

Football

Jonathan Northcroft

FOOTBALL CORRESPONDENT



It was late November 2016, a chilly evening at the Allianz Arena, with Bayern Munich easing to yet another Bundesliga win. More interesting than the actual game was an individual involved. He played as a right-sided attacking midfielder for Bayer Leverkusen, Bayern's opposition.

He was willowy, beautifully balanced and moved with a dancer's light-toed grace. His touch was lovely, his decision-making flawless. Such was his level of game understanding, it was almost as if he had played the very same match in a previous life.

Somehow, he was only 17 and making his first ever away start. You left sure – as sure as you ever can be about these things – that you'd just glimpsed greatness in the making.

The player was Kai Havertz and I was there and wrote a gushing tweet about him. I mention all this as a way of saying to Mikel Arteta: it's OK, I understand. I know why you did it. Know why you personally drove through his transfer. Know why you risked empowering a rival – and right at the start of the window, giving them scope to reinvest – by insisting Arsenal gave Chelsea £65 million for this player. I do hope Havertz proves you, and all of us who have ever fallen for this footballer, right. But I have to say, I'm not sure he will.

It has taken only 236 Premier League minutes of Havertz in an Arsenal shirt for Arteta to have to mount a defence of his signing, and he did it with passion and eloquence on Friday, imploring supporters to "give [Havertz] love and we'll get the best out of him".

This came after the grumbling at the Emirates that soundtracked Havertz's involvements in last week's 2-2 draw with Fulham. Not that there were too many involvements: substituted early in the second half, Havertz had the fewest touches (22) of any outfield Arsenal player in the first.

Arteta spoke of Havertz's "phenomenal football brain", his dazzling performances in training and the underlying numbers that suggest his contribution will be special once he finds that moment of spark to ignite his Arsenal career.

He's not the first manager forced to justify faith in this young German enigma. Frank Lampard, who bought Havertz for a then club record £7.2 million in 2020, found himself pleading for patience when Havertz's Chelsea career was just ten league games old. Thomas Tuchel produced quite the speech on Havertz's behalf in his first press conference as Chelsea manager, although he did have a message for the player that seems relevant – that he should not only "rely on his endless talent".

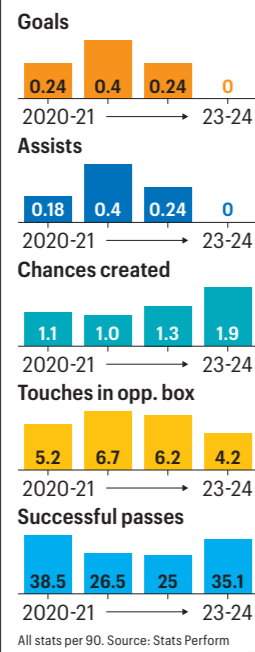
The trouble is that, even now, even aged 24 and into his eighth senior season, Havertz remains a better footballer on paper than on the pitch. The numbers those Emirates grumblers could quote back at Arteta are the ones that measure obvious output. This season, for Havertz, it's zero goals, zero assists, zero shots on target, zero passes leading to a shot.



ON TV TODAY

Arsenal v Man United
4pm Sky Sports Main Event. Kick-off 4.30pm

HAVERTZ IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE



Going into the current round of games, Havertz was joint 117th for touches in the 2023-24 Premier League, and 109th for completed passes, just above the Chelsea 'keeper, Robert Sánchez. To doubters he's a myth, a mirage.

Arteta looked past three anticlimactic seasons at Chelsea to the Leverkusen Havertz, the prodigy Lothar Matthäus tipped to win a Ballon d'Or, who Rudi Völler dubbed Leverkusen's best ever product and a "mix between Mesut Özil and Michael Ballack". That player produced 38 goals and 16 assists from 2018-20 operating mostly as an attacking midfielder, attracting interest from Liverpool, both Manchester clubs, Bayern and Real Madrid.

Havertz chose Chelsea because so many key people there – including Roman Abramovich – gave him the message that he was a player to build the club's future around and with Lampard he could learn from a giant of goal-scoring attacking midfield play.

The drift began with a quiet start, then a Covid absence and rush of price-tag pressure as he became a symbol of Lampard's failing reign. Havertz admitted that scoring the winner in the Champions League final stopped his first Chelsea season being a "disaster". His second was more productive, but not a lot more.

His third, for such an artistic player, became so artisan as, playing centre forward in a 3-4-2-1 for an embattled, toothless team, he shouldered a physical burden, winning headers, contesting tackles and pressing opponents. The goal touch went (he was statistically the Premier League's worst finisher).

But even amid 2023-24's toils there is something to like. It is Havertz's sacrifice, flexibility, capacity to plug away in a position not his favourite.



“

Arteta feels Havertz will be like Odegaard at Arsenal, who rediscovered himself spectacularly

Arteta has been looking for the right left-sided No8 since taking over in 2019 and has always wanted that player to be attack-focused, adept at arriving in the box on to cutbacks, and good at combining and swapping places with players around him. And good against the ball.

The tweak in Arsenal's style that he is attempting, in the hope of finding more solutions against defensive blocks, involves more rotations, better midfield possession and more goals from across the pitch.

Havertz has the skill set for all this and in his Leverkusen days showed a special knack for creating chances with clever short passes.

Arteta feels that Havertz will be like Martin Odegaard, who was also a former teen prodigy whose trajectory dipped, but who, once exposed to the culture and coaching Arteta provides – and the "love" of Arsenal fans – rediscovered himself in a spectacular way.

He makes the valid point that Havertz simply hasn't had time to establish the relationships with teammates through which a player with his intuition for moving effectively, according to others' positioning, thrives. He has been thrust in to the side of the field – the left – where Arsenal are in flux.

He's had three different left backs behind him in three games and Declan Rice, who Arteta is encouraging to push into an attacking midfield-left channel, is also finding his way. And, outside him, Gabriel Martinelli is slightly off form.

Those who describe Havertz as "lazy" or "languid" are very wrong. He works and tries hard. But does he do so with intensity? With assertive edge?

The past player he seems most similar to is Juan Sebastián Verón. What a signing Manchester United appeared to have made in 2001 when the Argentinian came to England.

How right Sir Alex Ferguson was to defend his talent – even if his language in his rant at journalists ("He's a f***ing great player! Youse are f***ing idiots!") was a little route one.

But in the end Fergie offloaded him to Chelsea. It didn't work out differently for the player there either.

"Verón was capable of exceptional football and was talented," Ferguson would admit. "But, at times, he found the Premiership a bit difficult."

I share Arteta's hope that Havertz avoids those words ending up on his football gravestone too – but am just not sure he will.

TODAY'S OTHER TOP-FLIGHT GAMES

Crystal Palace v Wolves
Palace will continue with Sam Johnstone in goal despite the signing of Dean Henderson. Wolves will give a fitness test to Hwang Hee-chan.
● 1pm, Sky Sports Premier League, kick-off 2pm

Liverpool v Aston Villa
Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk is suspended. The Villa goalkeeper, Emiliano Martínez, will have a fitness test.
● Highlights BBC1 10.30pm, kick-off 2pm

'I saw Uefa sexism – silence over Rubiales is no surprise'

Jonathan Northcroft

As Sarina Wiegman dedicated her coach of the year award to the Spanish women's team at Uefa's gala evening in Monaco, behind her stood Aleksander Ceferin, looking like a *Thunderbirds* puppet – stiff, blank-eyed, a wooden grin.

Uefa's president kept an uncomfortable silence, as he and his organisation have almost entirely done throughout the Luis Rubiales saga. It's a fortnight since Rubiales appeared to forcibly kiss the midfielder, Jenni Hermoso, as Spain were being presented with winners' medals at the Women's World Cup. Ceferin has said that Rubiales' actions were "inappropriate" but little else.

In fact, the leaders of the European game have spoken out more, in recent days, about how referees calculate stoppage time than about a scandal centring on the rights of women.

Rubiales? He remains a Uefa vice-president, although pay in his lucrative €250,000 position has been paused pending a Fifa investigation. He is still in the boys' club. Still the face of the Uefa-backed Spain-Portugal-Morocco-Ukraine 2030 World Cup bid, while he clings to power in his domestic post. "I am annoyed by Uefa's silence," Sally Freedman says. "But I am certainly not surprised."

Freedman, formerly a senior communications manager with Uefa, is the author of a book documenting her experiences of sexism and harassment during a life involved in the game. It's called *Get Your Tits Out for the Lads* and in light of recent scandals – of which Rubiales is only one – it is vital reading.

Freedman spent almost four years with Uefa, during which she was confronted by a range of outdated behaviours and thinking. These included female staff working at Euro 2020 being offered a choice of uniform that involved wearing either jeans or – no kidding – transparent trousers. When she took the jeans option, a "very senior manager" suggested she come in the next day wearing the trousers so he could "check" they really were see-through.

Then there was the marketing material that Uefa came up with to drum up hospitality ticket sales for that tournament in the Far East. It involved pictures of young women in crop tops and miniskirts. And there was last year's Christmas party. "I had left by then [Freedman quit in July 2022] but I asked a colleague how the party was and she told me there were girls half-naked, on stilts. Their only purpose was to strut up and down and have photos in Santa's grotto.

"Somebody thought that was a good idea. Despite every week there being a story about sexism – whether in business, in politics, in sport – somehow senior decision-makers didn't see anything wrong," she says. "It's shocking – but not shocking, if you know what I mean.

"And what did [the marketing material] say to women? That we're pieces of meat and they're just using us to make money. We've seen in the



Freedman's book covers some of her experiences at "tone deaf" Uefa



Freedman made contact with Jonathan Northcroft after reading this report a week ago

Tour de France, with the [scantly clad] girls who used to be on the podium, that's been stopped. Formula One used to have girls sprawled over the cars and that's been stopped. But at Uefa they're still doing it to promote hospitality sales. It's like they're tone deaf."

Freedman did try to effect change. "There are many good people [at Uefa]. I initiated a gender and equality working group that was supported by the chief of human resources. Unfortunately, the majority of members were women, but the idea was well received.

"I wrote emails. I talked to people. But an individual staff member in a diversity and inclusion role – who I was able to take complaints to – has zero powers. They did their best to

“

I asked a colleague how the party was and she told me there were half-naked girls

talk to those at executive level but I'd get emails back saying, "Thanks Sally ... " but never any change.

"I give the example in the book of, during the pandemic, being issued with a 'Teams background where all the people in it were male. I said, 'Fifty per cent of the population are women and we're supposed to be promoting equality' and it was, 'Great point, Sally'. But three months later there were eight new backgrounds, all featuring men.

"That's something tiny but not if you care about equality. Every meeting room at Uefa is named after a man. In the reception, it's the history of football. Are any women featured? Of course not. It's here's Ronaldo, here's Beckham. You think if they're not going to do the little things they're certainly not going to tackle the big things.

"My phone has gone more crazy over Rubiales than [it did over the European] Super League when I was at Uefa as it was happening. Even non-football people are messaging: 'Uefa's silence is deafening, why is he still vice-president, Sally?'"

Other experiences include sexual harassment from men on multiple occasions when attending games as a fan (the title of Freedman's book is taken from one such incident), being issued with men's kit to play in staff football tournaments, and a particularly unpleasant moment working for Melbourne City FC when, while escorting a player to the stage at a supporters' function the footballer whispered in her ear, "My cock is f***ing massive and wouldn't you like to see it."

She says, with sadness, "My book only contains a few things I encountered – if I put them all in, it could be an encyclopedia. The problems women face in football go beyond being with one individual or one organisation. Just as in society, they're systemic.

"All these stories people warned me about at the beginning of my football career, I naively thought, I'll be fine.

"But, as I say in my book, everyone was right – and I was very wrong."