4: Leeds squad values from 2017-22 (£millions)

4 Off the pitch

The final transformations that came with the Bielsa era was the increased turnover, and the growth of Leeds United into a global brand. Figure 6 shows the turnover made by Leeds United in 2017,18,21 and 22.

The merchandising turn over saw an increase of 15 percent in Bielsa's first

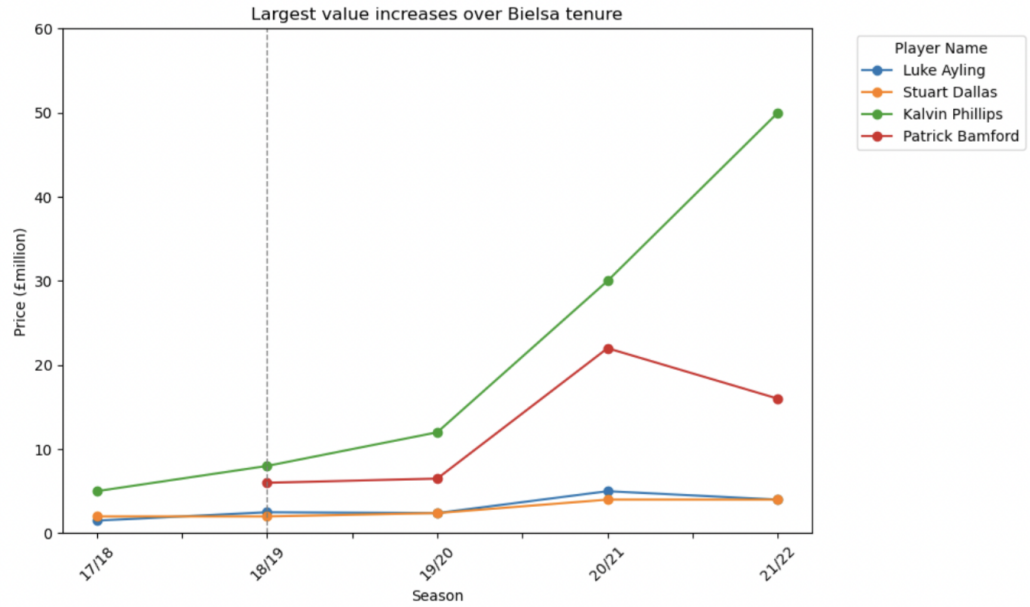
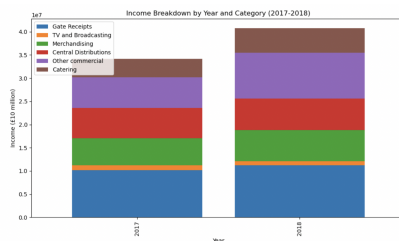
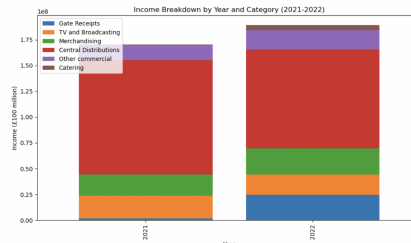


Figure 5: Transfer market value increase of specific players (£millions)

year in the job, and by 2021, this number had reached £20,400,000, which is an increase of 253 percent, over the 4 year period. This growth in merchandise has begun to turn Leeds into a global brand, and the changes which Bielsa has sparked have continued forward, with Leeds merchandise being the thirteenth highest selling football merchandise according to the 2023 UEFA accounting reports. Bielsa also sparked life back into the crowds at Elland Road, throughout Leeds' 16 year dry period and a number of lacklustre managers, the fans began to lose interest and the ground was no longer selling out. In 2017, gate receipts were £10,185,790, however (after the break for COVID) they had reached £24,600,000 in 2022, a percentage increase of 141 percent. Through his success and exciting attacking football, Marcelo Bielsa was able to restore joy into Leeds United.



(a) Leeds income accounts 17 and 18



(b) Leeds income accounts 21 and 22

5 Conclusion

Overall, Bielsa was able transform Leeds United on and off the football pitch. He took a firmly midtable Championship club to new heights in the Premier League, leading a record breaking debut season in the Premier League. Off the pitch, Bielsa brought the popularity back into the club. The brand has begun to stretch worldwide and average attendance and gate receipts have reached their highest numbers ever.