

Rodrygo pays off Real Madrid's investment after Champions League heroics



- Longtime bench player giving Carlo Ancelotti, Tite food for thought after meteoric rise

Had there been any doubts before, Rodrygo Silva de Goes has now well and truly paid off every last penny that Real Madrid laid out for his services.

Last week, the the 22-year-old Brazilian was the substitute hero of the astonishing Champions League comeback that saw Carlo Ancelotti's team knock out favorites Manchester City, scoring twice in stoppage time to take the match into extra time. And then victory, thanks to Karim Benzema's penalty.

Watching the action unfold, my mind went back to a curious history I have had with Rodrygo — one that shows just how much his career has come on in recent years.

In 2019, Real Madrid offered two players to be interviewed for the Arab fans, but not Rodrigo, then still a newcomer to the Bernabeu.

I immediately proposed to interview him instead, as I was curious to know who this kid was for whom the club had paid €45 million (\$47 million).

After last week's remuntada, it must seem like peanuts.

Rodrygo had been signed from Santos, the Brazilian club which had also sold fellow countrymen Robinho to Real in 2005. The club also sold Neymar to Barcelona in 2013.

Just what was so special about Rodrygo, still relatively unknown globally, for the club to pay that amount?

My persistence paid off and I ended up in interviewing the then 18-year-old Brazilian. I would not be disappointed either.

I was immediately impressed by his humility and his friendliness, but above all, his focus on constantly improving himself and making a success of his adventure at Real Madrid.

In an understated but mature manner, he told me that his routine was simply home to training center and back. He had no time yet to get to know the city of Madrid.

Such humility and patience has paid off three years later, with Rodrygo becoming a fan favorite at Real, where he has just claimed a second La Liga title in three years.

At 21, Rodrygo has shown that he is player for the big occasion, giving Ancelotti a welcome selection headache ahead of the Champions League final against Liverpool. It is a problem that Brazil's national team coach, Tite, will not mind having either as he prepares his team for the 2022 FIFA World Cup starting this November.

This season, Rodrygo has scored eight goals and provided eight assists in 44 games; three goals and four assists have come in the successful La Liga campaign.

Meanwhile, in the Champions League, he has played 10 matches (six coming from the bench) and scored five goals. He may not have been a starter, but his value as a squad player is rising with every match.

He had served notice from his early days at the club that he enjoys playing in the competition.

In his first ever Champions League appearance for Real Madrid, back in the 2019-20 season, he scored a perfect hat-trick — right foot, left foot and header — against Galatasaray of Turkey.

The Brazilian's goalscoring performance for Madrid's have been impressive, scoring six goals in the last six games in the Champions League and La Liga.

Rodrygo has an incredible ability to finish and decide. The game vs. Man City was lost. Rodrygo brought it back to life in two minutes. In addition to the two goals, he made the move that brought them a penalty, a foul by Ruben Dias and the winning goal by Benzema.

Once again I saw that ability to surpass himself — which I had noted in that first interview — in his second goal against Pep Guardiola's team. Rodrygo, at only 1.74 meters tall, beat Aymeric Laporte (1.91 meters) and Ruben Dias (1.87 meters) to head the ball past the rooted Ederson and take the match into an extra 30 minutes.

Few players have progressed as much as Rodrygo has this season, and acclaim has come from the greatest of Brazil's legends.

"I knew this time will arrive and I will congratulate you," said Pele in message to his talented countryman after his double strike against the Premier League champions.

Bigger and better challenges lie ahead.

The night before the game against Manchester City, Rodrygo told his father that he would score a hat-trick. Having managed two goals, he said after the match: "Well, I didn't score the third, but I will get that one in the final."

Should he do so, his days of watching from the bench for both club and country may well be over.
