Name: _____ Date: _____

The Player in the Middle

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 895 words

A soccer field is long. In international games, it is 100 to 110 meters from one goal to the other. In front of each goal, white lines mark a box on the grass. It is called the penalty area. It reaches 16.5 meters out. Look at the grass between the two boxes. That stretch is more than 65 meters long. It belongs to the midfielders.

A midfielder links the defenders to the attackers. When the team has the ball, the midfielder helps move it up the field. When the other team has it, the midfielder hurries back. A study once tracked 300 top players in games in Spain. The midfielders ran farther in total than the defenders or the forwards.

Some midfielders are called box-to-box. The name says it. They work from their own team's box to the other team's box. One writer says they help about equally in the first and last thirds of the field. The hard part is doing it again and again, in a fast game.

Jude Bellingham is a midfielder from England. Through November 2026, he plays for Real Madrid, a club in Spain. He also plays for England. A stats site wrote that he can play three midfield jobs: holding, box-to-box and attacking. This book follows him up a ladder. Each step is a record for being young.

The ladder starts at Birmingham City, a club in England. On August 6, 2019, Birmingham played a cup game at Portsmouth. Jude started it. He was 16 years and 38 days old. No one so young had played for Birmingham's first team before. The old record belonged to Trevor Francis, who later played for England.

A record like this is counted in days. Jude's birthday is June 29. On August 6, he was 38 days past his 16th birthday. To break the record, a player would have to be even younger on his first day. That is why people count so closely.

At Birmingham, Jude did not start in the middle. First he played on the left wing. Then his team moved him to central midfield to help him feel sure of himself. Later he got a job closer to the other team's goal. One report said his coach felt he was at ease in midfield.

On August 31, 2019, Birmingham played Stoke City at home. Jude came on after half an hour. Later he scored the winning goal in a 2 to 1 win. He became the youngest scorer in Birmingham's history. No scorer for the club had been so young. He was 63 days past his 16th birthday.

Jude wore number 22 for Birmingham. After the 2019-20 season, the club said it would retire the number. Retire means no one else wears it. The club said it wanted "to remember one of our own and to inspire others." That season, he scored four goals.

In 2020, Jude moved to Borussia Dortmund, a club in Germany. His first game was in the German cup on September 14, 2020. He scored. He was 17 years and 77 days old. The club's old marks were 17 years 82 days, in the league, and 17 years 83 days, in the cup. Jude beat both. A younger Dortmund player passed his mark that December.

Next came the Champions League, the yearly contest of Europe's top clubs. On October 20, 2020, Jude started Dortmund's game at Lazio, in Italy. He was 17 years and 113 days old. No English player had started a Champions League game so young. The old mark, from December 2017, was 17 years and 192 days.

In November 2020, Jude joined the England team. He played his first game on November 12. He came on in the second half of a 3 to 0 win over Ireland at Wembley. He was 17 years and 136 days old. Only two England players had played a first game at a younger age.

In June 2021, England played in the European Championship, the Euro. On June 13, Jude came on in the 82nd minute against Croatia. He was 17 years and 349 days old. No one so young had played in a Euro game. The old mark was 18 years and 71 days, from 2012. His record lasted six days. A younger player from Poland broke it.

In June 2023, Real Madrid said Jude had signed for six years. On August 12, 2023, he scored in his first game for the club. He scored in each of his first four games. Only two other players in the club's history had done that. Soon he played farther forward, in the number 10 job. That is the attacking midfielder.

By June 2026, Jude was 22 years old and in his fourth big tournament, the World Cup. No European had played in four so young. On June 23, he played his 50th game for England, at 22 years and 359 days. No England player had reached 50 so young. The ladder had grown from first games to totals. A 50th game takes years.

That World Cup ended in July 2026. England finished third. Jude scored seven goals, more than any England player had scored in one World Cup. The old mark was six. He still plays in November 2026, so his list is still open. Each game gives a midfielder another 65 meters of grass to cover.

Questions

1. What does a midfielder do?

A. Stays in goal for the whole game
B. Links defenders to attackers
C. Only takes the penalty kicks

2. How old was Jude on August 6, 2019, when he started for Birmingham City?

A. 15 years and 38 days
B. 17 years and 38 days

C. 16 years and 38 days

3. In the sentence "The club said it would retire the number," what does retire mean?

A. No one else would wear it
B. It would be sold
C. It would be washed

4. Why did Jude's Euro record last only six days?

A. He played no more Euro games
B. A younger player played in a Euro game
C. The rules for counting changed

5. Why did reaching 50 England games so young count as a record?

A. He had played more games than anyone
B. No England player had reached 50 games at a younger age
C. The rule for caps changed in 2026

6. How many goals did Jude score at the 2026 World Cup?

A. Six
B. Nine
C. Seven

Words to know

midfielder: middle-field player
record: best mark yet
wing: side position
retire: stop using
tournament: contest series

Answer key: The Player in the Middle

1. B. Links defenders to attackers
2. C. 16 years and 38 days
3. A. No one else would wear it
4. B. A younger player played in a Euro game
5. B. No England player had reached 50 games at a younger age
6. C. Seven