

# The Alvaro Morata Saga

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Zlatan Ibrahimovic is one of the most legendary players in the world and one of the most feared as well to set foot on the pitch. He's been through a lot and literally won it all (except maybe one thing, no disrespect intended) over a career spanning 18 years. Now it looks like the time for him to take the next step forward in his career.

Manchester United recently released him and have, seemingly, lost a huge part of the dressing room. With an aging and unsettled Rooney and a departing Carrick, the club has essentially lost the 'big guy' in their dressing room. That's the impact of Ibrahimovic in any team: he is more than just another player. He's the man with the fight, the man with the huge confidence, the pride needed to win and the man who brings every fan to the edge of their seat as he steps onto the pitch. He's the oldest in the dressing room (after Michael Carrick) and without a doubt the biggest personality. Younger players look up at him and see an accomplished veteran and they know what they have to do, who they have to emulate. The other, older players have more confidence while playing, knowing that a man like Zlatan will be out there with them.

We saw the effect of John Terry in this year's Chelsea under Antonio Conte: a player not appearing in every match but keeping dressing room together. His age, experience, knowledge, and presence made that possible – helping the younger players settle, enabling the easy transition of the foreign players into the team, his 'captain'-esque, inspiring half-time talks and 'gelling' everyone in the dressing room together. That's what Zlatan helped to do as well. Now that Terry is leaving, Chelsea will need Gary Cahill to fill those gigantic shoes and be the man Chelsea need off the field. When I look at Manchester United now, the only players I see who can even think of filling the Zlatan role are Antonio Valencia and Ander Herrera, the man recently targeted by Barcelona and Ernesto Valverde. Herrera has already told the world he isn't ready to be that leader that Manchester United need and while he may or may not step up, I highly doubt him stepping up to the level of Zlatan, which is exactly why this is a huge loss for United. This is losing a personality on the level of Ferdinand, Evra, or Roy Keane.

But this side of football isn't something all fans see. Hardly any of them look towards this side or are aware of it. Especially Manchester United fans. They're English fans and we all know what a lot of English fans are like. We all love those cliched 'one-season wonder' and 'overrated' chants we hear all day. From this perspective, I'd argue that the club has done the right thing. It was obviously a very tough decision for Jose Mourinho to think about considering the father-son relationship he has with Zlatan but might be the right one as far

as fans go. Zlatan has faced troubles with his injury this season and although he has almost fully recovered, he may not perform in the 2017/2018 season at the level he did in the 2016/2017 season and fans aren't going to like that, with possibilities of abuse thrown at Ibrahimovic as United fans do to their players on bad performances. And the thing is, Zlatan doesn't even need to perform badly to get this response, he might not reach last season's heights and he'll get that abuse, no matter how big or revered of a player and person he is. This is something I fear for Dani Alves as well at City next season – he'll be 34 and due to his age, he may not perform as he's done over the previous years. Then we'll get to hear what a fraud Pep is and how the mighty English Premier League was too much for Alves and he couldn't "prove himself".

At the end of the day, fans don't see what's going on in the dressing room and they don't even care that much. Football, to a lot of people, is only what they see live week in, week out. So, all that matters to them is what happens on the pitch and for that reason, trading off Zlatan for Alvaro Morata seems a good deal. Mourinho's pursuit of a striker of Ibrahimovic's caliber may end soon. With Morata's similar height, crazy heading, pace, and strength, he has all the attributes needed to replace Zlatan in that striker role Mourinho desires. One thing that Morata does better than Zlatan is move. Morata's incisive movement between the lines shows his intelligence and natural ability to be a striker. Ibrahimovic didn't have that movement. Morata, using this movement, can drop a few lines back, collect the ball and be the spearhead of fast, traditional United counter-attacks whilst being involved in the play himself. But it's Morata's ability to be that target-man, pouncing in and out of the box with nearly unmatched heading and great finishing ability, that people see him being able to replace a striker like Zlatan Ibrahimovic. He's been crucial for Zinedine Zidane's men this year, scoring a goal every 89 minutes, while being involved in 10 goals from the bench. He's been the dream super sub for Zidane, out playing first choice striker Benzema at times. The Frenchman was the only surprise name on the Champions League final lineup for many fans, as most people expected Zidane to play the more lethal Spaniard up front with Cristiano Ronaldo (only Leo Messi has a better minutes/goal ratio this season than Alvaro Morata).

Rather than seeing a legend like Ibrahimovic being disrespected for a season not as good as his previous and subsequently not "proving himself", the trade-off for a younger, faster and similarly built Morata may be one that brings the club goals on a very consistent basis. The Spaniard has his admirers in Zidane, Lopetegui, Max Allegri and Antonio Conte and now in the very man who handed him his Real Madrid debut and is looking to start working with him soon, José Mourinho.

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