



Perfect pitch
The Belgian defender in Manchester University's John Rylands Library



Video
'A lot of people on the course were surprised...'
ft.com/kompany

Kompany turnround

The captain of Manchester City football club set himself a very different type of goal when he decided to apply his leadership skills to an MBA

BY ANDY BOUNDS PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE BIBBY

Vincent Kompany has won plenty of accolades in his football career but the Manchester City captain believes his latest achievement is among his greatest: an MBA. Kompany, 31, studied part-time for five years at Alliance Manchester Business School. He received his Global MBA in 2017 and has no doubt it has improved him as a businessman and a person.

"I started like someone going to war with just his bare fist," Kompany says, raising it to emphasise how unprepared he was. He realised early on that he was "out of his depth" when the topic was corporate finance. "I had to research the name of the course before I could even start," he says, smiling. "It's daunting when you have to look up the title of the book before you can open it." But with the dedication of a professional athlete and help from his tutors he set about "learning how to learn".

Grasping technical language was part of the battle. "It's terminology really. If you talk to a top accountant about his field of expertise, it's mind-boggling. I got a lot out of it."

Kompany is a central defender and stands almost 1m 93cm tall. It can be an ugly position to play but his strength along with pace is his calmness, the way he reads a situation to intervene before it gets desperate.

His relaxed appearance playing in front of 50,000 fans and millions on TV is no illusion, he says. "You know that you're really good at something and you know that you've practised it all of your life, so you feel comfortable."

"Actually doing something in front of a very small audience, but it's out of your comfort zone... I find the second one a lot more challenging than the first." That is what the MBA forced him to do.

"That [process of] evolving is something that I will keep for myself for the rest of my life," he says.

He began playing at the Anderlecht academy in Brussels at the age of six, so football comes easily — but study was hard. Did he ever think of giving up? "Yes, many times."

Rather than City's Etihad Stadium, where he has played since 2008, he picks the John Rylands Library for our interview. The University of Manchester-owned Gothic revival building, with a reading room reminiscent of a church nave, opened in 1900. Such environments inspired him to work — and put up with teammates' jokes when he opted for a book rather than a film on flights to games.

"It was banter constantly and you knew whenever you opened a book you got hammered a little bit," he recalls. But it was brief and good natured, he says.

Kompany lights up when he sees the old books on the Rylands' shelves. He is focused as he talks, with an occasional smile when talking about his family or home city.

The footballer was born in Uccle in Brussels in 1986. His father is an activist from Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo, who had fled from the dictator Mobutu. His late mother was a Belgian trade union official. At their insistence, he ignored offers from some of Europe's biggest clubs and stayed with his home town team Anderlecht to complete his final school exams.

After an injury, some of those offers were withdrawn and he was bought by Hamburg, in Germany's first division, in 2006. Two years later he joined Manchester City, just before its takeover by Sheikh Mansour of Abu Dhabi's ruling family. A club that had not won the league since 1968 has since become one of the richest in Europe.

He is the only regular left from 2008 and has survived four managers, several injuries and won two championships, two League Cups and an FA Cup. City is on course to win the league again this year and make a serious assault on the Uefa Champions League. He also captains Belgium. ▶

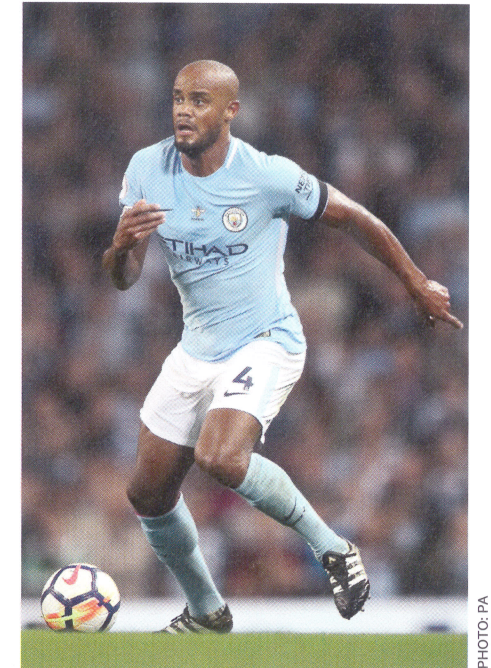


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