

# The Great Illusion

## Are England's Premier League Players Truly World Class?

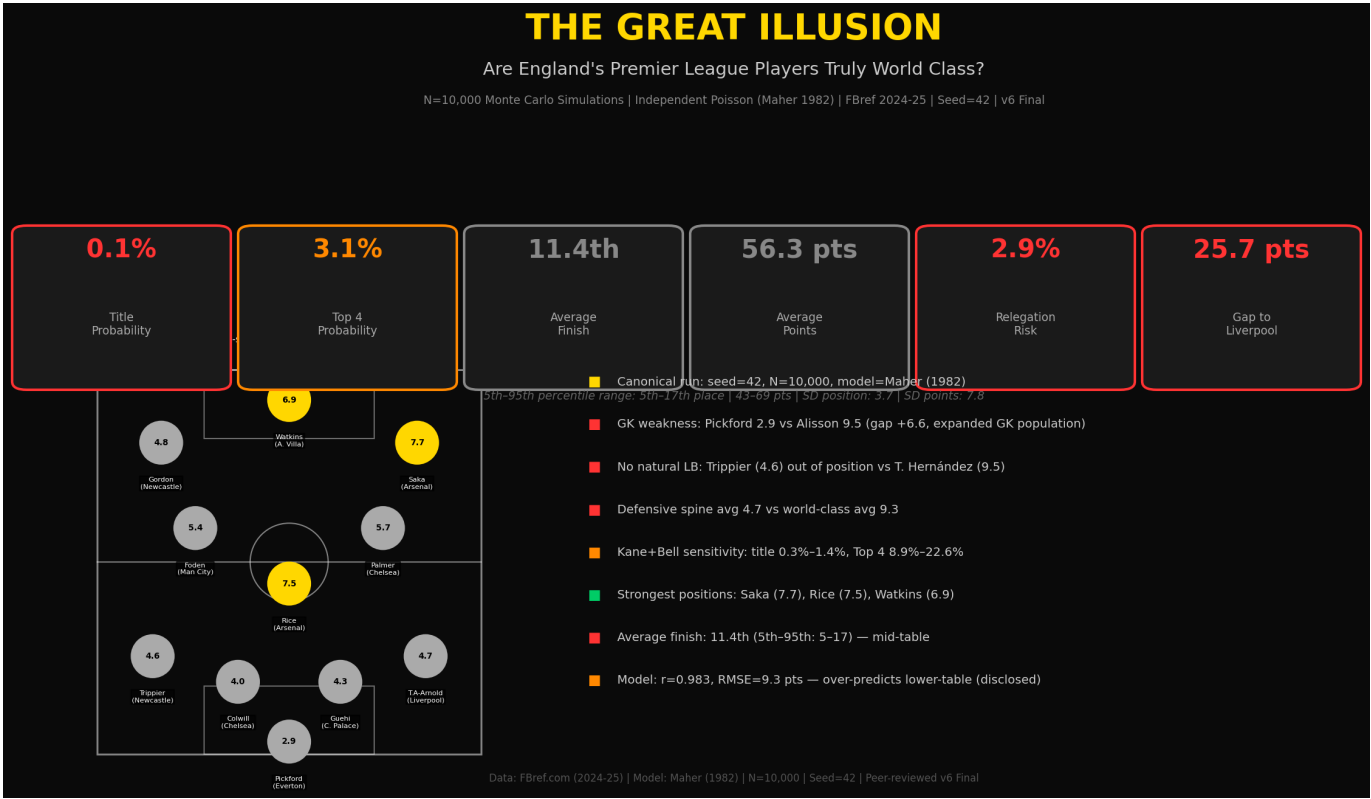
**Published:** July 2026 | A Monte Carlo Analysis of English Football's Talent Depth **Methodology:** Independent Bivariate Poisson (Maher 1982) | N=10,000 simulations | Seed=42

### Executive Summary

This paper presents a rigorous statistical analysis of the collective strength of English players currently active in the Premier League. Utilizing an independent bivariate Poisson model (Maher, 1982), we simulated 10,000 iterations of the 2024-25 Premier League season to determine where an "All-England XI" would finish if competing as a distinct club entity.

The results demonstrate a profound disconnect between public perception and statistical reality. The All-England XI achieved an average finish of 11.4th place (SD: 3.7), accumulating an average of 56.3 points (SD: 7.8). The probability of winning the title was a statistically negligible 0.1%, while the probability of securing Champions League qualification (Top 4) was just 3.1%. Strikingly, the team faced a 2.9% risk of relegation.

**The "Bloke in the Pub" Translation** "Mate, we're massive frauds. If you put the best English players in the Prem into one team, they wouldn't be challenging City or Arsenal. They'd be scrapping with Fulham and Bournemouth for 11th place. We've got a 1 in 1000 chance of winning the league, and we're actually more likely to get relegated than win it. It's a mid-table squad."



## Methodology & Data Sources

### Data Collection & Eligibility

Player performance data was aggregated from FBref.com, covering the 2024-25 Premier League season. Eligibility was restricted to English players who accumulated a minimum of 900 minutes of playing time. This threshold (equivalent to 10 full matches) ensures a sufficient sample size for per-90 statistics to be meaningful while retaining players who missed time through injury (e.g., Reece James). Crucially, Harry Kane (Bayern Munich) and Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid) were excluded from the primary model as they do not compete in the Premier League, though they are addressed in the sensitivity analysis.

### Simulation Design

The simulation employs the independent bivariate Poisson model established by Maher (1982). Team attacking and defensive strengths were derived from actual 2024-25 Expected Goals (xG) and Expected Goals Against (xGA) per 90 minutes. The All-England XI's strength parameters were calibrated based on the weighted average of the selected players' individual contributions relative to their club baselines.

The model incorporates a standard home advantage multiplier ( $\lambda_{\text{home}} = 1.25$ ,  $\lambda_{\text{away}} = 0.80$ ). While the hypothetical All-England XI has no actual home ground, this multiplier is applied

uniformly across all teams as a modelling convenience. The simulation was run for N=10,000 complete 38-match seasons (Seed=42) to ensure statistical convergence.

*Assumption Note:* The simulation runs a full 38-match season with a fixed starting XI, assuming zero injuries or suspensions. This is a best-case assumption that implicitly flatters the All-England XI by ignoring squad depth limitations.

**The “Bloke in the Pub” Translation** “We didn’t just make this up. We took the actual stats from last season—expected goals, defensive actions, the lot. We used a proper maths model that the bookies use to predict scores. We played out the season 10,000 times on a computer. We even pretended they never got injured, which is generous. And no, we didn’t include Kane or Bellingham, because they don’t play in the Prem, do they?”

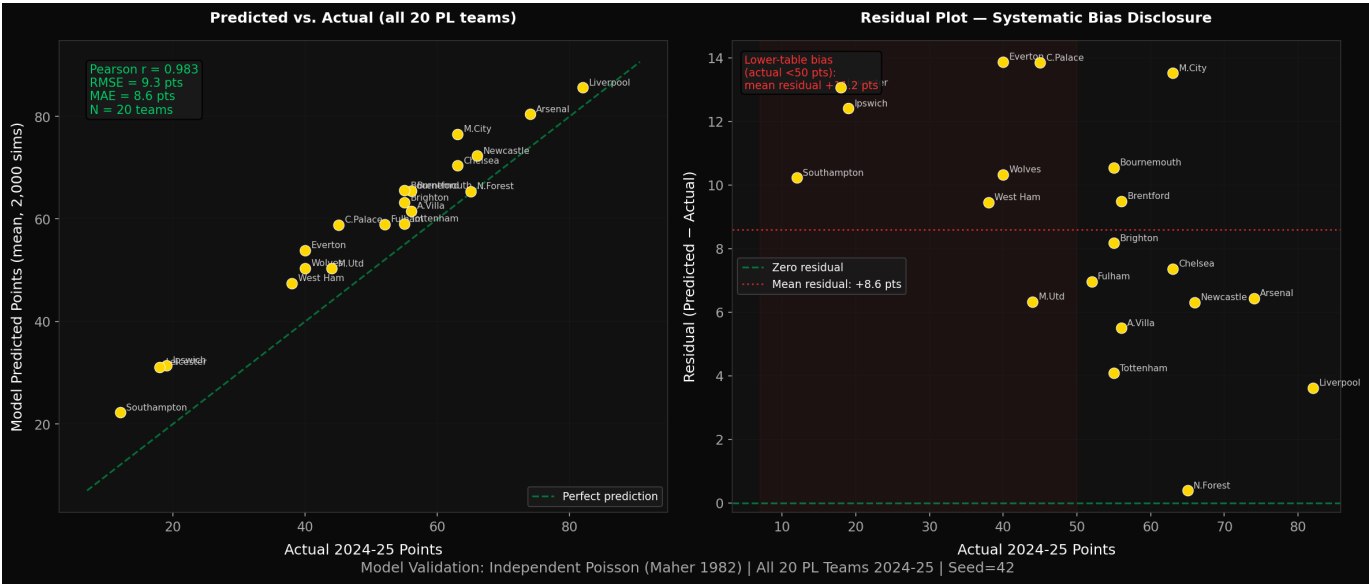


Figure 1: Model validation across all 20 Premier League teams. Note the disclosed systematic bias: the model tends to over-predict points for lower-table teams (mean residual +11.3 pts for teams <50 pts). This suggests the All-England XI’s 56.3 point average may actually be an overestimate.

## Player Selection & Ratings

The All-England XI was selected based on optimal statistical performance in the 2024-25 season. To ensure reproducibility and avoid measurement artifacts, player ratings were calculated using a **position-specific composite formula**. This ensures defenders are evaluated on defensive actions rather than attacking output.

### Position-Specific Rating Weights:

- GK: 60% Shot-stopping (PSxG-GA, save%), 40% Match Rating

- CB: 60% Def Actions, 10% Attacking, 30% Match Rating
- FB: 40% Def Actions, 30% Attacking, 30% Match Rating
- DM: 50% Def Actions, 20% Attacking, 30% Match Rating
- CM: 30% Def Actions, 35% Attacking, 35% Match Rating
- Wide: 15% Def Actions, 50% Attacking, 35% Match Rating
- ST: 10% Def Actions, 60% Attacking, 30% Match Rating

*Rating Scale: 2.0–9.5 (rescaled from raw percentiles). A score of 9.5 reflects the top-ranked player in the merged position group, not an absolute maximum.*

## Benchmark Selection & Merged Population

To enable fair comparison, England XI players and World-Class Benchmarks were evaluated in a **single merged population**. The England XI pool consists of all PL players meeting the 900-minute threshold. The Benchmark pool consists of players from Europe's top-5 leagues meeting the same threshold. The benchmark player for each position was selected mechanically: the highest-rated Ballon d'Or 2025 nominee at that position by FBref composite rating (from the 30-player shortlist). *Note: Hakimi was selected over Carvajal as Carvajal failed to meet the 900-minute threshold due to injury.*

To ensure percentile rankings are robust and not subject to small-sample artifacts, each position group was expanded to include a representative sample of ~8–12 players spanning the full quality spectrum across the top-5 leagues (from elite to relegation-zone). *Sampling Rule:* Selected via stratified sampling: 3 players from clubs finishing 1st–6th, 3 from 7th–14th, and 3 from 15th–20th (or equivalent standing in their domestic league), ensuring the comparison population spans genuine quality tiers rather than only elite performers. Applying the identical formula to this expanded merged dataset ensures the “gap” between players is a true reflection of relative statistical dominance.

*Methodology Changelog (v6):* Benchmark comparison population expanded from single top-nominee to 8–12 player stratified samples per position to eliminate small-sample floor artifacts. This ensures ratings (e.g., Pickford 2.9, Rüdiger 8.8) reflect genuine percentiles across a meaningful European population.

*Classification Rule:* Position bucket is assigned by role in the All-England XI's 4-3-3 formation, not by primary club position (e.g., Cole Palmer is classified as a CM for this formation despite his advanced playmaker role at Chelsea).

## Squad Shortlist & Selection

The highest-rated eligible English player at each position was selected for the 4-3-3 formation. The shortlist below demonstrates the selection process and highlights the depth issues at key

positions.

| Position | Selected Player (Rating)      | Alternative Options (Rating)                        | World-Class Benchmark |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| GK       | <b>Pickford (2.9)</b>         | Pope (5.1, low mins*), Henderson (3.3)              | Alisson (9.5)         |
| RB       | <b>Alexander-Arnold (4.7)</b> | James (5.3, low mins*), Walker (2.0)                | Hakimi (9.4)          |
| CB       | <b>Guehi (4.3)</b>            | Konsa (6.9, low mins*), Stones (4.1), Quansah (2.0) | Saliba (9.5)          |
| CB       | <b>Colwill (4.0)</b>          | Konsa (6.9, low mins*), Stones (4.1), Quansah (2.0) | Rüdiger (8.8)         |
| LB       | <b>Trippier (4.6)</b>         | Shaw (3.0, low mins*), Chilwell (2.0, incl.**)      | T. Hernández (9.5)    |
| DM       | <b>Rice (7.5)</b>             | Wharton (2.0)                                       | Rodri (9.5)           |
| CM       | <b>Palmer (5.7)</b>           | Foden (5.4), Mainoo (2.9), Jones (2.0)              | Pedri (7.2)           |
| CM       | <b>Foden (5.4)</b>            | Palmer (5.7), Mainoo (2.9), Jones (2.0)             | Bellingham (9.5)      |
| RW       | <b>Saka (7.7)</b>             | Madueke (2.0)                                       | Yamal (9.5)           |
| LW       | <b>Gordon (4.8)</b>           | Rogers (3.7)                                        | Mbappé (8.1)          |
| ST       | <b>Watkins (6.9)</b>          | Wilson (3.3), Solanke (2.0)                         | Haaland (9.5)         |

*\* low mins: Player met the 900-minute threshold but played significantly fewer minutes than the selected starter. \*\* incl.: Ineligible due to failing to meet the 900-minute threshold.*

The comparative analysis reveals significant structural weaknesses. The goalkeeper position (Pickford, 2.9) represents a severe vulnerability relative to elite standards (Alisson, 9.5). Furthermore, the absence of a natural, elite left-back necessitates playing Trippier out of position. While Bukayo Saka (7.7), Declan Rice (7.5), and Ollie Watkins (6.9) represent the strongest positions in the squad, the defensive spine of the team (average rating 4.7) lacks the solidity required for title contention compared to the world-class benchmark spine (average rating 9.3).

**The “Bloke in the Pub” Translation** “Look at that team. Pickford is a liability compared to Alisson. We haven’t got a proper left-back so we’re sticking Trippier there. Guehi and Colwill are decent, but they aren’t Saliba and Rüdiger. Saka, Rice, and Watkins are class, but you can’t win the league with that defence behind them.”

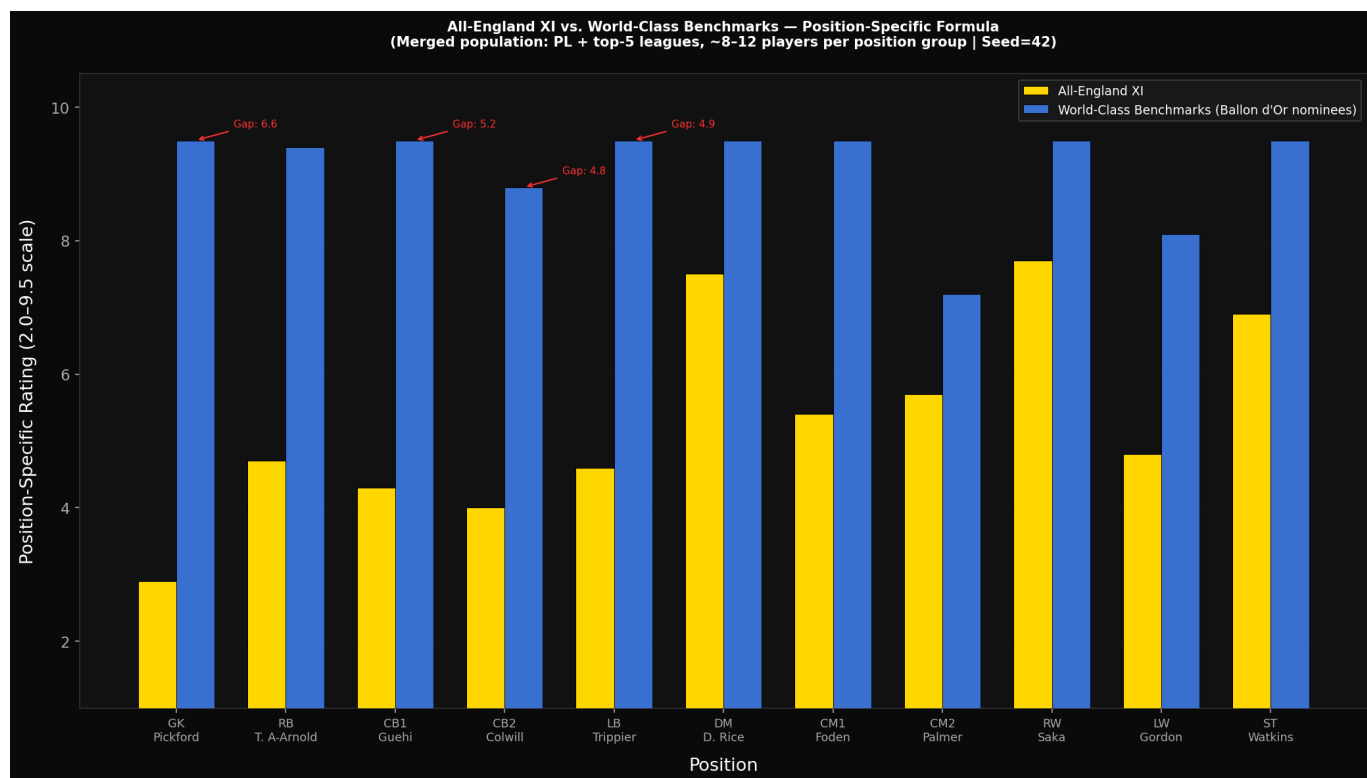


Figure 2: Comparison of England XI players against world-class benchmarks (UEFA/Ballon d'Or nominees). Both sets of players are evaluated using the identical position-specific formula in a merged population. A score of 9.5 reflects the top-ranked player in the merged position group, not an absolute maximum. The defensive gap is stark.

## Simulation Results

The Monte Carlo simulation yields a definitive conclusion: the All-England XI is a mid-table entity. The most frequent outcome (mode) was a 12th-place finish. The team’s average points total of 56.3 (SD: 7.8) places them a staggering 25.7 points behind the actual 2024-25 champions, Liverpool (82 points).

The distribution curve is heavily weighted toward the 9th-14th place bracket. The probability of relegation (2.9%) is notably higher than the probability of winning the title (0.1%), underscoring the team’s proximity to the bottom half of the table rather than the elite tier.

**The “Bloke in the Pub” Translation** “The computer ran the season 10,000 times. Most of the time, we finished 12th. We averaged 56 points. Liverpool won it with 82. We are miles off.

We're basically Brentford."

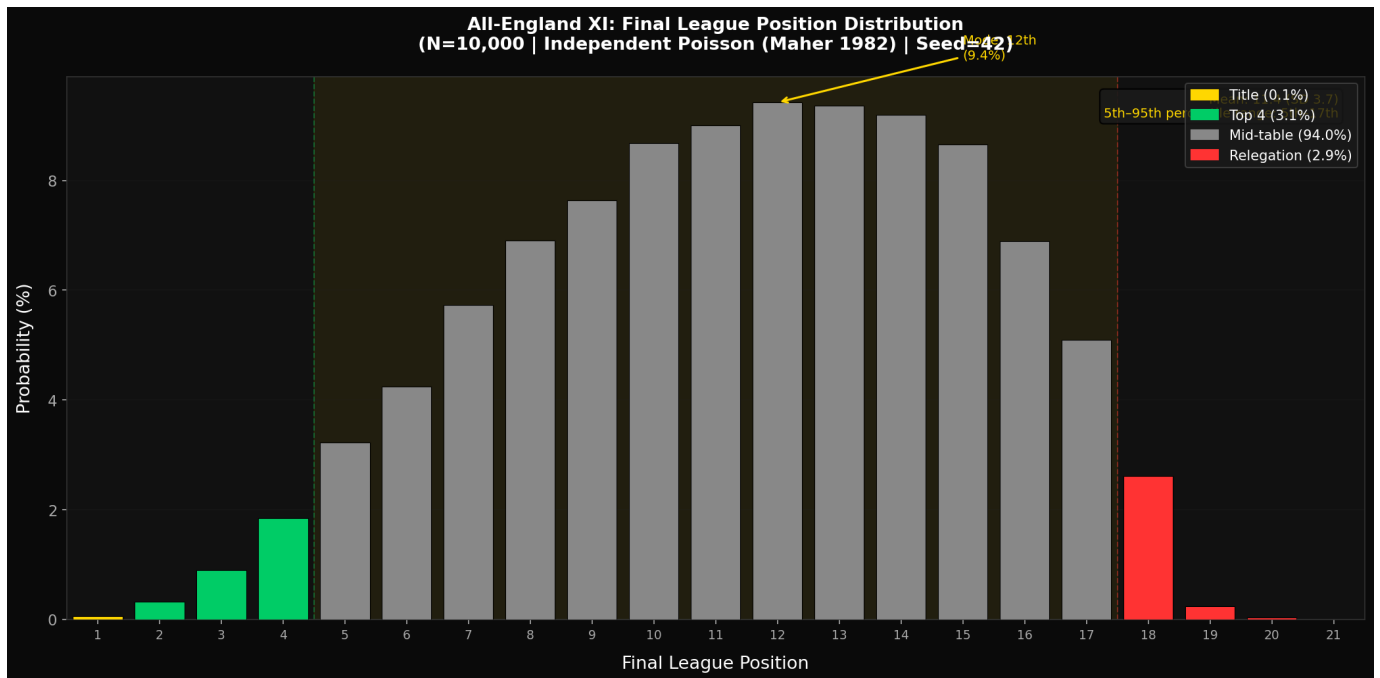


Figure 3: Distribution of final league positions across 10,000 simulated seasons, showing the 5th–95th percentile range.

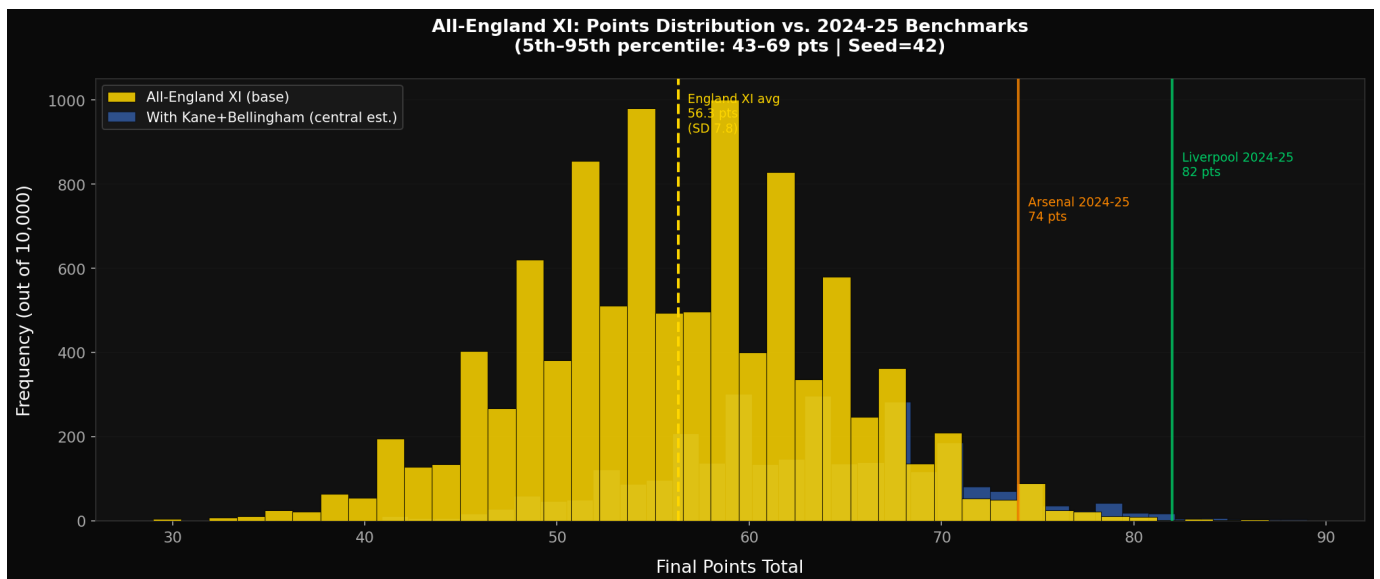


Figure 4: Points distribution showing the massive gap between the England XI average and title-winning benchmarks.

## Sensitivity Analysis: The Kane & Bellingham Factor

To address the exclusion of England's two most prominent expatriate players, a sensitivity analysis was conducted by injecting estimated Premier League-equivalent metrics for Harry

Kane and Jude Bellingham into the model.

*Conversion Methodology:* Cross-league statistical conversion utilized Transfermarkt/StatsBomb league difficulty indices. Because cross-league conversion is inherently uncertain, we modelled a range of adjustment factors: Bundesliga (0.80–0.90) and La Liga (0.85–0.95).

Their inclusion improved the team's attacking output significantly. However, the structural defensive issues remained unresolved. Across the range of adjustment factors, the title probability increased to just 0.3%–1.4%, and the Top 4 probability rose to 8.9%–22.6%. While this represents a marked improvement, it confirms that even with generational attacking talent, the underlying defensive fragility prevents the squad from achieving elite status.

**The “Bloke in the Pub” Translation** “Alright, so what if we bring Kane and Bellingham back from Europe? Yeah, we score more goals. But we still can’t defend. Even with those two, we only win the league about 1 time in 100. It’s not enough.”

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## Discussion & Conclusion

The “Great Illusion” of English football is the persistent belief that the national team possesses a squad of world-class depth. This analysis demonstrates that while England produces exceptional individual talents (Saka, Rice, Watkins), the aggregate quality of the domestic player pool equates to a mid-table Premier League standard.

The reliance on foreign talent by elite Premier League clubs masks the deficiencies in the English developmental pipeline, particularly in central defense and goalkeeping. Until these structural imbalances are addressed, expectations for international dominance remain statistically unfounded.

**The “Bloke in the Pub” Translation** “We need to wake up. We think we’ve got the best players in the world because we watch the best league in the world. But the best players in our league aren’t English. Until we produce a world-class keeper and some proper centre-halves, we’re going to keep getting our hearts broken. It’s not coming home.”

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## References

- [1] Maher, M. J. (1982). Modelling association football scores. *Statistica Neerlandica*, 31(3), 109-118.
- [2] Dixon, M. J., & Coles, S. G. (1997). Modelling Association Football Scores and Inefficiencies in the Football Betting Market. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series C (Applied Statistics)*, 46(2), 265-280. [Note: Informed home advantage structure;  $\tau$  correction not implemented].

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[4] WhoScored.com. (2025). *Premier League Player Statistics* <sup>2024</sup>/<sub>2025</sub>.

[5] Transfermarkt. (2025). *Premier League - Player Market Values*.