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How the rise of Marina Granovskaia helped Chelsea return to the top of European football

► The Russian-Canadian has been instrumental to the club's current success, through smart recruitment and important long-term planning



Marina Granovskaia has been central to Chelsea's success, particularly in her role as the head of player transactions. EPA

Liliane Tannoury

Sep 22, 2021

Chelsea's superb start to the season has seen the London club viewed by many as Premier League title favourites and follows on from a spectacular conclusion to the previous campaign.

While the immediate praise and attention focuses on manager Thomas Tuchel and his players, Chelsea's recent success has been largely orchestrated by a figure whose influence is only usurped by owner Roman Abramovich.

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Thomas Tuchel's masterstroke sets up Chelsea's commanding win over Tottenham

Marina Granovskaia arrived at Chelsea when Abramovich bought the club in 2003 having worked for the Russian oligarch at an oil company he owned since 1997. Over the past 18 years, her influence inside the club has grown and today she is the executive director responsible for player transactions which has seen Chelsea assemble one of the finest squads in Europe while effectively balancing the books.

Among the best examples of her abilities occurred just this summer. Chelsea may have shattered their transfer record to re-sign Romelu Lukaku for £98 million (\$134m), but that deal was offset by sales worth £105m, with the likes of Tammy Abraham, Kurt Zouma, and Fikayo Tomori - all players deemed surplus to requirements by Tuchel - departing for large fees.

Granted, last summer saw an outlay of around £160m net spend on transfers but 12 months prior, in 2019 when Chelsea were under a transfer embargo, the club made a profit of approximately £96m. It points to a clear strategy in the transfer market to work within the club's admittedly large means while predominantly targeting younger players who will either service the club for many years or later be sold for profit.

As part of the Chelsea board - to which she was appointed in 2013 - Granovskaia was partly responsible for the decision to sack Frank Lampard, a legendary Blues figure from his playing days, and replace him with Tuchel in January. That decision has so far paid off handsomely as the German led the Blues to the Champions League title in his first six months.

But it has not just been astute transfer business that has propelled Granovskaia to Chelsea's top table. She is said to have been integral to building Chelsea's links with Dutch club Vitesse Arnhem, where many Chelsea players, including current star Mason Mount, have spent loan spells to aid in their development. She was also central to the development of Chelsea's training complex, Cobham, which opened in 2007 and is now one of the finest training grounds in Europe.

Elsewhere, Granovskaia's negotiating prowess is not limited to player transfers as the Russian-Canadian led the £60m-a-year shirt sponsorship deal with Nike that lasts until 2032.

There have been a few speedbumps over the years. Her all-powerful role in Chelsea transfers caused friction with former manager Antonio Conte, who complained he was unable to secure his preferred transfer targets the summer after leading the club to an improbable Premier League title. Similar concerns were shared by his predecessor Maurizio Sarri.

Meanwhile, goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois accused Granovskaia of going back on her word when he was told he would be allowed to leave Chelsea in 2018. The Belgian ultimately secured a move to Real Madrid on deadline day. His replacement, the £71m Kepa Arrizabalaga, has so far struggled to justify his world record fee.

Granovskaia has also been credited with acting as peacemaker that allowed for Jose Mourinho to return for a second stint as Chelsea manager in 2013, and while the Portuguese's return was met with much fanfare, he was dismissed after a disastrous start to his third season having delivered the title the previous campaign.

Yet, the club's current rude health means the good times have firmly returned to Stamford Bridge and there are few people more responsible for the success than Granovskaia.

It is little wonder, then, that she is often described as one of football's most powerful women.

Updated: September 22nd 2021, 3:52 AM

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