



THE PERFECT TEAM

CODY GAKPO & KEES PLOEGSMA

Football is about fine margins and quick decision-making - when to shoot, when to pass, but also when NOT to take a big money deal to play in the Premier League. That was a choice Dutch international Cody Gakpo made in the spur-of-the-moment on 31 August 2022.

He was lining up to play for PSV Eindhoven against FC Volendam, knowing that offers were on the table from English clubs Leeds United and Southampton. It was a lot to contend with mentally so, as a man of faith, he put things in the hands of God. Score once and he would head to the English south coast, twice and it would be north to Elland Road. Should he score three times, he would stay put and keep fighting with PSV in the Eredivisie.

Within an hour of kick-off, Cody had scored a near-perfect hattrick: a penalty, one goal off his left foot, and one off his right. The game ended in a 7-1 victory, the jet that Leeds's sporting director Victor Orta had waiting for him was sent back to the UK, and Cody stayed put.

“In the end, the player decides”

SEG board member and agent Kees Ploegsma has been by Cody's side since first signing him as an eighteen-year-old in 2018. Despite the work that had already gone into the ill-fated move, he remains calm when asked what it was like from his perspective to find out Cody had a change of heart. "For me, it doesn't matter," he says. "In the end, the player decides. You

have to make choices and you never know if they will be the right ones, so I didn't make a fuss about it. My job is just to provide the opportunities for the players under my care."

A perfect choice

It transpired that Cody's choice was a perfect one. Leeds and Southampton both got relegated at the end of the following season, while Cody had a superb start to the next term and became the league's top scorer with PSV. Before that, he scored a trio of goals in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar to help the Netherlands top their group. They went on to beat the USA in the round of 16 and, after a heroic draw in normal time, only narrowly lost out on penalties to eventual winners Argentina in the quarter finals. By that stage, Gakpo had already announced himself on the world stage and a fresh set of Premier League clubs came calling for his services.

Become a better player

It was Liverpool who secured his signature on 28 December 2022, and he moved to the UK on the first day of the new year. "I thought it was the right step for my development to go to a really big club with a lot of competition in the best league in the world. I just wanted to become a better player, so I think it was a no-brainer for me. It was a real challenge for me to come here and to try and show who I am."

“A goal is a goal”

Warm and friendly while we chat, Cody is sitting in the club canteen eating chicken. The night before,



he scored a pair of brilliant individual goals against Brighton in the Carabao Cup. It's a competition he is enjoying this season, having sealed a dramatic win for Liverpool with an injury-time brace against West Ham in the previous round. "A goal is a goal," he says when asked how scoring in the cup compares to scoring in the league. After one of them, he celebrated by standing still with a stiff back, chest puffed out. Was it a message to manager Arne Slot that this is what he can deliver when in the starting lineup? "That was not really in my mind," he says. "You just do whatever feels right in the moment." Kees interjects to tell Cody he was a fan. "It looked good!"

At this stage of the season, Cody is sharing duties as a left-sided forward with Luis Díaz. After the game, Slot said he considered both men as starters in his side, and Gakpo is relishing the challenge of making the position his own as the months roll on.

Different positions

Kees points out that the new manager has been good for the Dutch player, position-wise. "In the past you played number eight, number nine, number ten, number nine and a half, seven, you know," says Kees. "We had discussions about the pressure you experienced. Now at least there's clarity. You are a left winger, and you play left wing, or you don't play. I have the feeling that this new routine has given you a chance to elevate your game."

Golden Boot

Cody agrees but also says he learnt a lot from the experiences. "It's not ideal because you know what you're capable of on the left, but on the other hand, you can also develop yourself as a player and end up being more complete. I'm grateful for the time I played in a lot of positions, I learnt a lot, but I think I showed everybody that I'm a left winger and that that's my position." He certainly did that during the EURO 2024 in Germany where he played off the left. He scored three goals and ended up sharing the Golden Boot with the likes of Harry Kane and Jamal Musiala.

Change of agent

All this success is vindication for Kees who first "wanted to impress Cody a little bit" when he was just a teenager

playing with Jong PSV. He invited him into his small office in Eindhoven when Cody was considering a change of agent. "Everybody could see he had the skills to be a top football player," says Kees. Cody at that stage ("and still now," laughs Kees) put his trust in his father who "had a good feeling" about the relationship.

Make the steps

"It's more like we formed a team with Cody's father and brother," says Kees. "Then you make the steps. And the fun thing is, with Cody, every year, there was a step made. First, it was getting into the PSV first team, and he did. Then he wanted to play minutes, and he did. Then he wanted to become a starter, and he did. Every year we could change the strategy because Cody was making the steps quite fast."

The best player in the world

And now comes the next step: negotiations about a contract extension with Liverpool will soon begin. "I know what Cody wants," says Kees. "He knows how I think. We know what we want and where we want to go. He wants to become the best player in the world and I think that's possible. From now until that time, there are steps to be made, and those are the discussions you share together."

Sharing the same values

Kees describes Cody as "very stable", settled with his girlfriend and someone who isn't a needy person. Instead, he "is very active" in looking after many things himself. The pair agree that their relationship "doesn't feel like work" and it is important to both of them that their wider families also get on and share plenty of the same values outside of football.

"That's the most important thing," says Cody. "With Kees, it's more like a friendship. I fully trust him and my brother, who he also works with. So yeah, I'm not really bothered by that side of my career. I'm just busy on the pitch, and they do their work off it."

So far, it's been the perfect team.



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