

# Great but not the Greatest

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Coming in for Rafa Benetiz in January 2016, Zinedine Zidane didn't need to command respect from his players – his legendary status as a Galactico had already guaranteed that. He was, for some, a childhood idol and for others, one of the greatest ever to play the game. And as inexperienced as he was, looking back, with his man-management skills and ability to massage each player's ego for the big moments, he was the perfect man for the job.

Winning 3 Champions League trophies is no easy achievement. Even more impressive (and depressing for me) is to win all three back-to-back. Winning the UCL requires you to be the more efficient team on the day and not necessarily the best. You can get run over by your opponent for 180 minutes of elimination football and you'll go through as long as you score at least 1 goal more than them. That is exactly what Zidane was able to get out of his players, getting the right things done on the right day and in the right time.

Getting out of the group stages isn't a demanding task for a team of Madrid's caliber. After that, however, all you need to do is win 7 matches and you have the trophy. That sums up Zidane's team over these years – unstoppable, persistent, and pragmatic on the day but unable to keep those levels of performance up for a longer string of matches. In other words, unable to show a level of consistency that is required to win a league year after year. The Champions League is obviously the more prestigious trophy and does wonders for your club both financially and image-wise, and that's why, for a lot of people, Real Madrid's UCL triumph this years trumps Barcelona's (just nearly unbeaten) domestic double even though a league is much, much more difficult to win than the Champions League. Don't take my word for that, take Zinedine Zidane's word himself:

"I can't explain it. Personally I prefer to win La Liga, as the day to day is the most difficult, and I believe that is also what the players want." "It's more difficult. I've always said that: it's more difficult [to win the league]"

This statement was made because Zidane isn't delusional. He knows that it's easier to get your game plan right for 7 matches than it is for 38. This is what he had to say in press conference as he announced his decision to leave:

"If there's one [best memory] as a coach, it was winning La Liga. For me that was the top."

This is coming from the man who has won 9 trophies as a manager and yet still values the sole league title he won over the unprecedented and glorious feat of winning 3 Champions League titles on the trot. He knows that to win the UCL you need game-changers in your team and the presence of those game-changers is quite self-evident. When nothing's working for the team, a piece of individual brilliance from Marcelo will win Madrid the game. If that doesn't happen, then a moment of magic from Isco would decide the game. Modric and Kroos' sheer individual control on a game would, at times, decide the result. Aside from that, they have Benzema, whose ability to adapt to and facilitate Ronaldo would hand over the team their victory. Even if none of those options worked, Madrid have Gareth Bale at their disposal whose raw unpredictability and pace could turn the match in his team's favour.

Despite having a good squad, Barcelona lack these game-changers with the only ones being Coutinho, who was ineligible to play in the CL, Dembele, who was injured for most of the year and not played in the big games, and obviously Messi. That's why we see results like the one against Roma and that's why we win more leagues than CLs – it's easier to defeat a team carried by Messi in one or two matches than it is in 38 matches, where consistency is key and one setback can be recovered from. The CL, on the other hand, is do or die.

The main point of all this is that no matter what their achievements, Zidane's team is not the greatest team ever. This team can't and shouldn't be called the greatest team of our era and possibly ever. That accolade belongs to Pep's Barcelona of 2008-2012. Unlike them, this Madrid hasn't dominated in the big games, hasn't controlled matches, has too many holes that get papered over by the trophies they win and the glory that comes with them, don't play like a team and rely on the aforementioned individual brilliance and to a very, very large extent, luck, to save them in the big games. Ronaldo's feat against Wolfsburg in the 2016 UCL to propel Madrid into the semi-finals, dubious goals and Marcelo's unstoppable locomotion

against Bayern, a last-minute penalty versus Juventus, Ulreich and Karius' horrible mistakes in successive matches that put Madrid ahead this year and this list can go on and on with Ramos' goal against Atleti and key players of Madrid's upcoming opponents, like Neymar and Mbappe for PSG and Vidal and Boateng for Bayern, getting injured before UCL games (Zidane's "black magic" now being a popular meme) being possible additions to it.

This is no discredit to Zidane, however. He's done his job to the fullest and earned every penny he was paid. It takes a special man to motivate his players the way he does and to man-manage them the way he does. Repeated success over these seasons with Zidane in charge is no joke: he was given a squad with players he legitimately could not upgrade on and he managed to get the best out of them, all to his credit. Even he admits that most of his job is social competence and as compared to other managers, he is tactically quite slim. And that's scary to consider when you realize, with the proper system and structure, players like Modric, Kroos, Isco, and Marcelo could play even better. However, as I said before, Zidane is not delusional and nor is he a fool. He knows that reliance on individual brilliance and getting lucky every time can't save his team every year and to me, that looks like why he is stepping down from his job. He realizes Madrid is a team that needs to compete on all fronts each year and isn't a team that can just put La Liga and the Copa Del Rey on the sidelines just to focus on the UCL, and he knows he isn't the best man for the job as the squad's depth is waning, players are becoming more and more unsatisfied, and most of all team's form visibly declining with this year's disastrous league finish in 3rd place, elimination to Leganes in the Copa Del Rey and having fate on their side against Juventus, Bayern, and Liverpool to push them through to the 13th.

After retiring at Madrid in 2006 and leaving the fans grateful for the "magic" he had displayed in his 5 years there, Zidane's now resigning from the club as the manager who won them three Champions Leagues, is at his highest point, and is leaving behind a legacy that can never, ever be tarnished now, all to his benefit. And even with all that, as crazy as it might be, he is not the best manager of all time and nor is his team the greatest to ever play in our era.