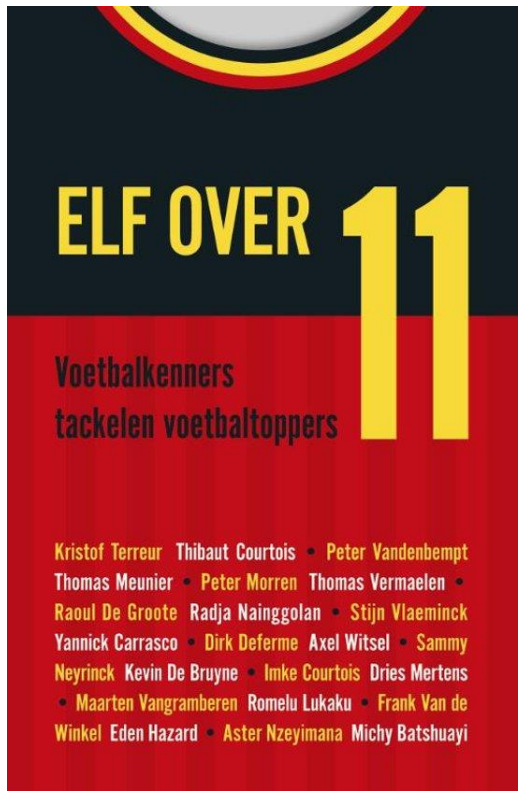


OUT OF “ELF OVER 11”, COMMENTATORS TACKLING 11 TOP PLAYERS”



THE STORY OF DRIES MERTENS, THE BELGIAN INTERNATIONAL PLAYER THAT BROKE MARADONA’S SCORING RECORD IN NAPOLI

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Mister Mertens, Dries, Driesje. I got the honor to write about and for you. I am a scientist. And a scientist loves numbers. At least I try to love them. At least, I try to love it. Where we can't tell anything meaningful, they fill the void, they say (although I personally think that emptiness or silence can say so much more). So I'm going to start with numbers. Not because otherwise I know nothing meaningful to write about you, but they tell us the story of objective truth, they say. But I am also a football fan, football player and apparently also an analyst. In the second part of this contribution I tell about you from this position, but also from the idea that you are more than just Dries Mertens. For me you are also the story that challenges the football philosophy in Belgium. But let's start with the beginning ...

Dries Mertens was born on May 6, 1987 in Leuven, birth weight and height unknown to me. The son of Herman Mertens and Marijke Van Kampen takes his first football steps in Stade Leuven and is soon noticed by RSC Anderlecht. There Dries continues his youth education, but he will never grow to the A-team because of his stature. He

moves to AA Ghent and here too he is found to be too small and too light. Belgian football philosophy: stature and duel power, that is what we need. No dribbling wonder, no low center of gravity, no perfect coordination and insight. In 2005-2006 AA Gent transfers Dries to third division club Eendracht Aalst. In this club he is rewarded with the prize for best player. The following season he moves to the North, where football is more than stature. AGOW Apeldoorn rents him for a year and then buys Mertens for two seasons from AA Ghent. In the first season, Dries scores only two goals, but he is still the absolute seasoning and Apeldoorn's favorite. The Belgian may even wear the captain's band in the following season. He leads his troops. With discipline, small in his ego and big in the field. Again, flavor maker and goal scorer for Apeldoorn. He was awarded the prize for 'best talent from the first division'. In 2009 Dries leaves Apeldoorn and moves to FC Utrecht, where he finally ends up in the premier league. He will play two seasons for this club, discover European football and be rewarded individually with the David di Tommaso trophy and Silver Shoe. Belgium continues to play football. Still not interested. For that we have to wait until 2011, when both the coach of the national Belgian team, Georges Leekens, and 'father Anderlecht' come knocking on the door again. Unfortunately, just like Ajax, Anderlecht cannot pay the transfer fee to PSV. In two years, Dries Mertens not only scores 45 goals for PSV, but is also good for 43 assists. In 2013, Dries is allowed to sign at the age of 26 a contract with Napoli, the club where Diego Maradona once performed unparalleled tricks for a thrilling audience. Still numbers? No. Dries scores and let score. The first three seasons, when he also plays football - not unimportantly from the left flank and is seen as a substitute, he scores an average of ten goals per season and delivers about the same number of assists. In 2016-2017 his number of playing minutes will double, he will be played more and more as a deep striker and he will triple his number of goals.

Mr. Mertens, Dries, Driesje. I am also a football fan, football player and apparently an analyst. My eyes have to view and review many phases. Something for which I get ten seconds, you decide in -1 second. My feet close together when I was standing on the football field in Leuven with you. At least one meter away from you. Receding. Maybe sometimes even avoiding.

Dries Mertens went to the top sports school in Leuven. That was the place where I met him in 2004. Surrounded by other talents - such as the timid but talented Sven Kums, pleasure maker Denis Odoi, goalkeeper (and also a perfect striker) Mike Vanhamel - but also by a trainer duo who combined discipline with 'something' for which Belgian football was not yet ready. Space, time and timing. Attention. Double tasks. Coordination. Each training was completed under the approval of Anne Noë and

Michel Bruyninckx. Where our first-class clubs continued to stare blindly at stature, they saw the grand class of Dries: Piet Keizer's scissor movement, at least as graceful, possibly at a greater speed, the radius of the circle perhaps even smaller. Left, right, inside, outside, behind the support leg. At least one panna per training session, only with male colleagues. Yes, he was so gallant. How come a player, one of the best, had to move abroad to give his football career a chance? Why did Anne Noë and Michel Bruyninckx see how good Dries was, but not Anderlecht and AA Gent? What went wrong and what goes wrong here in Belgium? What is our football philosophy? I am heading for an existential football depression. So, I went to Michel Bruyninckx. He spoke, I listened and listened again. Mr. Mertens, Dries, Driesje, you are the example for many, but also an example of a failed football philosophy that you have played through thanks to all your talent. You dribbled them and ignored them. In the next section I write down my conversation with Michel, "the trainer of the lost cases," as he was often called. Dries, where I use you - even though it sounds a bit strange - to look at football differently, at the emerging talent and the little big hope.

THE PERFORMANCE ALIBI

Dries is an example, but also a success story that is almost as rare as the Bornean orangutan. Indeed, they are threatened with extinction, but there is still hope. Mertens is the kind of player that makes us realize that we have to look at the development and education of children in any sport in a completely different way. The performance model is flourishing and dominating, which of course is also 'human' somewhere. After all, if we do something, we also want immediate results. The temptation is to leave the sport and continue with other social examples, but I have decided to keep writing. A (possible) consequence of that performance model was clear in the selections, both at the football clubs and at the national selections. The early-matured boys were given priority and were more likely to be selected. In short, they fulfill the performance model faster, or perhaps more appropriately, they fulfill it earlier.

I think Dries Mertens was already one of the best in terms of performance. I would repeat myself if I redefined the beauty of his football ability, so I won't do that. The football philosophy during our top sports training was different. Thank you, Anne, thank you, Michel. Dries yielded when he was allowed to move freely and from ball possession was involved in quick passing. Tactics and running pathways that felt intuitive but were dragged in through training. You know that what Kevin De Bruyne rightly quoted after the international match against Mexico. Players who already leave when De Bruyne is nearly in possession of the ball. Acting, anticipating, thinking -1.

The transition to Apeldoorn therefore turned out to be the right choice. The then licensing system in the Netherlands prevented the club from relegating. So, freak and free football. In addition, just when John van den Brom came over from Ajax - where he was head of the internationally acclaimed youth academy - to become head coach of Apeldoorn. 'The Dutch want to play offensive football, make actions and sometimes defend naively. All ingredients that were written on Dries' body and Bruyninckx also spoke. Dries Mertens performed.

Dear Anderlecht, my fellow analyst and your former player, Jan Mulder, sometimes also transfers his love for you to me, but how could you have missed this? Michel, tell me:

"Clubs and their status, the status transcends everything."

They have the right to make such mistakes. Because of the many years of tradition you have to look up to such a club and just 'follow'. Yes, follow.

Michel worked for Anderlecht when Dries Mertens, but also Denis Odoi and Sven Kums were housed there. Dries was ten years old when he was first noticed by Michel and another scout from RSCA. Together with Denis Odoi, he was included in a select group that trained once a week, in preparation for the switch to RSCA. On 'The day of football in Limburg' they played with this selection against Standard Liège, then also known for its excellent youth education. Standard was discarded. Incomprehensible and above all an unseen level of these players. Little boys who still needed to get ready achieved such a level with one training per week and in such a short time. Father Mertens was surprised. Their team - did they actually have a name? – stayed out of the duel, moved between the lines and was less focused on performance in the rough sense of the word. The children had potential and the best was taken out.

A few years and countless hormones later Dries was in the third year of secondary school in the Heilig Hartinstituut in Heverlee. In the meantime, he and the other boys played at Anderlecht, but it didn't go well at school. Dries wanted to play football and made a deal with - again - Michel and Anne: he was allowed to follow the Topsport Football training of the Belgian Federation, as long as there were no more shortages on his report. And so, happened. Successfully passed without shortages. The two fanatics Anne and Michel went to each class council to know how their football kids were doing, sometimes resulting in annoying conspiracies between the trainers' duo and the teachers. Bad points? Studying instead of training. The reverse meant my salvation. Playing football gave me structure and positively influenced my study performance. But I would also like to let Michel speak with the following explanatory quote:

"Football brains are not separate in our brains, it is all interchangeable."

Back to Dries and Anderlecht: Dries crying, not in the selection. Together with Sven Kums he had to train extra every Thursday morning in Anderlecht. Both had to develop more strength and the extra strength training was created for this. Amen. After three weeks, Michel and Anne learned that the physiotherapy room in Anderlecht was open, but that there was no one else to be found, there was no guidance whatsoever. I suspect that such times are fortunately over and that we are now even hitting the other extreme. Guidance for every chromosome and every brain cell.

Boys and girls with a football dream, a football passion, who are not allowed to play are unhappy. Such a thing seems universal to me. I have never seen Dries unhappy, but of course I only saw him on the football fields in the sports center in Leuven. Smiling. Playing soccer. Michel had Dries and Sven play futsal, every weekend, under the radar. You usually get to know such things quickly, especially at a secondary school. But this secret, because it certainly was, was preserved, covered with the cloak of football love and passion. "Futsal football can mean something in the development of a soccer player." Not only the improvement of technical skills, the movement in and between smaller spaces, but also the variation in, for example, the size of the field, the goal and the weight of the ball, contribute to the (football) development. In addition, Dries maintained his passion. They won tournaments with two fingers in the nose. Confused goalkeepers who turned their memory inside out in a fruitless attempt to remember how that ball hit their nets.

Back to the system. Jan Mulder, allow me to quote you this time: "Fuck the system." You're right. Thousands of talents are wasted every year. A system that aims at maturity of a skill - that per se is not or will ever be present in every child at the same time - is a negative and narrow system. The cut-off age was shifted from August 1 to January 1. Good news for those born in January, February, March, April and May. No less than 70 percent of the selections consisted of boys born in previous months. No, not an angry index finger (or raised middle finger) at the Belgian Football Federation. This happens at an early age within the clubs. The Belgian Football Federation distributes wildcards and looks for solutions. One solution came about in 2008 thanks to the concept of Futures, in which national youth teams (U15 and U17) give late matured footballers a chance to develop further. Just a little too late for Dries Mertens, but in time for another great talent, Yannick Carrasco. Carrasco flourished at the Futures, and also got his for future dream. Werner Helsen, professor at the Catholic

university of Leuven, gave me a little explanation, clarified the maturity screening and even told a nice anecdote about how late-matured players often earn more money than early-matured boys. Ideally, the maturity is determined with a radiography of the wrist joint. Growth discs give us an insight into the biological maturity. Fortunately, there is also a non-invasive - and in my opinion more practical - method for determining this. The child is weighed and measured. The leg length, the 'seat height' and the calendar age are included in the formula. In addition, the height of both parents can make a prediction of how big the child will become. On the basis of this result, we therefore receive an estimate of the biological age and we can divide children into the 'early', 'medium' or 'late' mature category. An improvement, right? Or can we just do it better from the start? An equally big dream for little boys. Perhaps less focus on pure physical return? Or as Werner indicated during our conversation: training and playing in groups based on biological age instead of chronological age? FC Groningen and AZ - two professional clubs with our northern neighbors - have been using this system for some time. Google even revealed that amateur club Victoria in Hilversum is experimenting with this system. Yes, also amateur clubs. But let's also look at ourselves, we adults, you coaches. Early, medium or late, they still need to be trained in the right way. What about the motor and cognitive programs that trainers put in the minds of their pupils? Michel, you name it ...

"The potential of a child comes from the brain, the body is the expression of that brain control."

I remain realistic, there will always be a genetic component. For example, not every child will be endowed with a Lukaku body, a De Bruyne insight or a Mertens skillfulness. Although the first experiences and movement patterns make it possible for children to organize their bodies well in time and space and to learn more easily from there. We have currently created a rational model in which we think we can think and go beyond people. This is again tempting as a scientist, but unacceptable as a person. Results can be achieved if we train this, that and also this. Step-by-step plan to 'guaranteed success'. If there is no result, the person in question is not equipped for it. Michel, right?

'Is not true! Create the right mental framework to encourage a child to continue to work and develop potential. '

Speed is measured with a running test. How fast can you run? Speed over ten, twenty and thirty meters is accurately measured. But that does not mean that you use that speed correctly during a game. There you have influences that ensure that you often cannot run in a straight line. Figures can indeed be informative, they can divide into

better and worse, they can also be preventive, to prevent injuries. But we must interpret and implement them correctly. Stop running for running, no more 'up and down' the football field. Not as fitness training, not as warming up or punishment. When running pathways are almost performed in an automated way during games, training must be mentally challenging. Football is reading the game, insight, concentration and anticipation. Let players think along and ban the mechanical performances. Don't let a defender stand on his back line while the midfielders do a hundred short ball kicks and the strikers always hit the goal. No shadow games, but rather playing ball possession to learn to defend. Give our brains as many solutions as possible. Create variation, related variation, and implement in real situations. Give us exercises with perception from right to left and immediately switch from left to right. Slightly confusing at the start, but sufficiently stimulating and challenging so that the repetition - which is indeed necessary - becomes remarkably unobtrusive. In short, moving with attention, dear people. Elegant and smart. Like a torero who enters the arena and moves gracefully around the bull. The Spanish football player who trains on ball controls and technical ingenuity, avoiding the duel as much as possible. Spain, 1340 kilometers away from us, Belgium, where we are still searching for our true football identity One hour and 45 minutes later in our conversation. Michel gives me a book, I tackle it, and just hear him announce the words "intensity" and "sensitivity." I am sitting there, the signed sweater of Dries Mertens next to me in the chair and a peat of a book in both hands. Michel lays down his pen on the book. I look with full expectation and very attentively as if I might be able to dismantle the whole thing. Nothing happens. The book is then exchanged with a sheet of paper. Michel places the pen on my sheet again. I feel the weight of the pen on the paper sheet. My senses give me this information and direct my hands to slightly curl the paper so that the pen does not fall. I understand.

"The crisis of football in a nutshell. The intensity should never be so high that it switches off the sensitivity to what you are doing. "

Without any additional explanation your senses told you: something is changing here. That change gives us something, a feeling, and attracts our attention.

Michel Bruyninckx, the deliberated practitioner par excellence, thank you for the potential that you were looking for and found in Dries, me and others together with a few individuals. Mr. Mertens, Dries, Driesje. I apologize for this contribution. One secret (indoor football), no life description and no detailed description of your most beautiful goals. I especially wanted to thank you. For the passion, the football joy and the little hope that you give me and so many others. I am a proud Belgian, I believe in

our football future and I am convinced that you, you, will redefine our football identity this summer and give it color.

Good luck!

Imke

