

Angel City Needs to Get Out of Escrow on Their Cabin in Big Bear

[By Evan Davis](#)

Angel City is constantly undone by the burden of their own self-regard.

One need only watch the three-part HBO docuseries about the team's inaugural 2022 season to understand the disconnect between the Girlbossin' ownership group and the rest of the women's soccer community. The joke around town is that they are a PR firm with a soccer team attached to it. They somehow manage to live down that reputation no matter what goes on between the white lines at BMO Stadium.

Granted, 2023 went far better than their début campaign. Poor results in the first half of the year belied better underlying performances: Angel City sat on a 1.9 non-penalty xG differential in those first 11 regular season games, good for fifth in the league. But the poor results—and the galumphing manner in which they occurred—cost head coach Freya Coombe her job. She was replaced by assistant coach Becki Tweed, who took Coombe's tactical shift from a 4-3-3 to a 4-2-3-1 in her final two games in charge and ran with it. Under Tweed, the team cut their non-penalty goals conceded in half, even though they only improved their non-penalty xG conceded by less than one goal. Regardless, those improved results helped them scrape into the fifth seed of the playoffs, only to be eliminated in the quarterfinals by Seattle.

ROSTER MANAGEMENT: A MONEY PIT IN SANTA MONICA

GM Angela Hucles Mangano had a monumental task facing her in the 2024 offseason, and without much apparent support. Hucles Mangano was thrust into the job when sporting director Eni Aluko was pushed out toward the end of 2022. The team's primary data analyst, Kim McCauley, left ahead of the 2023 season. Aside from performance analyst Oliver Blitz—who works primarily with players already on the roster—no other recruitment, scouting, or data analysis positions are listed on Angel City's website. No such individual can be found on LinkedIn. It's hard to shake the feeling that Hucles Mangano and co-founder/president Julie Uhrman are largely the only ones overseeing any of the team's roster construction.

That may go some distance toward explaining the single firehose of roster capital they have spit onto a flaming oil tanker. Here's a table of all the draft picks the team traded away, and the players they got in exchange.

<u>Pick Traded</u>	<u>Player Acquired</u>
2022 natural first-round pick	Christen Press
2022 No. 6 overall pick, 2022 No. 26 pick	Savannah McCaskill

2022 natural second-round pick	Tyler Lussi & Simone Charley
2023 No. 5 overall pick, 2023 natural second-round pick, 2024 natural second-round pick, Yazmeen Ryan	Alyssa Thompson
2023 natural second-round pick	Madison Hammond
2023 natural third-round pick	Ali Riley
2023 natural fourth-round pick	Brittany Isenhour
2024 natural first-round pick	Sydney Leroux

Most of those players are not going to be major components of the roster this year or in years to come. Lussi, McCaskill, and Charley have all moved to greener pastures. Isenhour retired. Press may never set foot on a professional soccer field again. Leroux had a resurgence once she returned from injury last summer, but she will be 34 this year, and is not a guarantee to play a full season. Hammond has emerged as a team leader, but has proven unable to stand out in central midfield without more talented support. Riley is now 36 at a position that requires oceans of endurance, and her backup is a 33-year-old, just-returned-from-a-yearlong-knee-injury Merritt Mathias.

More key contributors have also departed. Julie Ertz retired. Dani Weatherholt signed with North Carolina. Scarlett Camberos was traded to new rivals Bay FC in exchange for expansion draft protection. Jun Endō was lost to an ACL tear.

Loads of allocation money went back and forth in these transactions as well. Leroux's and Press's contracts weren't cheap. Nor were Ertz's or Amandine Henry's, who were brought in last year as short-term fixes at No. 6. What do those four players have in common? They're all big names you can leverage for social media engagements and jersey sales. They are also all over the age of 30 and in various states of decline. The salary cap doubled between 2023 and 2024, and teams' allocation budgets are kept from the public, but one can't shake the feeling that Angel City's coffers have run dry.

With an aging roster, no draft picks to help build the squad internally, and with potentially few funds to make a splash in the free agent and international transfer markets, Angel City pivoted to a new strategy: sign teenagers and develop them for the future. Joining Alyssa Thompson (19) among the teen ranks are Korean-American forward Casey Phair (16), midfielder Kennedy Fuller (17), and Thompson's own sister, fullback Gisele (18). No other team has more than two teenagers under contract; Angel City has four. It really was the only way for the team to bring in youth. The drawback, of course, is that they may not all be major contributors at the same time for a long while.

Hucles Mangano used what capital that did remain to bring in three players off the trade market. Messiah Bright joined from Orlando for \$130,000 in "intra-league transfer funds". Meggie Dougherty Howard drove up the I-5 from San Diego and sent \$40,000 in allocation cash the other way. Angel City's attempt at a headline-grabbing transaction came in the form of 30-year-old Rocky Rodríguez driving *down* the I-5 from Portland and tossing a duffel bag full of \$275,000 in allocation money onto a northbound train.

Those signings don't exactly help the team get younger. While the three new teens pull the average age of the whole squad down, the projected starting XI remains one of the oldest in the league, now that Rodríguez has joined up and Claire Emslie recently turned 30. Henry's return from loan slots her straight back into the side, a year older than when she first showed up in Exposition Park.

There still remains the question of proper use of your capital. Could \$450,000 have gotten you different players? What about a single, high-impact player? Maybe so, though one imagines the contract that would come with such a player may have been out of Angel City's budget range. The club could have used Taylor Flint (née Kornieck), who put herself on the trade block. That knowledge drove the trade price down, and Flint now flicks headers for Racing Louisville. Maybe the reason Uhrman and Hucles Mangano didn't make a bid (or lost on their bid) was because they wouldn't have been able to afford Flint's contract. This is all speculation, but at least it would apply some rational thinking behind a frustratingly obtuse offseason for the organization.

Let's talk about the squad they do have, and why they could dazzle or fizzle.

ROCKY RODRÍGUEZ: A ONE-BEDROOM IN NORTH HOLLYWOOD

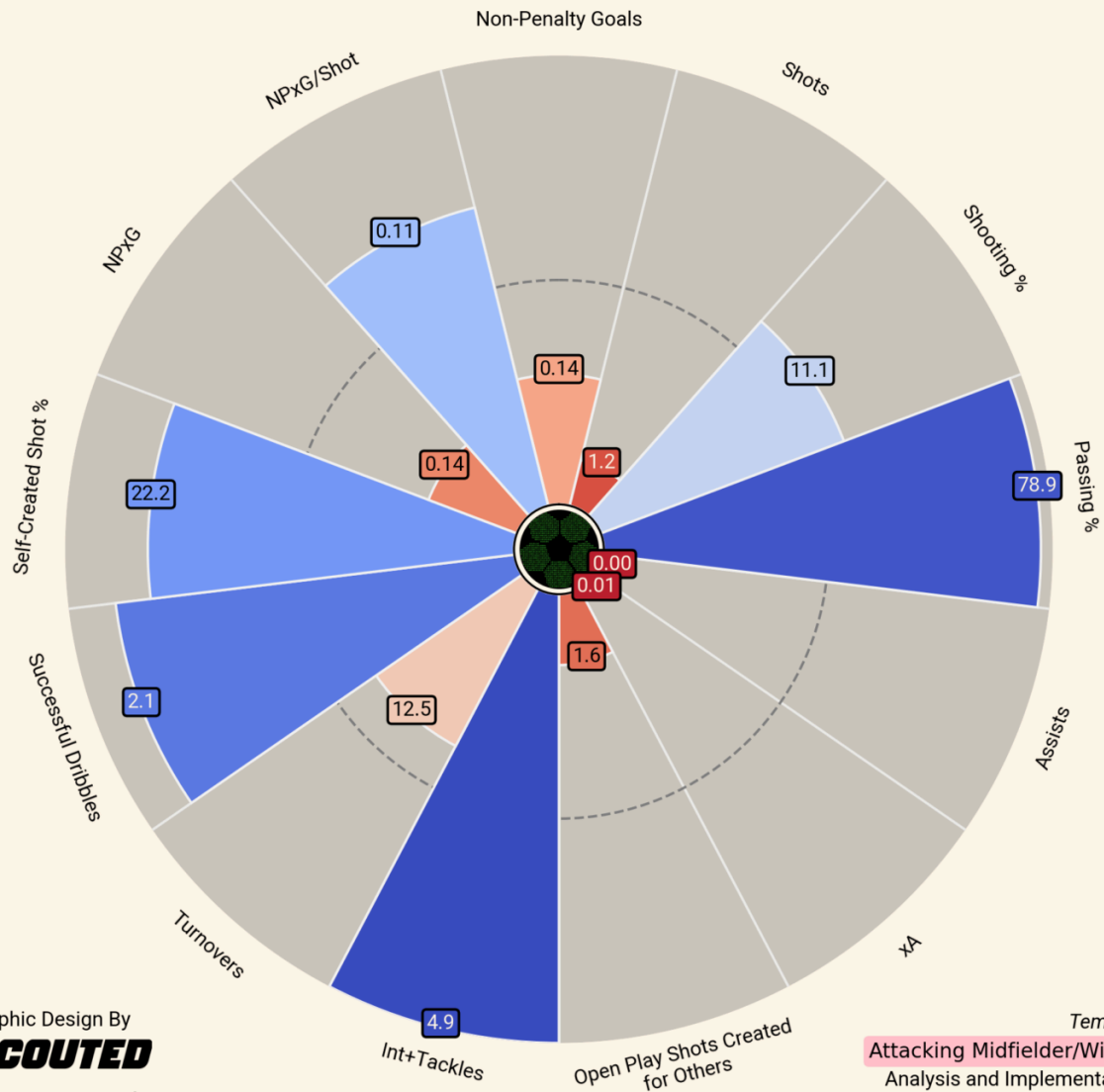
Rodríguez is at a crossroad. She recently turned 30, and has spent more time on the bench and the trainer's table in the past 12 months than she has in a starting lineup. The Costa Rican *wunderkind* was a lynchpin in the Thorns' championship campaign in 2022, but the rise of Olivia Moultrie, the return of Crystal Dunn, and Sam Coffey's success as a single pivot created a central midfield bottleneck last season. Rodríguez pulled the short straw. Angel City may represent a chance at a comeback.

She'll need it. Rodríguez will be tasked with the No. 10 job, a position she rarely plays in full. Her gifts as a No. 8 mean that she can do a bit of everything, and so playmaking from more advanced territory is not the craziest decision Tweed could make. It's not exactly optimal, either. Compare Rodríguez's performance in key skill areas for the No. 10 and No. 8 last year, respectively.



Raquel Rodriguez

656 minutes | 30 years old
Portland Thorns | NWSL | 2023 season



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Compared to qualifying players in
NWSL

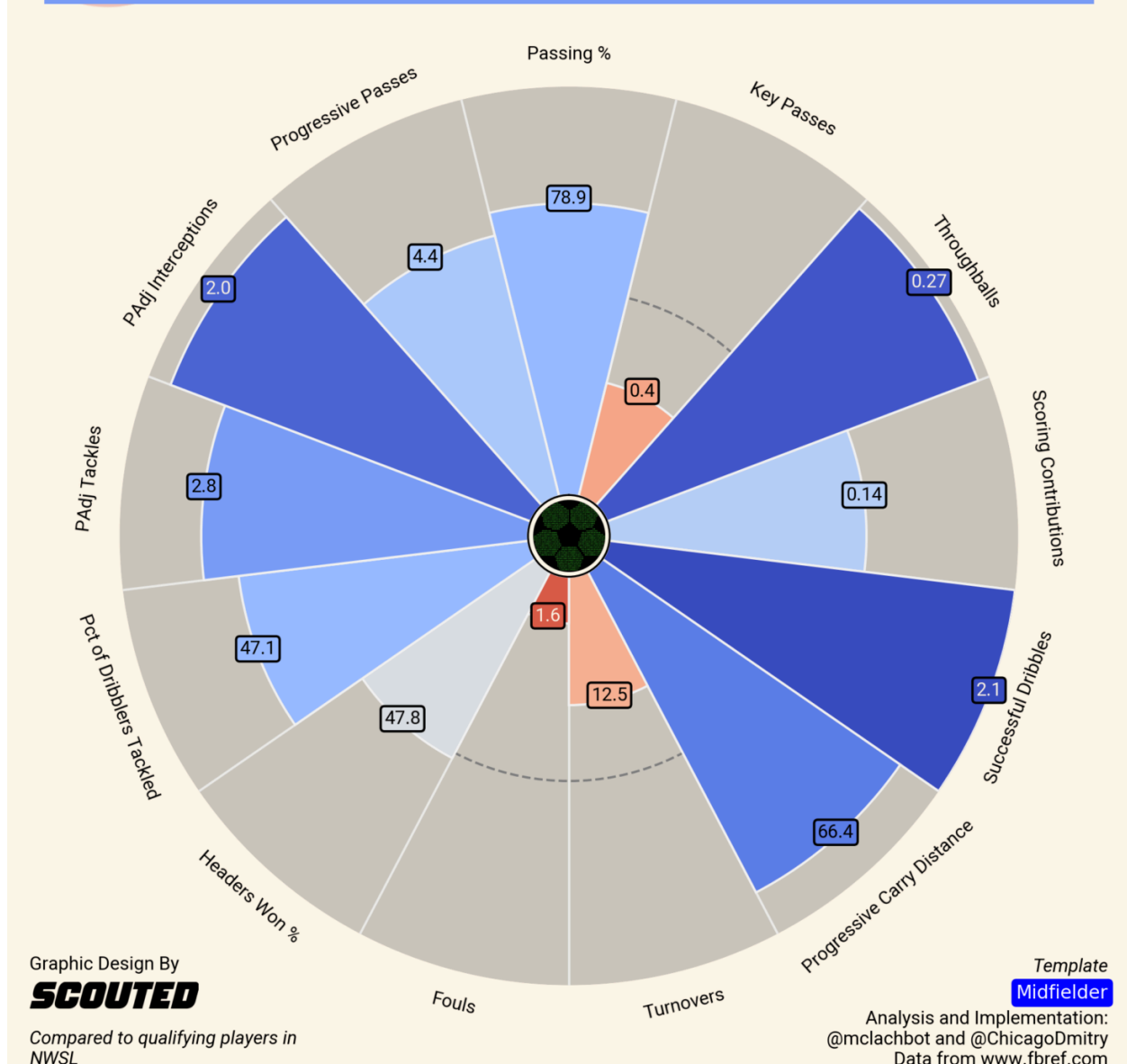
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Raquel Rodriguez

656 minutes | 30 years old
Portland Thorns | NWSL | 2023 season



No team has needed her to be a No. 10 at any point in her career, either. Dunn, Moultrie, and Christine Sinclair saw to those duties last season; the year before that, Janine Beckie joined Dunn and Sinclair in the creativity department. Lindsey Horan ran the show in 2021. Imani Dorsey and Nahomi Kawasumi served that function in 2019. Rodríguez now has to be the quarterback, when she should be the yarn stitching Henry's passes to the person who can unleash Alyssa Thompson and Emslie, not to mention get stuck in a time or two. Angel City

need a natural advanced playmaker; the inconvenient truth is that they had one already. She plays in San Diego now.



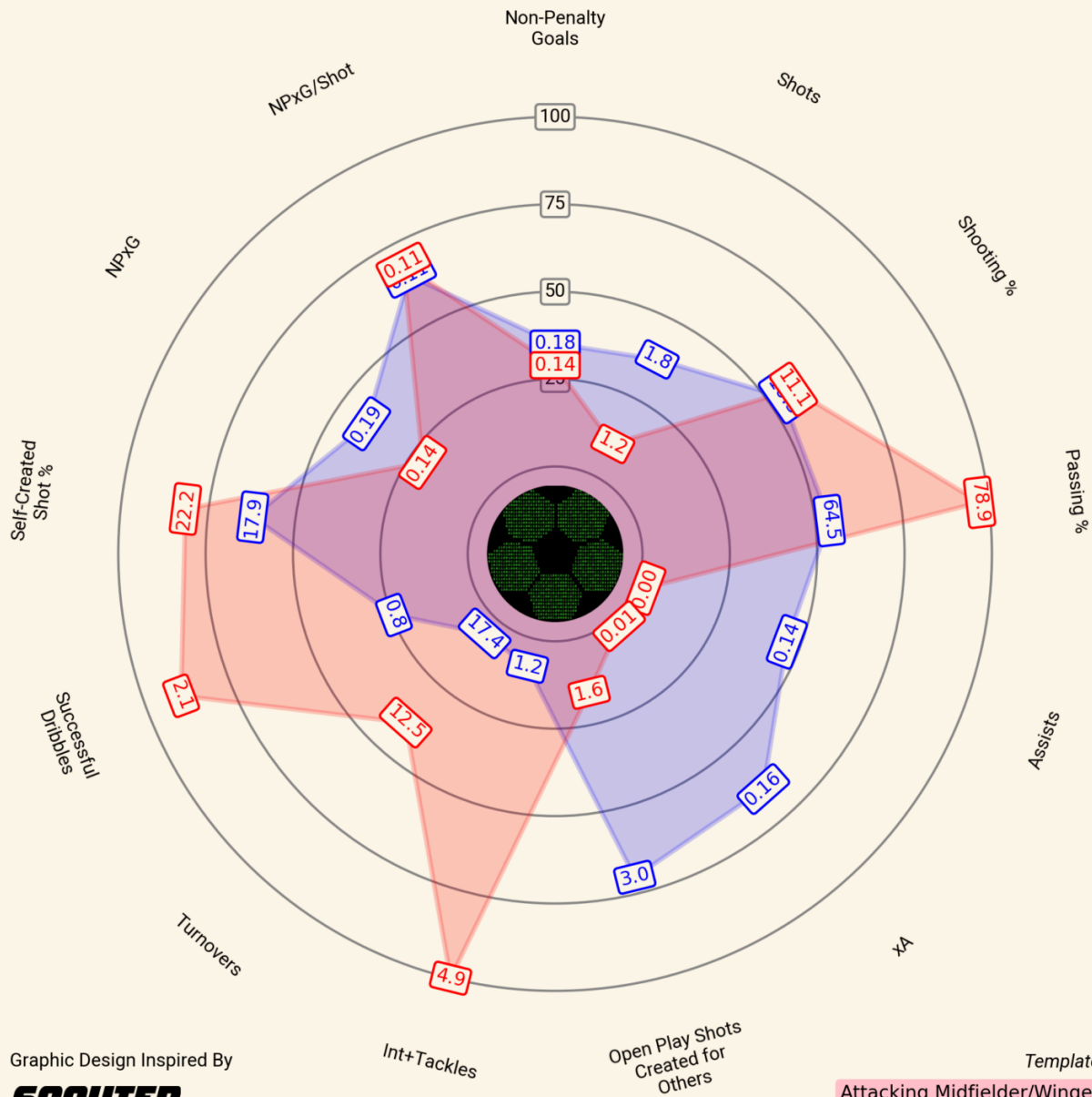
Savannah McCaskill

1955 minutes | 27 years old
Angel City | NWSL | 2023 season



Portland Thorns | NWSL | 2023 season
656 minutes | 30 years old

Raquel Rodriguez



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European Competition stats included where applicable

Template

Attacking Midfielder/Winger

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STRIKERS: A RENOVATED CONDO IN EAGLE ROCK

You certainly can't take anything away from Sydney Leroux's 2023 comeback. She scored an [emotional goal](#) in her first game after a year of injury rehab. She backed it up down the stretch with 0.45 npxG/96 in over 600 minutes. A spark had been re-lit. Could she be counted on to deliver in the season ahead?

Her age and injury history hang like a sword of Damocles over her head. A 34-year-old Leroux with two major injuries in the past five years cannot be relied upon to be the primary target forward. Enter Bright. Her profile closely matches Leroux's, but she's a decade younger with all the extra quick-twitch fibers and sprint speed Leroux can no longer provide. She can drop deep to link, defend from the front, and make defender-dragging runs that free her in space or open up gaps for Alyssa Thompson and Emslie.



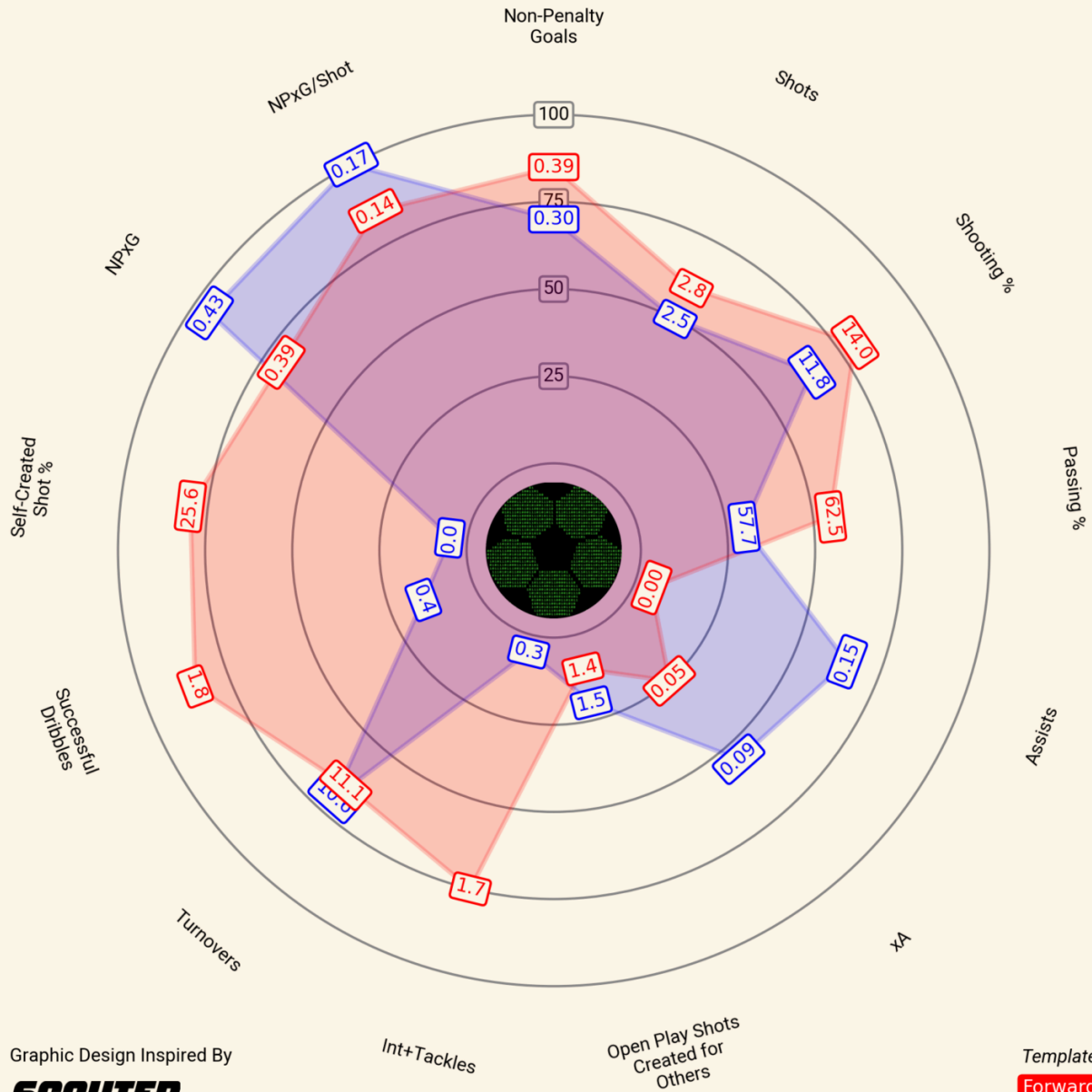
Sydney Leroux

602 minutes | 33 years old
Angel City | NWSL | 2023 season



Orlando Pride | NWSL | 2023 season
1370 minutes | 23 years old

Messiah Bright



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Forward

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Plus, she's already iconic.

<blockquote class="twitter-tweet"><p lang="en" dir="ltr">Well this was fun ✨🐱🌕🌑 #volemos

Moonlight + Sol kits are here '24 pic.twitter.com/tu2Qosv7kY</p>— Messiah Bright (@messiah_bright) February 29, 2024</blockquote> <script async src="https://platform.twitter.com/widgets.js" charset="utf-8"></script>

WINGERS: SNOW WHITE COTTAGES NEXT TO A CASH-FOR-KEYS SCAM IN LOS FELIZ

Ok, that last analogy was a bit harsh on Alyssa Thompson. The 19-year-old is bursting forth with creative talent. Nobody looks as terrifying as her when they get on the ball at full speed in the final third. Her insane [goal against Kansas City last May](#) is the stuff of legend in Los Angeles. For all of Thompson's youthful fireworks, though, it is Emslie who has been able to create chances for others. (She's also just as good off the dribble, albeit with fewer whiplash-inducing feats of trickery.)

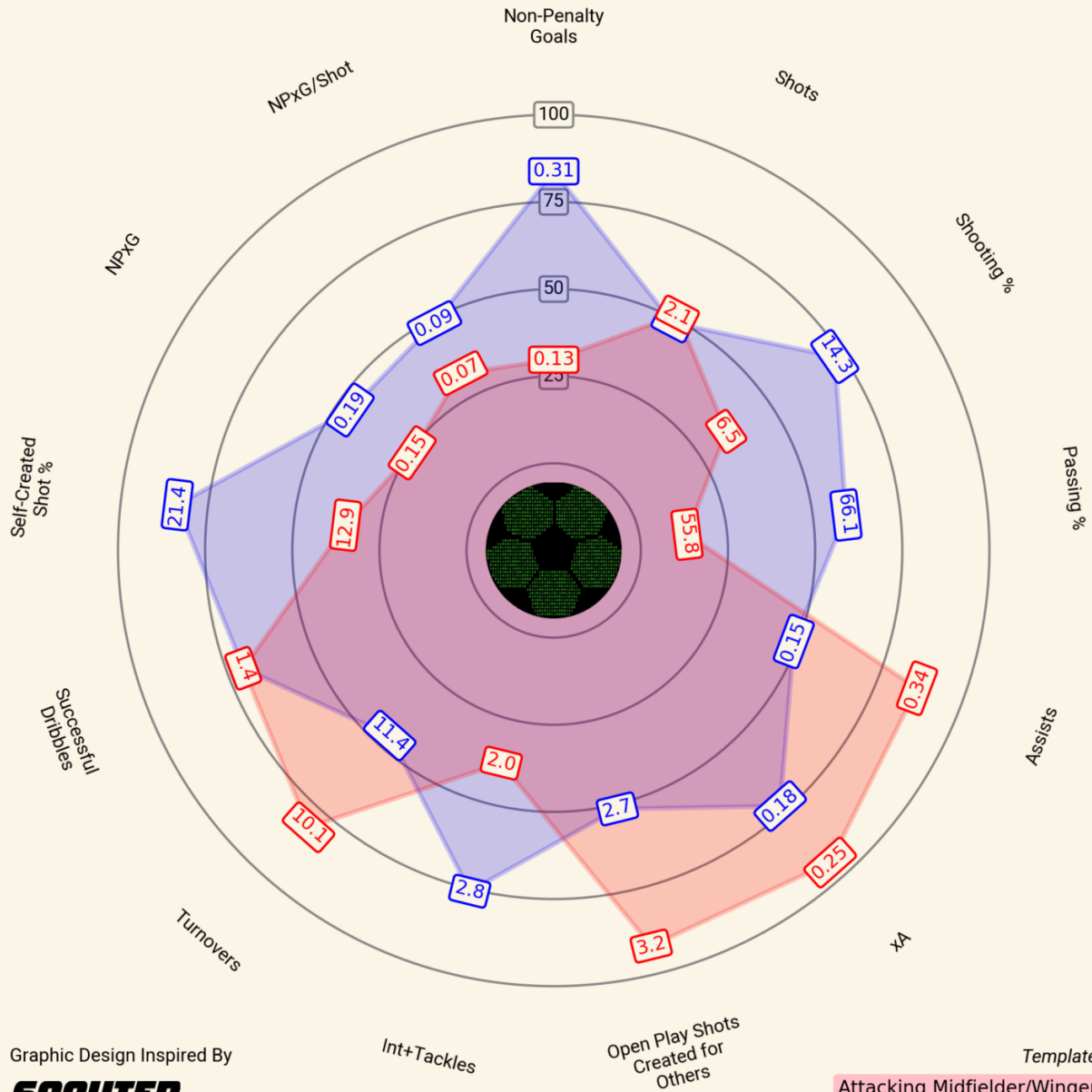
Alyssa Thompson

1176 minutes | 19 years old
Angel City | NWSL | 2023 season



Angel City | NWSL | 2023 season
1340 minutes | 29 years old

Claire Emslie



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European Competition stats included where applicable

Template

Attacking Midfielder/Winger

Analysis and Implementation:
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Data from www.fbrf.com

No [attacker who played at least 1,000 regular-season minutes](#) generated more expected assists per 96' than Emslie did last season. That crazy goal Thompson scored after breaking Addisyn Merrick's ankles and turning the posts into a pinball machine? Emslie put the pass on a dime for her.

Plenty of that xA value came from setpieces and crosses, to be sure; no player was as cross-happy as Emslie last year. She was really good at it, though. When looking solely at passes in open play (including crosses), Emslie's 0.22 xA/96 was behind only Morgan Weaver. A 0.06 [g+ Boost/96](#) figure also topped all 1,000+-minute attackers, which dovetailed nicely with the xA value. Emslie is making the players receiving her passes better. Thompson may be more memeable, but it's Emslie who's actually helping her teammates take shots from high-quality chances.

PREDICTIONS: SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC HOUSING, OR THE RETRENCHMENT OF THE GROVE?

The range of outcomes for Angel City is vast, like many other teams. Because Padmé Amidala is an owner who hangs out and does halftime sideline interviews on TV, the club's decisions have a hotter spotlight trained on them. Uhrman and Hucles Mangano have built a squad bursting with talent. Henry remains a poet from deep midfield. Sarah Gorden has returned to form as an aggressive center back. MA Vignola earned USWNT caps on the back of her 2023 campaign. Alyssa Thompson is Alyssa Thompson, and her little sister might be better. Emslie's passing vision won't abate with age. Rodríguez feels like a more successful version of Crash Davis. Bright's future is, well, bright.

But it won't take much to let age and empty pockets hold off the Angel City rebuild until 2025, or '26, or maybe '27. 2027 would actually be a great year to contend. The World Cup will most likely be in town. I'm sure there are some brand activations Uhrman and her army of art directors, content creators, and marketing professionals could whip up. Too bad they can't hire some actual data analysts. Oh wait, they have; they just do revenue and ticket pricing projections, not scout players. Oh well.