



RICHARDS' ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

Omar Richards' colourful career has seen him get defensive tips from Jaap Stam, deputise for Alphonso Davies and win the Europa Conference League

► Words: Mark Lomas

Omar Richards can still vividly remember the moment he was told that Bayern Munich wanted to sign him. Playing for Reading in the Championship in early 2021, the Lewisham-born left-back received a call that would change the course of his career; at the time, he suspected his agent was pulling a friendly prank.

But the offer was a serious one and, although Harry Kane and Eric Dier are now both lining up at the Allianz Arena, four years ago Richards became the first English-born player to complete a transfer to Bayern.

"I didn't believe him at first," Richards reveals to *World Soccer*. "It wasn't until I actually saw the Bayern representatives on a Zoom call that I realised it was real. It felt crazy to me. These are the types of things you dream of when you start playing football, so when the opportunity arose, of course I grabbed it with both hands."

Bayern and their coach Julian Nagelsmann had raided Reading for a player they believed would provide quality cover for first-choice left-back

Alphonso Davies. Richards was already an England Under-21 international – making his debut in a team featuring Phil Foden, Marc Guehi and Callum Hudson-Odoi – but the step-up from Reading to Bayern was still a bit of a shock.

"It was a big challenge, mentally, going from the Championship to the Bundesliga and one of the biggest teams in the world. Getting my head around it was the first thing," Richards says. "But I just remember being so excited and ready to accept the challenge. I knew I had worked hard and felt I was good enough."

Richards had already been learning from the best at Reading, with former Manchester United and Netherlands defensive colossus Jaap Stam, the coach who gave him his debut at the Madejski Stadium.

"He taught me a lot, gave me my first big opportunity and he had a lot of interesting ideas about defending," Richards says of Stam. "He was a very physical defender and my physique isn't like that so he helped me to understand how I could use my

Rio Ave standout star
...Richards is enjoying
his time in Portugal





Breakthrough...
Richards during
his first season
at Reading

position to affect my opponent."

Having developed under Stam's tutelage, Richards faced a sink-or-swim situation at Bayern. As a football obsessive, who voraciously consumes the game in any way he can off the

pitch, Richards was in his element. He flourished at the German giants, taking full advantage of working closely with Bayern's catalogue of stars – including, of course, Alphonso Davies.

"I learned from Alphonso and all the

others too. Every day in training was an education – just being around pure quality every day. I also enjoyed being able to show people what I could do as well.

"I had never played at a club where you need to win every game at all costs. The pressures are different when you're playing for a team like Bayern – I had to adapt to that as fast as possible.

"The winning mentality and how to deal with that relentless desire to win, under high pressure – that was the most important thing I took from that season."

Richards highlights the positive role that Joshua Kimmich played in taking the young Englishman "under his wing", while he clicked socially with Jamal Musiala and Joshua Zirkzee in particular. The left-back played 17 games across the season, including Champions League group stage appearances against Benfica, Dynamo Kyiv and Barcelona.

"All of the Champions League

nights were special. When the song comes on, it really is something else and, of course, playing Barcelona was a highlight. Winning the German Super Cup almost as soon as I arrived too.

"Bayern are like a winning machine and they don't stop. They don't get tired. They just keep winning"

Four years on, Richards is playing his club football in Portugal with Primeira Liga side Rio Ave. The 27-year-old initially moved to Nottingham Forest in the summer of 2022 but a succession of serious injuries prevented him from making his debut at the City Ground. He went on loan to Olympiacos last season and has been one of Rio Ave's standout performers in 2024-25.

"It has been another good experience for me," Richards reflects. "The city I live in [Vila do Conde] is nice and peaceful so you can really focus on playing and improving. I've got back to doing what I love regularly, and I'm enjoying it."

"It is a competitive league; a lot of the teams can beat each other and a lot of teams have good players. They have some special talents here. The game in Portugal is very tactical as well, so it's a great place to develop that side of your game."

"Obviously that's why a lot of clubs around Europe are now looking at the Portuguese league for players."

Richards is one of three Englishmen in the squad, joined in northern Portugal by

fellow loanees Jonathan Panzo and Nelson Abbey – from Forest and

Olympiacos respectively. It is a rarity, with compatriots few and far between both on the shores of Portugal and further afield in Europe.

"Honestly, I don't know [why there aren't more English players abroad]," Richards says. "It is probably easier for a lot of English players to stay in League One and League Two and

"Bayern are like a winning machine and they don't stop. They don't get tired. They just keep winning"

be content. But the type of person I am, I'm a bit of a sponge when it comes to taking information and learning and accepting new challenges.

"I think players are missing out. It feels like I have all this extra equipment for my game and I am just a lot more well-rounded as a player. I might not have that if I had just stayed in England."

Had he remained in his homeland, Richards would have also missed out

"It was so good to finally be playing again but it was also a bit scary because you are not sure if your body is actually right yet. As time goes on you can trust yourself more and you feel like you are getting back to your best and the confidence comes back."

"I had to be patient, building up my minutes. Then winning the Conference League at the end was incredible. Especially at that club, with

the support they have from those fans. The celebrations

were wild – we had a parade through the city. I'll never forget it."

Richards may yet get another taste of European action, with parent club Nottingham Forest surging towards Champions League qualification. He admits his injury-hit time at the City Ground has been "tough", but also feels his experiences have made him "mentally stronger". For now, he is focused on life at Rio Ave.

"Forest are doing great and I'm happy for the guys there," Richards says. "Playing in the Premier League has always been one of my dreams so when the injury happened [in 2022-23 pre-season] it was just so difficult."

"Every day I was just thinking: 'As soon as I can get back playing again, I'll appreciate it so much more.' That's what got me through and that's why I am enjoying my football so much now."

"Obviously I love England but right now I can look out my window and see the sun and the sea. We're footballers, but also we're living so it's nice to be able to enjoy these experiences too."



Welcome to Bayern...Richards is unveiled by Bayern Munich's then-sporting director Hasan Alihamidzic



Rio Ave left-back... Richards attempts to block a cross from Sporting's Geny Catamo



Conference League winner...Richards in action against Aston Villa in last year's semi-final for Olympiacos