

# English Debate: Liverpool Better Off Without Barry?

*As it looks like Liverpool's chase for Gareth Barry may finally be at an end, Goal.com's Sulmaan Ahmad contends that the Reds may be better off spending elsewhere...*



Barry

For the entire summer, Rafa Benitez has pursued Gareth Barry as his number one transfer target. Waves of criticism from a disgusted Martin O'Neill did little to perturb the Spaniard in his quest for the versatile 27-year-old who, this past season, had established himself as a starter in Fabio Capello's England side.

While this may be an honour in itself and testimony to the Brighton-born man's commitment, professionalism and quality, many remained baffled at Rafa's preoccupation with getting the central midfielder in at Anfield when, as most would attest, there are other areas of the team that needed strengthening with a distinct degree of more urgency.

The wings have been a weakness of the Reds for the four seasons that Benitez has been in charge and, following this summer's transfer dealings, that shows little sign of changing. Whether we're talking about Cristiano Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Pavel Nedved or Luis Figo, great teams in recent history have relied significantly on big players in wide areas, with the only exception to this rule being Carlo Ancelotti's Milan - and Liverpool aren't that good - not even close, despite one night in Istanbul defying all logic to suggest otherwise.

It is fairly certain that in securing Barry's services, Benitez would have been willing to let go of Xabi Alonso. In fact last month - when the deal was thought to be just days away - Juventus' decision to end their pursuit of the Euro 2008 winner due to Liverpool's unreasonable demands is thought to be the sole reason for the Reds' inability to seal the Barry deal.

Bearing in mind that Rafa has still not guaranteed Alonso that he will be staying at Anfield this season as he still clearly has one eye on the prize, would Barry in for Alonso prove to be a good trade, in particular when considering that Liverpool would lose money? The Basque playmaker certainly brings a passing range to the table that no Englishman not plodding around for LA Galaxy can contend with and adds another dimension to the Reds' midfield that would be all but lost if he were to leave.

The ability to play at left-back, left-wing and centre midfield is certainly a virtue of the Villa captain, but would he be content in defence, a position he has not played with any regularity in several years? The signing of Udinese's Andrea Dossena would appear to rule out the possibility as it is, and the notion of Barry replacing Ryan Babel in left-wing might offer a genuine left foot out wide, but they would lose an invaluable amount of pace and Barry, a year older than Xabi, is only going to get slower.

There has not yet even been mention of Lucas Leiva, a Brazilian Player of the Year and impressive youngster Damien Plessis. Suffices to say, the Merseysiders have no mugs in the middle of the park and, unless Barry has a Darren Bent-like ambition to be a multi-million pound bit-part player then the signing can only be seen as superfluous. Whether or not he is a better player than Alonso is as good as irrelevant, it should be about building a team; with Xabi in possession of all the right attributes to pull Pool's strings for a good few years to come and Barry, while top class, not bringing any attribute of distinction to the table.

Rafa's pre-packaged plea for the media in the face of failure is that he is not afforded the funds to contend with Europe's elite, but the Barry saga highlights as well as any that the former Valencia coach is simply not astute enough in the transfer market. Two world class purchases have been made in his four-year tenure - Fernando Torres and Javier Mascherano - and each cost a vast amount of money but are already proving their worth. But otherwise, by and large, Benitez should be giving his humdrum dealings a considerable amount of further thought before heading to Uncle Tom for some spending money.

It may already be too late, as he has missed the warning signs already this summer with his £20m purchase of Robbie Keane, a forward, despite the formulation of an extremely effective system last season that functioned with just one striker - Fernando Torres. Pre-season has indicated that the Irishman might be deployed in Dirk Kuyt's position of right-wing, a criminal waste of his talent. If he does indeed slot in up front, one of three central midfielders will face the chop as a result - and with little justification, considering the Reds' distinct lack of wide players - their midfield could go from formidable to comparatively flimsy as far as a balance is concerned, all in the name of almost £40m spent on two unnecessary players.

The full-back slots were up for grabs this summer, but Benitez has again undershot in this department. He could have almost negated the need for wingers with the purchase of names such as Valon Behrami, Rafinha or, less probably, Dani Alves, but instead opted for the free signing of Philipp Degen and Andrea Dossena. Degen is third choice for his country and he's Swiss, not Brazilian, in which case it would of course be a compliment. Dossena, while a classy acquisition, is approaching his prime and cannot even make the Italy squad.

Undershooting in key areas while overcompensating in others is likely to see this year be another of same old Liverpool, albeit with a touch of more class. Be prepared for cries of 'next year is our year', 'we need more players', 'we don't have the money of other big clubs' and a comfortable finish in third or fourth in the Premier League.