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The Most Valuable Player

In sports that dominate the United States like American football, baseball, and basketball, there is a most valuable player award. The most valuable player (MVP) award is often given to the player that had the best season that year or the player who is just the best there is, whether he had a great season or not. When I refer to most valuable however, I mean it literally. Valuable is defined as “worth a great deal of money.” Another definition is “having monetary value,” or “worth a good price.” Whether it’s Merriam-Webster’s definition or dictionary.com’s, these definitions are all centered around one entity: money. Therefore, the most valuable player is actually the player that is worth the most money, and not necessarily the best player. While these MVP awards are given out on simply a performance basis, there are many other things that contribute to value as well.

Other sports, like soccer, are less ignorant when it comes to the use of the word “valuable.” In soccer, there is not a MVP award but rather the Ballon D’or, given to the best player in the world, or a “Player of the year” trophy given to the best player in a certain league. As said above, value is something that is more all encompassing than just being the best player. Hence, the word is not used for these awards.

The word is instead used when there is a transaction for a player. Out of all sports, the most monetary transactions happen in soccer. In baseball, basketball, and other sports that are

very popular in the United States, there are pretty much only trades and free agency. While there is the occasional distribution of allocation money, it is nothing like the system that is seen in soccer.

An example is the most intuitive way to explain this. When soccer players are not under contract the process is fairly similar. In America, these players would be called “free agents” and move to their next team at no cost to their previous one. In soccer, it’s the same. When players are under contract on the other hand, the process is a little different. Future hall-of-fame basketball player Carmelo Anthony was on the Denver Nuggets. He was under contract at the time when the New York Knickerbockers wanted him. Therefore, a trade ensued. The Knicks gave away many players (along with the future of the franchise but that’s besides the point) in order to receive Carmelo Anthony. This is a trade. What happens in this scenario in soccer is a bit different. Cristiano Ronaldo was under contract with Manchester United when Real Madrid was keen on the left winger, just like Anthony was under contract with the Nuggets when the Knicks wanted him. In American sports as seen with the Anthony trade, teams will offer players in exchange for other players. In soccer, teams instead offer money. Real Madrid went on to have a 94 million euro bid for Cristiano Ronaldo accepted by Manchester United, a record breaking fee at the time (2009).

This made Cristiano Ronaldo the most valuable player ever to transfer clubs. But what exactly went into his price tag? Yes he won the Ballon D’or the year before, so performance is a part of this, but was this sale completely performance based? Ronaldo was 24 years old when he transferred to Real Madrid, about to hit the prime of his career. He also plays winger. These

factors have nothing to do with performance, but all played a part in the record breaking fee paid by Real Madrid. Let's find out why.

Is a Certain Position More Expensive than Another? If so, Why?

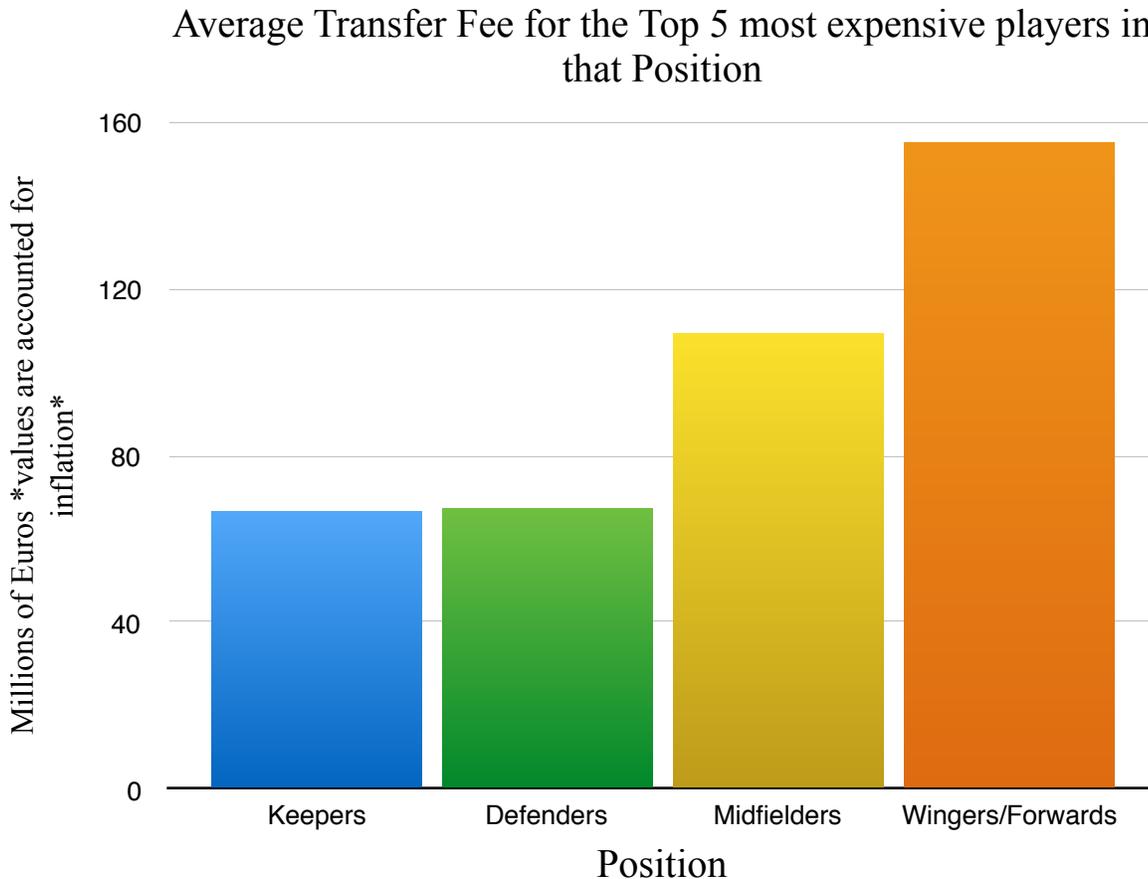
It is said in soccer that the hardest thing to do in the game is to score. This is the reason behind the low scoring nature of the game, and matches often ending 0-0 or 1-0. Does this have an effect on the price of players though? Of the top 100 most expensive transfers ever, more than half are either forwards or wingers. If you want to count attacking midfielders that number becomes about two thirds.

Some might argue that this is just because there happen to be more better attacking players than defending players. After all, the last ten Ballon D'or awards have been given to forwards (before the latest one given to Luca Modric, midfielder, a little more than a week ago). However, we live in an era dominated by two of the greatest players of all time: Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. They won the last 10 Ballon D'or's (5 each) before Modric broke their streak. Before them there were defenders that won this award like Fabio Cannavaro and Matthias Sammer. For those who are persistent and would say that there are more forwards who won the award than defenders and keepers, which is true, a more insightful person would tell them just because the very best player in the world is an attacking player does not mean that attacking players in general are better. When one expands their horizons and looks at the top thirty of the Ballon D'or (the top 30 players in the world) for 2018, ten of the thirty are either defensive midfielders, defenders, or goalkeepers. In 2017, there were eight of these players in the top thirty. In 2016 there were nine. After examining a larger subset of players, it is more

clear that the best players in the world are simply not only attacking players but instead there is a more well rounded distribution between positions.

Nevertheless, attacking players are still sold for more money than players further back on the pitch. Despite the fact that there is not a disparity between the abilities of defenders and attackers, there is a difference in price. As noted above, the amount of players in the top 100 highest transfers ever is overwhelmingly in favor of the attackers. The price for these players is also blows the price for defenders out of the water. Seven out of the top ten sales are teams purchasing wingers or forwards (eight if you do not count Zidane who is included in the top ten when his sale price is converted from nominal to real value) and 16-18 of the top 25 depending on what position you want to consider certain players.

It would not make sense to take the average of all the attacking players in the top 100 because then we would be holding the fact that there were so many of them against them. So to get a fair comparison across all positions I instead took the average price of the top five most expensive players for each position. Here is what I found.



*there are only 4 keepers in the top 100 most expensive player so I took the average of those four

Wingers and forwards are far and away the most expensive players. The average for the top five most expensive players in that position was 155.29 million euros. For midfielders it was €109.02 million, and for defenders and keepers it was a mere €67.37 million and €66.65 million, respectively.

The argument for attackers having more ability than players of other positions has already been dismissed, so this the price does not come down to one position being more talented than

another. Despite this, wingers and forwards do cost significantly more than players of the same quality at another position. The rationale for this may be due to the fact that scoring is looked at as the hardest part of the game, and thus more valuable.

To see whether this is the case or not, I have examined players within their position and then compared their statistics. This way it isolates the variable of position, because strikers are always going to score more than defenders, etc. Virgil van Dijk is the most expensive defender of all time. He transferred earlier this year from Southampton to Liverpool, both English Premier League (EPL) teams. He is the outlier of the defenders in the top 100 most expensive transfers. He is a proper defender. Tall, six feet and four inches. Strong, weighs 203 pounds. Good defensively, has kept 34 clean sheets (when you do not allow a goal in a game) out of 97 EPL appearances. He's had 216 interceptions, 648 clearances, and zero errors leading to goals in those 97 games. On the offensive end though, he has only had one assist and four goals in the EPL. It is safe to assume that Liverpool bought him for his defensive prowess and not his lackluster ability in front of goal.

This is a stark contrast to most of the other defenders you find in this list. The next most expensive defender is Aymeric Laporte, Manchester city center back. He scored twice in five champions league appearances this year so far, which is quite prolific for a center back, and once in the premier league as well. On top of this, he has contributed offensively in categories that may not catch the eye at first glance. Laporte completes 87.2 passes per game in the EPL, astounding compared to the 55.37 that van Dijk completes.

Player	Goals	Completed Passes/ match	Asists
Virgil van Dijk	4	55.37	1
Aymeric Laporte	1	87.2	0
David Luiz	9	49.85	4
Benjamin Mendy	0	47.06	6
John Stones	1	52.2	0
Kyle Walker	6	50.49	24

These are the the top six most expensive defenders. These are career stats in the premier league and they have all had a varying number of appearances. Nonetheless, there are attributes about all of these players except maybe van Dijk that are common. They are good offensively despite playing defense. Laporte completes an incredible number of passes per game. This is an indication that his team has the ball more, and thus is attacking more. If he can complete a lot of passes, he is an asset offensively. David Luiz is a goal scoring center back which is crazy to think about but if you watch him play you'll see why. He takes free kicks; he attacks well on corners; he is dangerous offensively, thus yielding his extremely high purchase price (mind you he is on the top 100 most expensive transfer list twice at positions 30 and 100). Benjamin Mendy is entering just his second season with Manchester City in the EPL, his first being riddled with injury, but has already racked up the assists. He may not be scoring like David Luiz but his contributions are leading to the same thing: goals. John Stones's statistics above are not flattering, but his pass completion percentage is ridiculously high at 93 percent, one of the highest in the EPL. This indicates that the English center back simply does not often lose the ball, resulting in him being a valuable offensive player. Lastly Kyle Walker, who has been in the EPL for quite

some time now and has proven that he, like Mendy, can provide service for people to score while chipping in with the occasional goal himself.

What all these players, to a lesser extent van Dijk but even with him, have in common is that even though they are defenders they contribute to their team scoring. Whether that be by the more intuitive route of scoring and assisting, or by a less direct rout such as passing the ball a lot which leads to goals or keeping the ball well, which in turn leads to your team having the ball more and then creating more chances to score, they all contribute offensively. And the second thing they have in common, which is not a coincidence, is the fact that these six players are the most expensive defenders ever.

This proves just how valuable scoring is. It is not that attacking players are more talented or more skilled players than defenders or midfielders, they just score more. Even with defenders, the most expensive defenders are the ones who contribute to goals. By isolating position, it is easier to see that teams are more willing to spend substantial money on players that will supply goals in one way or another, and the players that go for the most money are the ones that do this directly by scoring themselves. So while position does matter in terms of how much a player will be sold for, it is not because attacking players are better players but instead because they directly contribute to the most goals, and goals are very valuable.

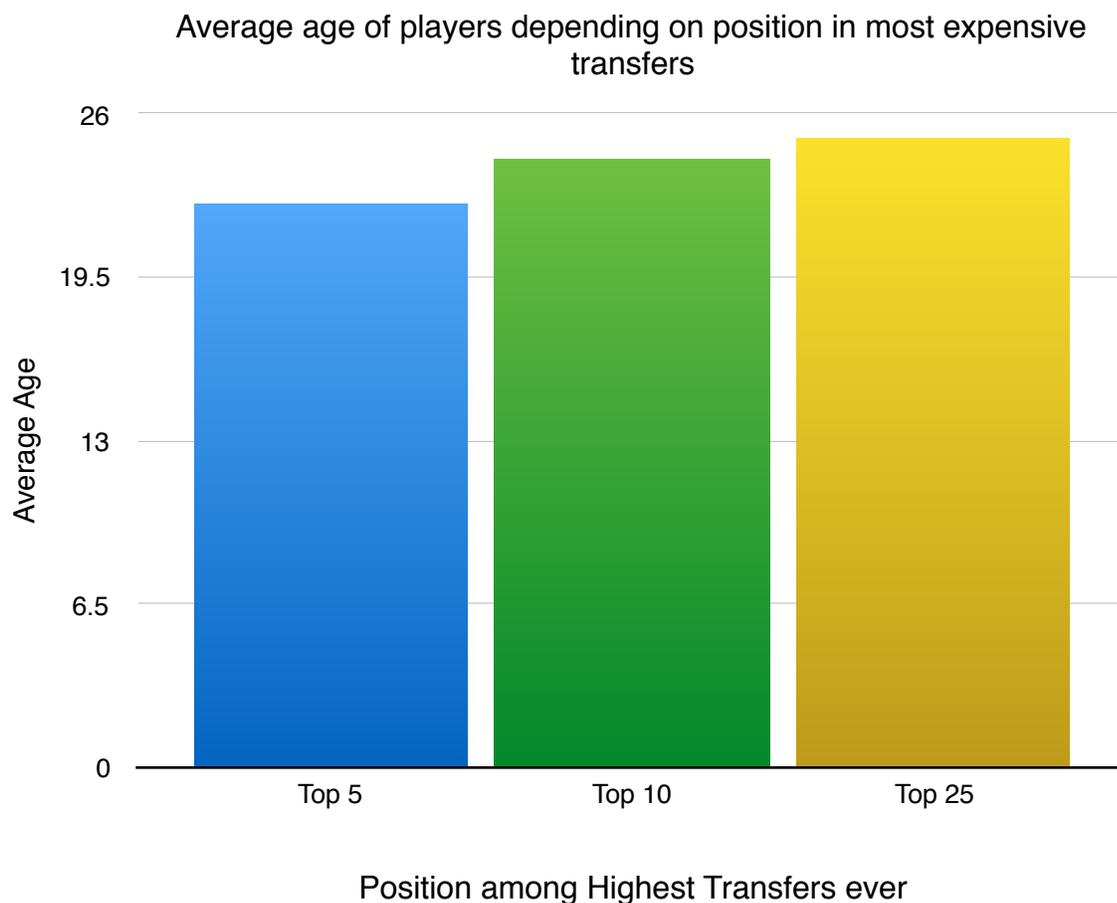
Does Age Contribute to the Sale Price of a Player?

Age is another non-performance factor that effects the sale price of a player. How many years of quality soccer does a player have left? What is this player's potential? Is he going to get significantly better? Will he be worth more in the future? These are all questions that owners are asking managers before they purchase a player. As stated above, goals are indeed

very valuable, but if there were no other factors that led to the price of a player, Cristiano Ronaldo should have been sold for more than his €100 million price tag. He scored 44 goals in 44 games in all competitions, second most out of anyone in the world and most among players who transferred. So why didn't he break the transfer record for a second time?

This is because he is now thirty-three years old. Most players are nearing retirement by this point so it would be surprising that he was sold for as much as he was if he was any other player (but he's Ronaldo so even at thirty-three he'll pay dividends).

The average age of the 5 most expensive players when sold is 22.4 years old. For the most part, the lower you go into the list of transfers, the higher the average age becomes.



While there may not seem to be much of a difference between the data, the trend is still very apparent. The 22.4 year old average of the top 5 is followed by 24.2 years old for the top 10 and 25.04 years old for the top 25. The gradual increase in age does not increase much after this, and shows no trend after the top 50, but what this does show is that the most expensive players are the youngest. While the data might not give us a great idea about what to expect from the 50th most expensive transfer in terms of age, it does tell us what to expect from the 5th most expensive player in terms of age, or even the first for that matter. Teams want to get the most out of players and want to get the prime's of their careers, so they will buy young, which in turn makes them more valuable.

Conclusion

The transfer market in soccer is complex, and there are many things that factor into it. Certainly the biggest one is how a player performs. However, you cannot derive a player's value simply from their performances. Other factors like position and age that have nothing to do with how good a player is still contribute to a player's price tag. All in all, based on the data collected above and the statical analysis that was executed, a player that 1) plays up front (either winger or forward) will be more expensive than a midfielder, or defender, or keeper of the same quality not because wingers and forwards are better or more talented but instead because goals are very valuable and players in those attacking positions tend to score more; and 2) is in their very earlier twenties (or maybe even a late teen, so 18-23) will be more expensive than an older player who is just as good but older.