

Darwin Núñez transfer to Liverpool highlights attacking talent in Portugal's Primeira Liga



- Cash-rich English clubs have recently successfully plundered the likes of Benfica and Porto for their best players

The secret is out. Portugal's Primeira Liga is where Europe's top clubs are turning for some of the continent's top attacking talent.



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At least the cash-rich ones of the English Premier League are doing so.

Last week, Liverpool signed Uruguayan forward Darwin Núñez from Benfica for an up-front fee of \$79 million, with potentially another \$26 million in add-ons if certain requirements are met.

The move makes Núñez the second most expensive transfer ever in Portuguese football, after the \$132 million paid by Atlético Madrid to the Lisbon club for João Félix in 2019. It will likely end up being the biggest investment in Liverpool's history too, surpassing the \$88 million Jurgen Klopp spent on Dutch defender Virgil van Dijk.

While the fee cannot be called a bargain, yet, it has been hailed as another smart piece of business by Liverpool's transfer committee, especially for a player who is only 23, and who until the start of last season was not on the radar of Europe's top clubs.

Signings from Portugal have excelled in the Premier League in recent times.

For example, Bruno Fernandez has arguably been Manchester United's best signing, having joined from Sporting CP for \$58 million, at the time a record fee paid to a Portuguese club.

And only on Tuesday night, Fabio Vieira's \$42 million move to Arsenal from Porto was confirmed.

Between July 2017 and January 2022, \$1.76 billion poured into the coffers of Portuguese clubs, for profit of almost \$1.2 billion after these teams invested \$555 million in player transfers, according to a study by CIES Football Observatory.

Portuguese football thus had the highest five-year profit margin among the 40 countries analyzed, ahead of Brazil (\$1.07 billion), the Netherlands (\$780 million), France (\$726 million), Argentina (\$630 million) and Belgium (\$455 million).

Impressive numbers from Portugal. And the trend has been rising, slowly at first, over the last half decade.

Diego Jota, a big success at Liverpool, made his way to Wolves from Atletico Madrid, but via Porto.

Wolves, the favored destination of so many Portuguese players thanks to their solid relationship with super agent Jorge Mendez, also struck gold after signing Ruben Neves from Porto, and Raul Jimenez from Benfica.

The numbers back up Pep Guardiola's comment highlighting "the fantastic recruitment of Portuguese clubs." Indeed, Manchester City were one of the clubs that contributed the most to the Portuguese coffers in the last five years, having signed Ederson from Benfica, for \$40 million in 2017. That year they also bought Portuguese Bernardo Silva, though in this case the \$50 million went to Monaco, the club he had joined from Benfica on loan in 2014, and permanently a year later.

So what is behind the success of these Portuguese, and Portugal-based, players?

The indication is that the Portuguese League has become a 'trampoline' championship, giving its best players a major bounce on their way to the Premier League's land of riches.

Just as in France and the Netherlands, the business model for many Portuguese clubs is to spend low, develop top class players and then sell high.

The Primeira Liga may not be perceived among the top leagues in Europe, but the sale of Núñez showcased an increasing reality. That is, performing in the Champions League for one of the country's best teams, could be a ticket to one of the continent's leading clubs.

Benfica, despite a lackluster domestic season, progressed to the quarterfinals of the Champions League, a platform which offered Núñez the opportunity to put on high-level performances against Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Liverpool. His goalscoring performance at Anfield may have just secured his transfer to the Premier League and Champions League runners-up.

Núñez, like new Real Madrid signing Aurelien Tchouaméni, prospered individually in a collectively underperforming team during the 2021-22 season.

Should he emulate countryman Luis Suarez and go on to become a success at Anfield, you can expect the eyes of the recruitment managers of Premier League clubs to turn toward Portugal more and more in the coming seasons.
