Coutinho to Aston Villa: Can Gerrard help former Liverpool team-mate put Barcelona nightmare behind him?

It is fair to say that this is not the return Philippe Coutinho would have envisaged.

When he left the Premier League in January 2018, the Brazilian was ready to establish himself as one of the world's best.

Four years later, he is seeking to rebuild his career, to put the nightmare of his 'dream' move behind him.

Not many players swap Barcelona for Aston Villa and see it as a step forward, but for Coutinho this was a much-needed switch.

The 29-year-old will, subject to a medical and successful work permit application, spend the rest of the season on loan at Villa, who have the option to make the move permanent come the summer.

Their manager, Steven Gerrard, played with Coutinho for two-and-a-half seasons at Liverpool, and his influence in this deal is clear. Villa, 13th in the Premier League, will rightly see it as a coup, even if others will take a more cynical stance.

Coutinho, lest we forget, is the third-most expensive player in football history. Only Neymar and Kylian Mbappe have ever been transferred for more than the £142 million ($192m) Barcelona agreed with Liverpool back in 2018.

He was 25 at the time, about to enter his prime and viewed in Catalonia as the heir apparent to Andres Iniesta, a player to both excite fans and deliver trophies.

As Gerrard pointed out on Thursday, Coutinho's Wikipedia page will tell you he won two La Liga titles and two Copas del Rey at Barcelona, as well as a Spanish Super Cup. It will also tell you he was a Champions League winner in 2020.

That's not the full story, though.

For a start, that Champions League triumph came with Bayern Munich, to whom he had been farmed out on loan after just one full season at Camp Nou.

Coutinho, Barcelona's biggest ever signing, actually helped knock them out of that season's competition, scoring twice in Bayern's infamous 8-2 semi-final win in Lisbon, a night which summed up just about everything that has been wrong with Barca in recent years.

He would return to his parent club, but never to deliver on his potential. There have been just 24 league appearances across the last two seasons, and only 30 in total.

As Barcelona have bloodied youngsters, the likes of Nico, Gavi, Abdessamad Ezzalzouli and Yusuf Demir, Coutinho has had to content himself with a bit-part role, appearing occasionally and often ineffectually from the bench.

His place in the Brazil team has vanished, too.

His last cap came in October 2020, although he was, somewhat surprisingly, called up to the squad for November's World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina.

The likes of Lucas Paqueta, Raphinha, Anthony, Vinicius Junior and Mateus Cunha, however, all featured ahead of him; a sign of the challenge he faces if he wishes to force his way into Tite's plans for Qatar.

Villa, of course, hope to be the beneficiaries, and will be banking on Coutinho rediscovering the magic which saw him light up Liverpool during his five years on Merseyside.

There was a reason, after all, that Barcelona wanted to pay all that money for him.

Coutinho's talent is vast, his ability to carry the ball, pick killer passes and produce stunning long-range strikes has the potential to seriously improve Gerrard's side, who remain inconsistent since the loss of talisman Jack Grealish to Manchester City in the summer.

Coutinho, naturally, has been linked to a host of Premier League clubs prior to this move.

Liverpool's name was mentioned in just about every transfer window, though the Reds' stance has always been the same; no interest, no chance of a return to Anfield, however highly he was thought of by Jurgen Klopp & Co.

He made more than 200 appearances for the Reds, scoring 54 goals, but fans remember the way he sought to engineer that move to Barca, the transfer request on the eve of the 2017-18 season and the curious 'back injury' which kept him out of action for weeks once Liverpool had refused to sell.

He actually captained the Reds in his penultimate game for the club, but Klopp's side improved after he left.

The fee received for Coutinho effectively paid for the arrivals of Virgil van Dijk and Alisson Becker, who would be key players as Liverpool became European, World and eventually Premier League champions.

They may have mourned his departure, but they haven't missed him.

There will, one imagines, be plenty of rubber-necking once Coutinho gets down to business for Villa. Fans, pundits and observers will be keen to see just how much those four years have taken out of the player, and whether Gerrard can be the one to unlock that rich potential once more. If he can, then Villa may have pulled off the signing of the window. Goal

Djokovic detention shows sports stars not immune from Covid rules

As Novak Djokovic was plotting how to win a record 21st tennis grand slam title, it almost certainly did not involve being confined in a quarantine hotel used by the Australian government to hold refugees.

The world number one's extraordinary detention in Melbourne this week, after Australia's border force ordered his removal from the country, shows even the world's biggest sporting icons are not immune from public health strictures against coronavirus.

Djokovic has found himself stuck at the Park Hotel ahead of his appeal on Monday after tournament organisers' decision to award him a medical exemption was criticised and his visa revoked, putting the defence of his Australian Open title in doubt.

The Serbian, an opponent of inoculations who has never divulged whether he has received a Covid-19 jab, is among the minority of influential athletes to voice concerns about vaccination.

US basketball star Kyrie Irving's refusal to be vaccinated led his team the Brooklyn Nets to initially block him from selection, while Aaron Rodgers, a star National Football League quarterback, has defended the right to "make choices for your body".

Concerns have also been raised about vaccination rates in English professional football — 18 Premier League games due to take place over Christmas had to be postponed as Covid outbreaks depleted squads.

Tim Crow, a sport marketing expert, said it was a mistake to judge sports stars the same as members of the public, pointing out that athletes were accustomed to paying close attention to their medication and nutrition in normal times, for example to comply with doping requirements.

"The mind of an athlete is totally different to that of a civilian," he said. "It's not surprising a lot of them are super, super conscious about putting something into their body if they feel they don't know what the effects are going to be."

Just as athletes have become more vocal on politics and social issues, some have entered the public debate on vaccines. But as Colin Kaepernick discovered in 2016 when he began taking the knee while the US national anthem was played before NFL games, athletes can encounter a strong backlash against their views.

"We live in a world where we're used to athletes taking a stance and having an opinion but you can't have it both ways," Crow said. "They can't just take a stance when it suits."

But controversies around high-profile figures such as Djokovic who have spoken out belies evidence suggesting the vast majority of athletes have been vaccinated, or are on the path to doing so.

According to the Association of Tennis Professionals, the professional body, more than 95 per cent of the top 100 men have been double vaccinated. One person close to the organisation said Australia's strict requirements have motivated players to be jabbed in order to compete in the grand slam.

North American sports leagues have posted extremely high jab rates. The National Hockey League in October heralded an "incredible" success, with 99 per cent of 700 players considered fully inoculated, while the Women's National Basketball Association achieved the same rate in June.

Senior figures across sport argue that it is easier for leagues, club owners and players' associations to work together in team sports to encourage athletes to be vaccinated, for example by co-ordinating group Zoom calls.

"Particularly in the Olympic environment, in a team environment, I don't think there's a lot of sympathy [for unvaccinated athletes]," said Michael Payne, former International Olympic Committee marketing director. Athletes at the upcoming Winter Olympics must quarantine for three weeks upon arrival in Beijing if they are not fully vaccinated.

Tennis players, however, are individuals who depend on the prize money from winning matches, instead of drawing a guaranteed salary.

"There's a big difference between a team sport and an individual sport," said the chief medical officer at an American sports league. "[With] tennis you can afford to speak out a little differently than say in basketball, where there's going to be heavy consequences, or in football or in hockey."

The English Premier League, the most lucrative in Europe, said last month that 77 per cent of footballers from its 20 clubs had received two vaccine doses. But the latest figures from the English Football League, which runs the three divisions below the top flight, revealed only 59 per cent of players were double jabbed, while a quarter "currently do not intend to get a vaccine".

Simon Hallett, majority owner of Plymouth Argyle of the EFL, said the reason it had been a challenge was because football was a "very traditional industry and people think in very old-fashioned ways".

"It's participated in by young men with plenty of time to hang around in dressing rooms and share conspiracy theories. It's disappointing that so many didn't want to be vaccinated," he said.

By comparison, more than 85 per cent of footballers in Spain's La Liga are vaccinated, according to a person close to the league, while nearly all players in Italy's Serie A have been jabbed ahead of the introduction of new rules from Monday making vaccinations mandatory.

The experience of Djokovic, whose career prize money totals $154m, suggests vaccine reluctance could have a significant impact on an athlete's career, from stopping them competing in an overseas tournament to being recruited by a top team.

Jürgen Klopp, manager of English Premier League side Liverpool who is recovering from coronavirus, warned last month that he would think twice about signing up unvaccinated players, citing health risks. "If a player isn't vaccinated at all, he's a constant threat," he said." FT

Covid-19 outbreak puts a damper on local prep and college sports

A rise in Covid-19 cases throughout Santa Cruz County has put a halt to some collegiate and high school sports events in the area.

The Cabrillo men's basketball team was supposed to begin its California Community College Athletic Association Coast Conference South Division season this week. But its first set of conference games against De Anza and West Valley colleges were postponed after a Seahawks' player tested positive.

"We are currently in covid protocols," Cabrillo coach James Page said.

Page canceled practices for the remainder of the week. They hope to clear protocols in time for next week's games against Hartnell and San Jose City colleges.

Scotts Valley High postponed its athletic contests on Tuesday and Thursday and UC Santa Cruz's men's basketball game was also canceled.

Scotts Valley was scheduled to host Santa Cruz in girls soccer, play at Santa Cruz in boys soccer and had boys' and girls' basketball games scheduled at Santa Cruz on Jan. 3. The Falcons were also scheduled to take on Soquel in boys' and girls' soccer on Thursday.

"We did the right thing," Scotts Valley Athletic Director Louie Walters said. "I feel with kids coming back from break and positive cases blowing up, [we'll] shut down for the week."

The Watsonville girls' basketball team canceled its nonleague game against North Salinas High. The Aptos girls' soccer team had its Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League opener against Soquel High on Tuesday canceled after Knights' players tested positive for Covid. Mariners coach Gina Castañeda, who is currently traveling with the Cal North's Olympic Development Program, said it was unfortunate they had to postpone their league opener. She broke the news to the players, who were disappointed they didn't get a chance to play.

"The new Covid strain is so contagious," Castañeda said. "Coaching is more than playing to win games, it's also managing your environment. Sadly for us, Covid has become part of that environment. It's important we keep our players healthy and safe."

Aptos' wrestling team also had to back out of Wednesday evening's SCCAL meet at Santa Cruz High. They were slated to compete against Soquel, but both teams backed out as a precaution.

"It's unfortunate to say but this is nothing new to us," Aptos Athletic Director Travis Fox said. "We're still living through it."

Schools got some good news from the California Interscholastic Federation on Wednesday. They announced that it is temporarily suspending a bylaw that doesn't allow student-athletes to compete on Sunday.

Due to the impact of the pandemic, the rule will remain suspended for the remainder of the 2022 winter sports season. Schools can mutually agree to use Sunday as a possible day to reschedule any postponed games, according to a press release issued on Jan. 5.

"That gives schools and leagues a bit more flexibility to try and make up games, especially in a sport like soccer because now we can have days in between games instead of having back-to-back nights," Fox said.

Fox said that each student and staff member in the Santa Cruz County Office of Education will receive two take-home Covid test kits. It's not required but they're giving them out for those who want one.

The California Department of Public Health announced an updated guideline for a player who tests positive for Covid-19. "Number one goal is to get kids back in the classroom for the second semester and provide a safe space for in-person instruction," Fox said.

All signs point that local schools are anticipating adopting the new update, which will knock down the isolation period from 10 days to five. If a student-athlete is asymptomatic and tests negative, players can return with restricted mask usage.

Fox said the new guidelines are mostly in place to get kids back into the classroom rather than getting them back on the playing field.

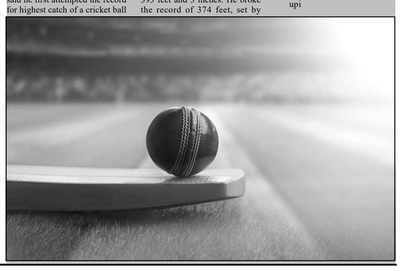
"We consider athletics the last class of the day but we know that kids need to be on campus for instruction," he said. "That's the number one goal, is to keep school going safely." Skysport

Man catches cricket ball dropped from nearly 400 feet for Guinness record

A Sri Lankan man living in Australia broke a Guinness World Record when he caught a cricket ball that was dropped by a drone 393 feet and 3 inches over the ground.

Thimothy Shanon Jebaseelan said he first attempted the record for highest catch of a cricket ball in 2019, but he ended the attempt with a broken finger and no broken records.

Jebaseelan attempted the record a second time about two years later, successfully catching a ball dropped from a height of 393 feet and 3 inches. He broke the record of 374 feet, set by Kristan Baumgartner of Britain in 2019.

"Breaking a Guinness World Records title is my dream. Ever since I was a kid I have been dreaming of this," Jebaseelan told Guinness.

upi