Name: _____ Date: _____

What Does a Midfielder Like Jude Bellingham Do?

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1244 words

What does a midfielder do? The midfielders are the players between the defenders and the forwards. One coaching guide says they link defense to attack. It adds that they are usually among the players who cover the most ground. Jude Bellingham, an Englishman born in 2003, is a midfielder. Through November 2026 he plays for Real Madrid in Spain and for England. His career shows how a midfielder's work is named, and how people try to measure it.

Start with the field. In international matches the long side must be 100 to 110 meters. A penalty area reaches 16.5 meters out from each goal. Take away two of those, and by this book's count the grass between the boxes is about 67 to 77 meters. That is what "box to box" means in meters. A midfielder who works at both ends has a long way to go, again and again, for 90 minutes. The distance comes from the rules of the field, not from any one player.

Do midfielders really run the most? A 2007 study followed 300 top players in 20 Spanish league games and 10 Champions League games. Midfield players covered a significantly greater total distance than defenders or forwards. A study of 28 English Premier League games from the 2005-06 season looked at fast running. Central midfielders covered about 2,825 meters that way in a typical match. In the last 15 minutes they ran about 20 percent less than in the first 15. Those are averages for groups, not facts about any one player.

"Box to box" is a job name, not a rule. One tactics writer says it is the ability to run well between your own penalty area and the other team's. The same writer says such a player helps about equally in the first and last thirds of the field. The hard part, the writer adds, is doing it as a repeated action in fast games. Running is only the ticket in. The player must also defend in one box and arrive in the other.

Bellingham's career shows how the labels change. A June 2023 article on Opta's analysis site says he can play three ways: as a holding midfielder, a box-to-box midfielder or an attacking midfielder. One encyclopedia lists him as an attacking midfielder. The England FA's squad page lists him as a midfielder. The labels differ because the job differs from team to team, and sometimes from game to game. Names for jobs are useful, but they are not fixed.

The first rung was at Birmingham City, in England. On August 6, 2019, he started a cup game at Portsmouth. He was 16 years and 38 days old. He was the youngest first-team player in the club's history. BBC Sport said he broke the record of Trevor Francis, a former England striker. The 38 days are simple arithmetic from his June 29 birthday. Records like this are counted in days, because one day can decide who holds one.

Birmingham did not start him in the middle, and the role changed as he grew. One report said he began on the left wing, then moved to central midfield to build his confidence, and later played a more advanced role. Clotet was his head coach at Birmingham. In a 2023 interview, Clotet said of him on the ball: "When he has the ball, it's as if he stops and dominates the time."

On August 31, 2019, he came on after half an hour of a home game against Stoke City. He scored the winner in a 2 to 1 win and became the club's youngest goalscorer. His season ended with four goals. Then the club said it would retire his number 22 shirt, "to remember one of our own and to inspire others." To retire a number means no later player wears it. The club said this after his only season with its first team.

How do analysts count a midfielder's work? They use event data, and each count has a definition. Opta says a carry is a player moving the ball five meters or more. A progressive carry moves it more than five meters upfield. A tackle is a legal, ground-level challenge in which the player connects with the ball. An interception is reading a pass and moving into its line. Another company could draw these lines in other places. A count only means something next to its definition.

In June 2023, Opta's analysis site profiled Bellingham. In the 2022-23 Bundesliga season it counted 76 tackles, the most of any Dortmund player. It also counted 88 dribbles, the most in the league. Those two counts cover both ends of the job: winning the ball back and carrying it forward. But counts leave things out. A player who stands in the right place needs fewer tackles. No count records the pass that was never needed.

Dortmund, in Germany, signed him in July 2020. On September 14, 2020, he scored in the German cup in a 5 to 0 win over Duisburg. He was 17 years and 77 days old. Dortmund's site says the old marks were 17 years and 82 days, in the league, and 17 years and 83 days, in the cup. A younger Dortmund player passed his that December. On October 20, he started a Champions League game at Lazio, at 17 years and 113 days. No English player had started one so young. The old mark was 17 years and 192 days, set in December 2017.

With England, the ladder had two steps. He made his debut on November 12, 2020, at 17 years and 136 days. Only two England players had been younger. On June 13, 2021, at the Euro, he came on against Croatia at 17 years and 349 days. No one so young had played in a Euro game. The old mark was 18 years and 71 days. By this book's count, that is 87 days younger. Six days later a player from Poland broke his record.

In 2023 he moved to Real Madrid, and his role moved forward. There he was often an attacking midfielder in the number 10 position. Sometimes he was a false 9 or second striker. England Football wrote in October 2023 that he had 13 goals in 13 games for Madrid. At Birmingham in 2019-20 it was four goals in around 40 games. Take care: that is a different team, a different league and a short run of games. Still, more goals is what a move forward

would be expected to bring.

At the 2026 World Cup the records changed type. On June 17 he became the youngest European to play at four major tournaments, at 22 years and 353 days. On June 23 he played his 50th England game, at 22 years and 359 days. No England player had reached 50 so young. Then he scored seven goals, the most for England in one World Cup. The old best was six. England finished third. Through November 2026 he is still playing.

So what does a midfielder do? Part of the answer is a distance: a long stretch of grass between two boxes. Part is a list of jobs that change with the team. Part is a set of counts, each with its own definition. Bellingham's records only show how early he started. The rest of the answer lies on the grass between the boxes, one 90-minute game after another. Through November 2026, that work goes on.

Questions

1. What did the 2007 study of 300 players find about midfield players?

A. They ran farther in total than defenders or forwards
B. They scored more goals than any other group
C. They played fewer minutes than all the others

2. Why does the book say the labels for Bellingham differ?

A. Reporters made mistakes
B. He changed his name twice
C. The job differs from team to team

3. In the sentence "Opta says a carry is a player moving the ball five meters or more," what does carry mean?

A. Holding the ball in the hands
B. Moving the ball a few meters
C. Kicking the ball out

4. How old was Bellingham when he started at Portsmouth on August 6, 2019?

A. 17 years and 38 days
B. 16 years and 38 days
C. 16 years and 83 days

5. Why does the book say to be careful with 13 goals in 13 games versus four in around 40?

A. The numbers were copied from the wrong team
B. He did not play for Birmingham at all
C. The teams differ and 13 games is few

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

A. Seven
B. Six
C. Eight

Words to know

tackle: taking the ball
interception: catching a pass
debut: first appearance
retire: stop using
progressive: moving forward

Answer key: What Does a Midfielder Like Jude Bellingham Do?

1. A. They ran farther in total than defenders or forwards
2. C. The job differs from team to team
3. B. Moving the ball a few meters
4. B. 16 years and 38 days
5. C. The teams differ and 13 games is few
6. A. Seven