

PERFORMANCE

WHERE PROS REVEAL THE SECRETS OF THEIR GAME



GET THE BABIES ON BOARD

In need of a pre-match energy boost? These tasty treats will turbocharge your muscles in no time

Eyewitness accounts from the dressing rooms at Leicester City and Sheffield United, among others, confirm that pro footballers have resorted to eating babies for pre-match fuel. Fortunately it's only the jelly variety being scoffed by the fistful prior to kick-off, in order to give players a fast-acting energy boost.

"Although sugary foods like sweets are most effective when consumed at half-time, if a sound

pre-match meal has not been eaten three hours before kick-off then a handful of these high-carbs will help," explains Mayur Ranchordas, Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Nutrition at Sheffield Hallam University and advisor to Bolton Wanderers.

Recent research from the *US Journal of Nutrition* has highlighted the effectiveness of fast-acting high-sugar snacks for athletes in need of a boost, a study that

would be backed up by jelly baby munchers including European 200m silver medallist Christian Malcolm and former decathlete Dean Macey. Jelly babies fall into the 'simple' carbohydrate category of food: unlike, say, pasta, a 'complex' slow-release carbohydrate, the babies' sugar is converted to glucose almost instantly, fast-tracking energy to your muscles – and stopping your legs turning to jelly on the pitch.

Performance editor Hitesh Ratna; Jelly baby words Rob Kemp

THE FOURFOURTWO PERFORMANCE PANEL

Meet the experts available to answer your questions about playing the game

FITNESS

Scott Miller Fulham conditioning coach

The Australian is preparing for his fifth season working with the first XI at Craven Cottage.



NUTRITION

Matt Lovell Tottenham sports nutritionist

Matt has worked with the England rugby team since 2002 and is currently working with Spurs and UK Athletics.



PSYCHOLOGY

Tom Bates Birmingham peak performance coach

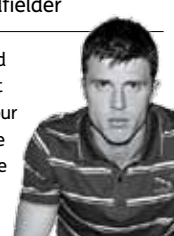
Birmingham's brain trainer helped the Blues mentally prepare for their recent Carling Cup triumph.



TECHNIQUE

Michael Carrick Man United midfielder

Michael has played over 200 top-flight games, winning four Prem titles and the Champions League in '08.





DON'T COUNT ON CORNERS

Don't let your team rely on being a danger at set-pieces. American statisticians reviewing English Premier League games found that, on average, a team scores a goal from a corner only once in every 10 games.

GRAB A COFFEE

Coffee can perk up your game. A New Zealand trial of 22 pros found those who had a caffeine fix an hour before playing recorded a 10 per cent improvement in passing accuracy, a five per cent boost in shooting power and a 2.9 per cent faster short sprint time compared to those who took a placebo.

DYNAMIC START FOR IMPROVED SHOOTING

A study of 18 pro players in the Far East has found that dynamic stretching before a game – including hip extensor and hip flexor moves – improves a player's kicking range of motion by almost 10 degrees when compared to doing static stretches or no stretches at all during the warm-up.



RING FINGERS POINT TO TRUE TALENT

Bryan Robson, Stanley Matthews and Gazza's long ring fingers, compared to their index fingers, indicates their talent. The weird but true research adds that naturally gifted players with a genetic predisposition for spatial awareness were exposed to more testosterone in the womb.

EAT UP!

A study of 10 Championship players found they consumed 2,831 calories per day – but their energy expenditure was 3,618. Researchers concluded that this lack of calories resulted in muscle glycogen decline over the course of the week, leaving players tired.

10 THINGS WE'VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

WHAT WAGS WANT

Forget their wallets: according to evolutionary scientist Dr Albrecht Schulte-Hostedde, footballers are attractive to women because the team environment lets them demonstrate role acceptance and the ability to work with others, desirable in a mate.

27%

That's the improvement in kicking distance among junior players after they'd included plyometric (explosive muscle) drills in their 14-week training program. Distance actually went down for those who didn't do them.

FAT CHANCE IN THE OFF-SEASON

A footballer's body fat can increase by as much as 10 per cent during the summer lay-off if he doesn't watch his diet or do aerobic training. The body percentages of professional players are between nine and 16 per cent, but can balloon to 19 per cent.

A SIGN OF YOUR BEST POSITION

Creative passer? Bet you're a Taurus. Quick feet? A Gemini, then. A new journal claims star signs spawn different players. Taureans include Johan Cruyff and Dennis Bergkamp; Frank Lampard and Gazza are Geminis.



PLAYERS PASS MORE EXAMS

Football after school boosts a pupil's chances of achieving top GCSE marks. Studies into academic achievement and sports that build confidence and team skills found kids, when offered a range of extra-curricular sports, were "significantly" more likely to attain between A* and B grades.



[You ask, we answer]

How to become a full-back

Transform from winger to defender with these expert tips from Arsenal starlet Kieran Gibbs

"I started out on the wing, but the gaffer has now moved me to full-back. Any tips on how to make a smooth transition?"

Mark Brinkman, via email



Kieran Gibbs

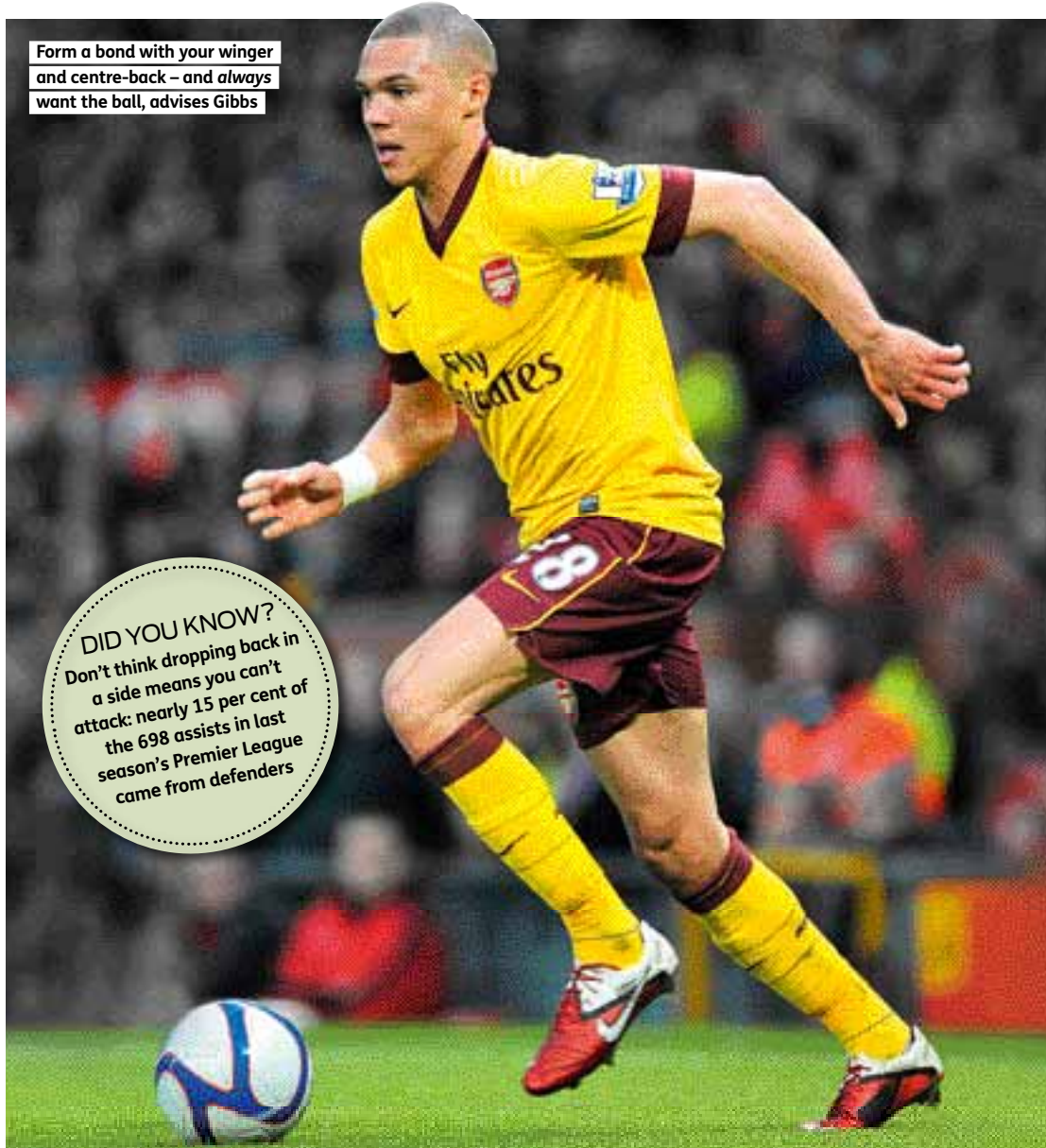
Arsenal left-back and former wideman

"As a full-back you need to understand the importance of distances between you and your centre-half. You always need to be talking. You have to know how close you need to be to each other in different situations, and work together. If you're not compact as a back four, you can get exposed.

Form a good partnership with the man playing in front of you, too. If you've got someone who likes to go forward a lot, you know you don't have to support him as much, but if you've got someone who likes to come inside and play then you know you have to get round him.

You could practise one-twos and triangles to improve your on-pitch relationship. You want to get up and down the channel fast, to help the midfield. You have to always want the ball. If you want to play from the back, you need confidence in your ability to get the ball from your keeper and centre-half."

Form a bond with your winger and centre-back – and always want the ball, advises Gibbs



DID YOU KNOW?
Don't think dropping back in a side means you can't attack: nearly 15 per cent of the 698 assists in last season's Premier League came from defenders

Kieran Gibbs wears the new CTR 360 II, a boot that helps the playmaker to receive, control and distribute the ball to take charge of the game. Visit nikefootball.com

Interview Ben Welch

"I'm a keeper and always return to pre-season training overweight and rusty. What can I do over the summer to stay fit and sharp?"

Anthony Gray, via email



Paul Robinson

Blackburn Rovers and former England No.1

"As a goalkeeper a lot of your game is mental, so it's best to take some time to switch off. It's important to rest your mind as well as body in the off-season.

Be sensible, then build up fitness from two weeks before pre-season.

Playing tennis is a great way to keep your muscles ticking over. It also helps a goalkeeper with footwork and movement, obviously important inside your 18-yard-box.

I'd also recommend going for a run before breakfast. It only has

to be for 40 minutes and it will help you keep the weight off.

You can even do stuff on the beach. Find a quiet corner and do 20-30 minutes of press-ups and sit-ups to keep your conditioning up.

On day one of pre-season I want to be ready. You've got to hit the ground running because within a week you'll be playing matches."

Paul Robinson is an Under Armour-sponsored athlete: for information, visit underarmour.co.uk

"Anyone up for tennis after the match?"



Interview Ben Welch

DID YOU KNOW?
Keeping possession is vital for a holding midfielder: all four of last season's most prolific short passers in the English Premier League play in that role

Masterclass

MICHAEL CARRICK ON PROTECTING YOUR BACK FOUR

From fighting fires started by the opposition to making attacking surges from deep, Manchester United's midfield sentry explains the art of the holding role



1 Know your job

Remember you're an extra layer of defence

"If you're playing the holding role in a central three in midfield, you're screening the two centre-halves and stopping the service getting to the opposition's forwards. If the game is being played at 100mph, don't get carried away with what's happening – positioning is the key. If you can get on the ball and support the attack then go for it, but be aware of where the danger is if the move breaks down. If they counter-attack you've got to be able to get in a position to help the defence."



2 Work with your defence

Force the play and follow orders

"If the opposition floods the midfield and one of their forwards drops deep, you have to get information from your centre-halves. If you've got to keep looking over your shoulder you can't see what's happening in front of you. Angle your body so you're in a position to cut out passes to their centre-forwards, but also able to face the play. If the opposition get the ball in between you and your centre-halves, they're running forward and you're running back – and then you have a problem."



3 Discipline is key

Don't get pulled out of position

"Avoid getting dragged out wide, leaving space in the middle for players to run into – this puts your centre-backs under pressure. Sometimes the danger is out wide and you've got to deal with it, but make sure you've got cover. But if you're being hit on the counter-attack and you're the only midfielder, you don't want to be going out wide – let them have it and try to delay them so you can get bodies back."



4 Press space, not players

Going man-to-man creates space for the oppo

"Shut off the angles. If you press the player on the ball you're creating space in behind you and they can pass into that space. Force the opposition to play the ball where you want. Do this by stepping off the player you're marking and drawing them into a pass, then trying to intercept it. If their biggest threat is out on one wing, focus on defending that area, pushing them to the other side. If they have someone playing off the front, like Messi, cut the space through the middle by bringing your wide men in, forcing them out wide."



5 Make yourself available

You're not just there to defend: be another option

"If you're chasing the game you want to keep the other team under pressure, so you want to keep the ball moving. Press high up the pitch and don't let them out of their half. As a holding midfielder you have to be in a position to receive the ball and influence the play, but at the same time being in a position so that if the play breaks down, you're covering. From your position you can see the play both ways, so even if you haven't got the ball you can tell your teammates what options they have."



6 Pick the right pass

Assess your options and take calculated risks

"When you've got the ball you have to think, 'How far forward can I play?' Sometimes a 10-yard forward pass can be better than a 60-yard forward pass that doesn't get anywhere. The short pass might take three midfielders out the game and get your attacking midfielder running at the back four. If the game is stretched and has been end-to-end then don't go long, because if it gets cut out then they're attacking you again. This is the time to play a five-yard pass and slow the game down. However, don't be afraid to take a risk and try an incisive pass."

Interview Ben Welch

PRO TIP

LEE PELTIER

The Huddersfield Town defender on returning to pre-season sharp



"Maintaining match sharpness over the summer months is just as important as maintaining physical fitness. As a defender sharpness can give you an advantage against a player blessed with pace or one with quick feet. If you're sharp it can help you read the game. Tackling is one area you have to stay on top of as a

defender. You can work on this by simulating lots of one vs one scenarios in training. When you're in a one vs one situation stay on your feet and don't dive in because once you commit yourself you're out of the game. Stand side on, so you can turn either way and you're not flat footed. Use your body shape to direct them away from goal and get tight to stop the cross."

[Psychology]

Off-season mind gym

From visualisation to setting yourself fresh targets, Birmingham City psychologist Tom Bates explains how to return from your break feeling tip-top courtesy of his cerebral workout

REFLECT ON YOUR PAST PERFORMANCES

Evaluate your performances last season and ask yourself: "How can I improve on my best?" Accept the things you've already achieved and look back on the things you've struggled with. Be honest in your approach to your game and you will return to pre-season with a structured plan for improvement.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH POSITIVITY

Concentrate on your strengths and love of football, and surround yourself with positive influences. Try to cut energy-sapping people and habits out of your regime and fine-tune your engine with stretching, yoga or swimming. It might sound airy-fairy, but taking these steps will leave you feeling energised for pre-season.

SET YOURSELF NEW-SEASON TARGETS

Set performance goals early. Have a clear vision of what you want to improve, write them down and ask your coach for their views. Connecting action to intention injects enthusiasm, builds the focus and ignites drive. Create a clear picture of your personal training diary and make sure you stick to it religiously.

TAKE SOME TIME OUT – REST IS VITAL

When a battery gets used constantly it needs time to recharge. Players are the same. Throughout the season you will have worked very hard physically, technically, tactically, mentally and emotionally so the rest period is crucial. By giving your mind and body a chance to recover you will feel a surge in energy levels.

VISUALISE SUCCESS TO KEEP MOTIVATED

By identifying what you want to achieve during pre-season you will generate goals and connect with the emotions you'll feel if you achieve your goals. If you visualise yourself looking faster and fitter during pre-season, you're going to feel more energised and emotionally motivated to produce those results.

[Tactics]

WINNING WITHOUT WINGERS

It is possible: get forward from midfield and use your full-backs, says Chesterfield boss John Sheridan

"Having pace on the wings is obviously great, but it's not the be-all and end-all – particularly in modern football. You can still have success by playing narrow, overloading the midfield and keeping possession of the ball in central areas. The full-backs are very important too, because if the wide midfielders do lack pace they will probably tuck in a bit more to allow the right-backs and left-backs greater freedom to get forward."

When I played for the Republic of Ireland under Jack Charlton we had Ray Houghton on the right and Steve Staunton on the left, with myself, Roy Keane and Andy Townsend in the middle. Ray and

Steve were obviously very good players but neither was particularly quick, and they weren't the sort of widemen that were going to go past players. Jack overcame that by getting people to join the strikers from central areas – that meant we always posed a threat.

That worked really well for us during the 1994 World Cup, and it worked well because those guys were clever footballers; the sort of players that instinctively knew where to stand to make things difficult for the opposition. Very often, the opposition full-backs didn't know whether to come out and mark them or stay in their position. Good players can do that: they can create that confusion."

Interview Richard Edwards

DID YOU KNOW?
Sir Alf Ramsey's '66 World Cup-winning 'wingless wonders' tactic brought other players into attack: Bobby Moore provided two assists in the final



DOS AND DON'TS AFTER YOU'VE JUST SCORED

Sheridan on handling that post-goal period

1 Do hammer home your advantage

There's no better time to take it to the opposition than when you've got them on the back foot. After scoring your confidence is up, you're feeling good and you have to make that pay.

2 Don't be too gung-ho

You want to be on the front foot but don't over-commit, as you don't want to concede straight after scoring. There's nothing worse.

3 Don't switch off

When I was at Sheffield Wednesday we had some top players that really knew how to defend, like Nigel Pearson and Nigel Worthington. If you have players like that it's perhaps easier to sit back and soak up some pressure as they should help you remain organised – but don't switch off.

4 Do keep the ball

From the re-start it's really just a case of wanting to get the ball back, getting back possession and creating more chances.

