

Manchester City: does success breed success?

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Manchester City, a football club in England's top division, the Premier League, had long been the second-best team in Manchester, overshadowed by their local rivals Manchester United. Every time the two teams met in the Manchester Derby, the underdog was always the so called "Noisy Neighbors" Manchester City. But in September 2008, Abu Dhabi United Group, led by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nayhan, took over ownership of Manchester City Football Club and began to inject money into their new sporting product. Almost instantly, the impact was evident. A year later in the 2009/10 season, with the signing of Roberto Mancini as manager, Manchester City finished the season in fifth place, their highest finish in the top division since 1992 (Transfermarkt). The following season, Manchester City won the FA Cup, their first trophy in 44 years, and the season following that, they lifted the Premier League trophy for the first time since the rebranding of the league 20 years prior. Since they won their first Premier League title in 2012, they have only finished below second place in the league once. This all may seem like a lot of random numbers and statistics just to show how good my favorite football club is, but it begs a question: does success breed success? While it is true that money certainly helps, there are other teams with comparable spending to Manchester City who simply haven't performed as well. Manchester City rank tenth in net expenditures over the last five years, including the season currently in progress (Watson, 2023). Of the four previous seasons, they have won the league three times, finished second place once, and are currently in second place. To compare to the top three net spenders on the list, Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea, there are only four top-three finishes out of the twelve years between the teams, and currently Arsenal sits in first place. Looking at this information, it is clear that money cannot solve all problems and there are other factors in play that decide how well a team will perform.

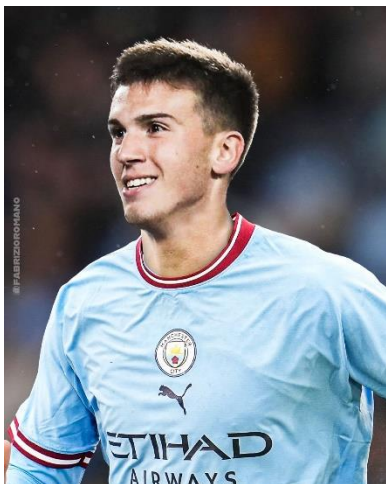
The day that Manchester City went from being the “Noisy Neighbors” to a true contender, some consider to be October 23, 2011. On this day, Manchester City went to Old Trafford and beat Manchester United 6-1 on their own ground, a score line that City had only ever beaten United by in 1926. With a heavy defeat coming so early on in the season, it was



evident that City was up for a title challenge. Edin Dzeko (pictured to the left), a new signing of the previous season where Manchester City won the FA Cup, scored the final goal of the 6-1 trouncing of Manchester United as he swept it past David De

Gea with a left-footed finish to put the icing on a remarkable victory (Andrew Yates, Photograph). This victory over their rivals would serve as a springboard for Manchester city as they would go on to lift the Premier League trophy seven months later in May of 2012. The success in the previous season of Mancini’s team was undoubtedly a confidence boost for a team who had felt doomed to never win again. But once that mindset was broken with their Cup victory over Stoke City in May of 2011, the floodgates opened for Manchester City to begin a decade of trophy collecting. Though the success of Manchester City is often attributed to monetary reasons by fans of rival teams, it is plain to see that money cannot put the ball in the goal for these teams, and there is a balance required between so many different factors including team chemistry, exceptional management, a successful business model and, yes, adequate financial investment. But with so many superb signings made by the Manchester City board over the last fifteen years since Sheikh Mansour and Abu Dhabi United Group took over ownership in 2008, Manchester City is a testament to the fact that it is not always the quantity of money spent, but the quality of player bought with that money.

Edin Dzeko has been just one of a series of excellent signings by Manchester City over the last 15 years. Other notables include David Silva, Sergio Aguero, Fernandinho, Kevin De Bruyne, and most recently Erling Haaland in the summer of 2022. For a team to succeed in the transfer market, the scouting department has to work in tandem with the manager and the board so that the most suitable signings are made. Signings are not the only important use of money; oftentimes a clubs training facilities and youth facilities are a factor in attracting youth talent and high-quality players (Kellar, 2021). Manchester City has some of the top-rated under-23 talents in the world. Of Manchester City's first-team players, there are four standout U-23 players that feature regularly. Phil Foden, who came up through City's own academy and therefore does not hold an incoming transfer value, Rico Lewis, who is also a City Academy product, Julian Alvarez, who was bought from River Plate of Argentina in January 2022 for just over £14 million, and Erling Haaland, widely considered to be one of the top two attackers in the world, who Manchester City got from Borussia Dortmund of the German Bundesliga for a release clause fee just north of £50 million, though he is reportedly worth more than three times that value. Again, this might seem like spouting off random numbers, but for Manchester City, these



are remarkably efficient signings. One such instance of a promising youth player choosing Manchester City over other clubs has happened as recently as a few days ago in the January transfer window of this season. Maximo Perrone, pictured to the left, has been signed from Velez Sarsfield for just around £8 million and has been confirmed by Fabrizio Romano, who is a trusted source of transfer news for most of the top European

leagues (Romano, 2022). Another such instance happened in the summer of 2022, where Erling

Haaland could essentially pick wherever he wanted to go, but ultimately chose Manchester City as his destination for the foreseeable future because of their recent success and their promise of more success to come. Other suitors included Spanish giants Real Madrid and even Dortmund's rivals Bayern Munich, but Haaland chose Manchester City because he deemed them to be his best fit and most likely source of success. To combat recency bias, we can also look at transfers from closer to the start of Abu Dhabi United Group's takeover. Sergio Aguero came from Atletico Madrid for £36 million and stayed for ten years, proving to be instrumental to five Premier League titles and multiple cup wins. David Silva was acquired from Valencia for £24 million and also stayed for ten years. Both Silva and Aguero have been honored with a statue outside the Etihad Stadium to commemorate their service and loyalty to the club. Fernandinho was bought from Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk for £36million as well, and served as Manchester City's lynchpin midfielder for nine years and captain for two before deciding to return home to Brazil. But longevity is not the only measure of good business that City has exemplified. Ukraine international Oleksandr Zinchenko was bought from Ufa for under £2 million, helped City to win four Premier League titles and then was sold to Arsenal in the most recent transfer window for £30 million. A profit of £28 million as well as four titles for one player.



Gabriel Jesus was bought from Brazilian side Palmeiras for £32 million in 2017 and sold to Arsenal for £52 million. Another £20 million profit as well as being a part of the same four Premier League titles as his teammate Zinchenko proves to be another smart investment for Manchester City. In addition to that, Gabriel Jesus also scored the goal that dubbed Manchester

City's 2018/19 team as "Centurions" when they became the first and still only Premier league side to secure 100 points in a season, with the celebration pictured to the right (*Man City Hit Century Thanks to Jesus Goal*, 2018). The list continues on and on with brilliant signing after brilliant signing from the Manchester City board but I have neither the space nor the depth of discussion to spare. Money is only a part of what Manchester City do to succeed year after year. By making smart signings and investing in players who they believe they can develop and have resale value of, they are able to continue to sign world class players to their team to continue their winning ways.

One of the final ways that Manchester City shows that success breeds success is their manager, Pep Guardiola, who has now stayed at Manchester City longer than he had managed either of his previous clubs, FC Barcelona and Bayern Munich. Guardiola's style of football is unique and his passing style had become "synonymous with the Catalan club," referring to Barcelona, before bringing the style to Manchester City (Rickett, 2019). Many analysts of the club even believe that Pep Guardiola was the missing key that allowed Manchester City to find their own identity as a football club, citing that before the title winning campaign of 2017/18, Manchester City was unable to find their identity at the top of the English footballing world until he came along and brought his footballing philosophy and management style which has led them to four Premier League titles in his seven years in charge (Segrave, Spenser, and Santos, 2018). Pep Guardiola was able to come in and revolutionize a squad which had already proven itself able to win and turn them into a consistent winning side. This was a stark contrast to the manager at the start of the Abu Dhabi United Group takeover when Mark Hughes could only bring the team to a tenth-place finish before Roberto Mancini took over in December of 2009 and changed the club atmosphere. The change that came with Guardiola's arrival was not

immediate but has proved to be much needed for the Citizens and his tenure so far has not been a disappointing one (Pollard, 2016). One thing is certain: A coach of Pep Guardiola's status would not have joined Manchester City's project without seeing some promise first. Barcelona and Bayern Munich are always perennial contenders for their respective titles and Champions League, and it is easy for a coach to take a job there. But Manchester City had only recently become consistent title contenders in the Premier League and had yet to stamp their mark in the Champions League or Europa League, but Guardiola was willing to trust the board and their ability to cater to his desires and chose to move to Manchester City for his third club of his coaching career.

With all these factors at play, it is hard to pinpoint just one reason that Manchester City has been so successful over the last decade. Many rival fans will choose money and financial injection as the reason that Manchester City has been so successful, but clubs such as Manchester United, Chelsea, and Arsenal have all spent comparable amounts of money and not seen the same return on investment in the form of trophies as Manchester City has over the same time period. Manchester City's first large success was the FA Cup win in May of 2011, but perhaps the most important success was the Premier League victory in the final day of the league in 2012 where Sergio Aguero, pictured to the right, scored a goal in the 94th minute of regulation time, and created one of, if not the, most iconic Premier League moments in history (Tyler, 2020). Since this title win, Manchester City has won five more, one under Manuel Pellegrini and four under Pep Guardiola, in addition to one more FA Cup and six League Cups. So, is it money that buys success, or is it success that breeds success? It seems



that there is a great deal of distance that money can go before it falls short of giving a club titles and cup victories. For money to be put to its best use, a club must establish throughout the whole club a system that allows for that money to be used efficiently. The training grounds and youth academy help to bring young players and sought after talent to the club with the promise of playing and practicing at these facilities. Having a world class manager, whether it be Roberto Mancini, Manuel Pellegrini, or Pep Guardiola, offers even more incentive for a player such as Erling Haaland to want to play for the blue side of Manchester. And the continued success of the club in winning trophies - Premier League titles, FA Cups, and Carabao Cups – continues to be an attractor for top talent as well. The best players will want to go where they are going to be able to stamp their legacy and add to their trophy cabinets. The first team to score 100 points in a season, the longest stay for Pep Guardiola at any one team, the most successful team in English football over the last decade, whatever title can be given to Manchester City, it is clear that they are here to stay as contenders at the top level. Even though they may not win everything every season, as no team ever does, they will remain a prime destination for players who want to play with the best teams in the world. And though not all their signings have proven to be superb (see Robinho), they will continue to persevere and use their almost bottomless funds to pick the cream of the crop. Though their funds may be bottomless, they are one of the only clubs who have put them to the most efficient use by surrounding the club with different measures of success which serve to attract top talents and thus breed more success year after year.

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