SUCCESS CASE

How the Pro League transformed Belgian football with new data strategy

Creating centralized data warehouse and updating its applications has led to insights that reduce costs, boost fan engagement and deliver more innovative and profitable partnerships.

About the Belgian Pro League

The Pro League is the body that organizes professional football in Belgium, including the coordination of clubs playing across the three competitions to which it holds organizing rights: the Jupiler Pro League, Challenger Pro League and Belgian Women's Super League, as well as all youth competitions where these teams participate.

Through its efforts to assist the year-on-year professionalization and development of all clubs, Belgium now ranks as the 8th strongest men's league in Europe according to UEFA club coefficients, and has helped to establish a strong new infrastructure for the growth of women's football.
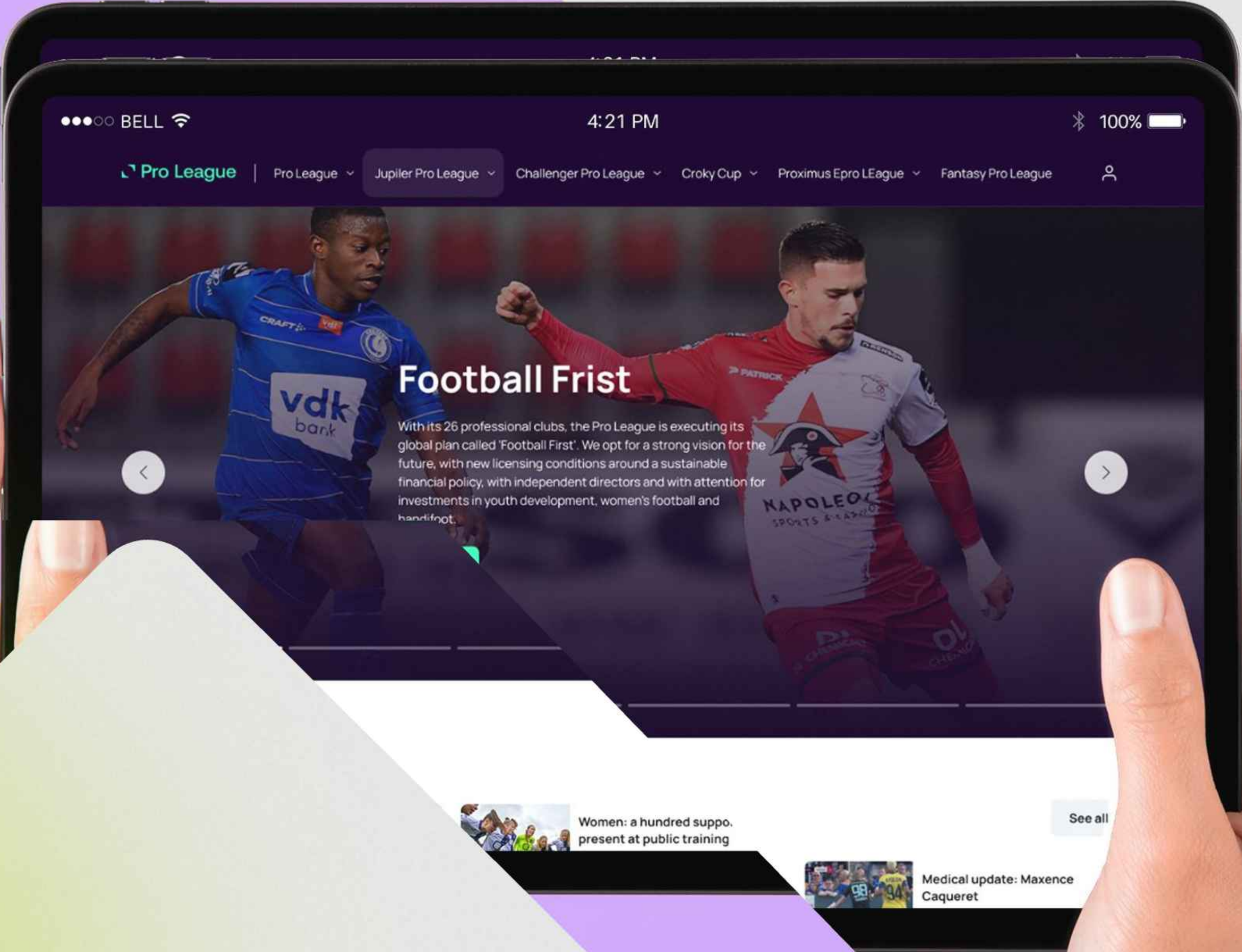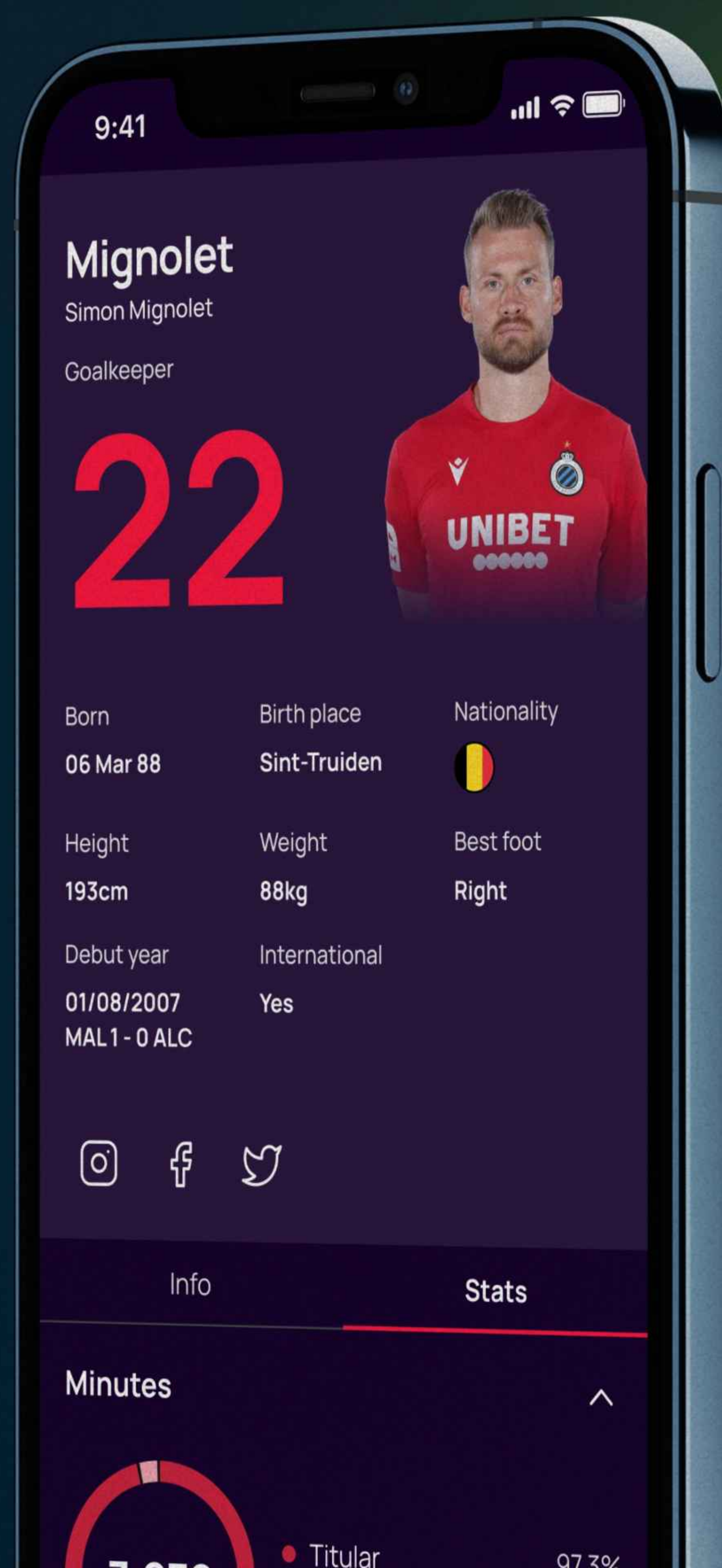
Digital vision and strategy

Connected to its vision to put Belgian football on the map and drive higher growth and employment in the sport, the Pro League has a central aim: to be the most innovative sports league in Europe.

Led by its digital department, the idea is to expand innovation to all areas of the league and develop new data-led solutions that benefit fans, clubs and commercial partners. It is a transformative and all-encompassing goal, designed to improve on-field results and off-field growth, for which the league is partnering with Sportian.

"We don't see ourselves as a football league but an entertainment company," said Arno Lycke, BI and Digital Manager at Pro League.

"Our role is to provide the most compelling sports spectacle that keeps fans interested and more partners wanting to invest. To do this you need great technical abilities but also a deep understanding of sport and the intangible factors that make it so important. This is where Sportian's partnership stood out."

9:41

Mignolet
Simon Mignolet

Goalkeeper

22

Born	Birth place	Nationality
06 Mar 88	Sint-Truiden	

Height	Weight	Best foot
193cm	88kg	Right

Debut year	International
01/08/2007	Yes
MAL 1 - 0 ALC	

Info   Stats

Minutes   ⌃

Titular

Data warehouse leads to cost efficiencies

Lycke has begun the digital transformation of the Pro League by centralizing the historical data that existed across the three competitions, working with Sportian to create a central data warehouse that provides real-time dashboards and add predictive analytics on key areas like fan engagement, content performance and match attendance. **"It's important not only to look to the past with your data but also use it as a tool to drive proactive decisions"** he said.

One objective from this will be to improve operating costs for the league and clubs, as the data can help to identify new trends that can be immediately acted upon. For example, the league is planning to monitor the occupancy of stadiums and waiting times for service, advising clubs to open new kiosks so that fans do not have to form long queues. As such information is now available centrally, it can be automatically generated for clubs, presenting a major time saving.

"We can also apply new parameters to determine how we prepare for a specific game and achieve cost efficiency for our clubs," said Lycke.

"For instance, reviewing historical data shows that some teams get better attendance on Saturdays, others on Sundays, or that certain fixtures attract more people to the nearby bars and stores. We can look at all of this, as well as variables like weather, competing events, TV schedules, to make sure that every game has the best chance of filling the stadium and engaging the most people."
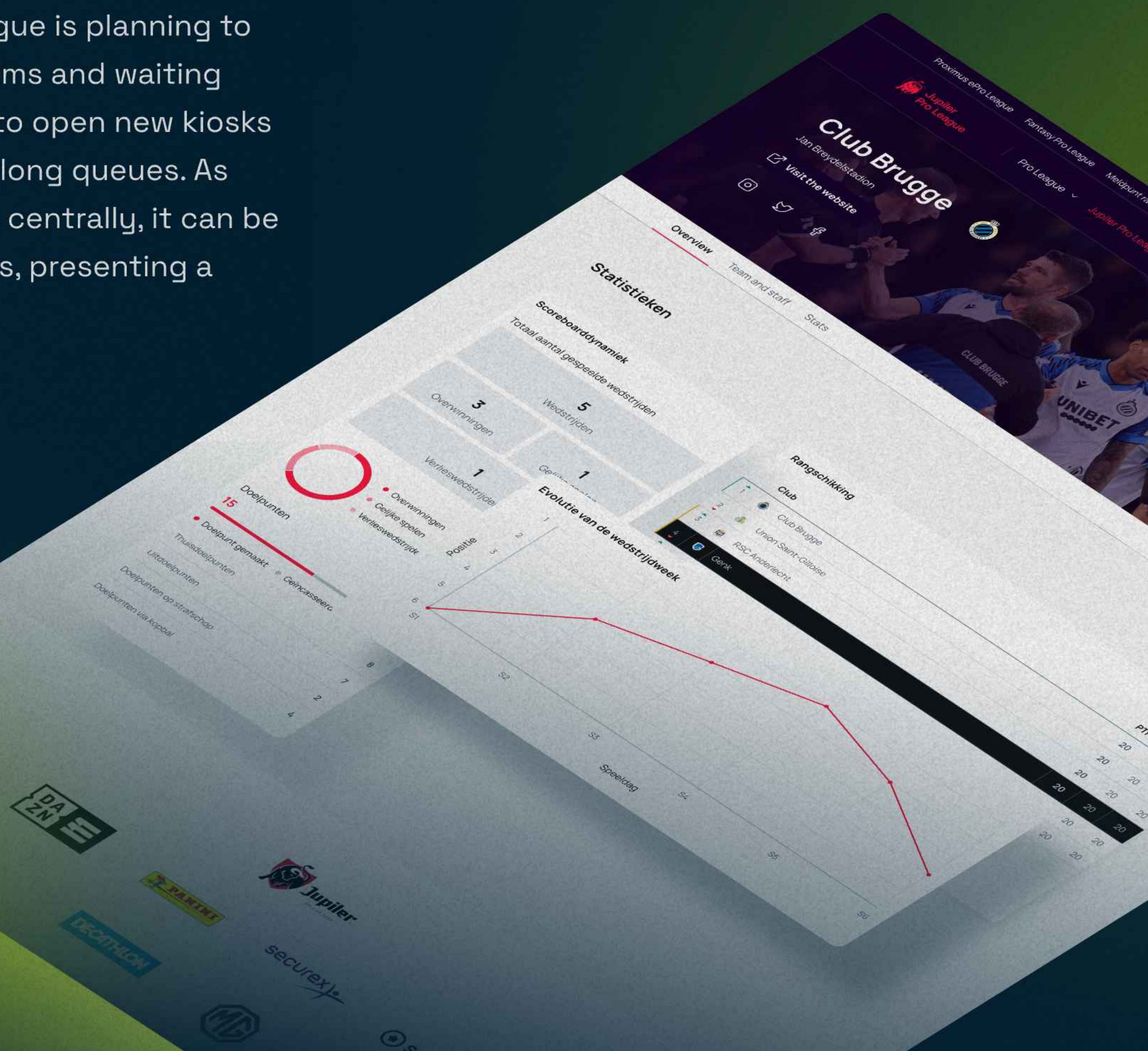
Innovating fan engagement

The new data warehouse also reveals a world of insights about how Pro League fans interact with the matches outside of the stadiums, helping the league to adapt and strengthen its fan engagement across its digital platforms, including its official app, website and fantasy game.

"What we are seeing is that the majority of fans are consuming our content on more than two devices at once," said Lycke. "We want to lean into that and create the definitive second screen experiences that add a new dimension to match broadcasts."

To enable this, Pro League is adapting its official application with Sportian's Maker solution, to provide real-time data and new immersive experiences around its matches, including a voting system where fans can interact and select their player of the match. Separately, within its fantasy game, it has added gamification elements to drive competition between fan groups, attracting a younger audience.

A future aim is to incorporate augmented reality too, for viewing real-time player statistics or other information to help bring the fan closer to the action.

"We want to offer the fans a definitive guide to football," Lycke added. "When the fan is talking with their friends about the game, they should be able to turn to our app to pull the best data, experiences and insights. By doing this people generate a stronger emotional connection to football, which helps preserve the popularity of the sport and increases opportunities for our clubs."

By analyzing fan interactions through Maker, Pro League then works with Sportian's Fan Activation services to segment its data by individual fan profiles, league and club preference, driving communications that resonate more strongly with the recipient and generate loyalty for both the league and clubs.

"One interesting variable has been to compare fan interactions against sporting results," Lycke commented. "We are detecting that the time to engage most heavily with the fan is when the team is winning. By forging a positive emotional connection during the good times, we see better long-term loyalty even if the team starts to lose. We have configured our marketing automation around trends like these, and many clubs are following this approach to good effect."
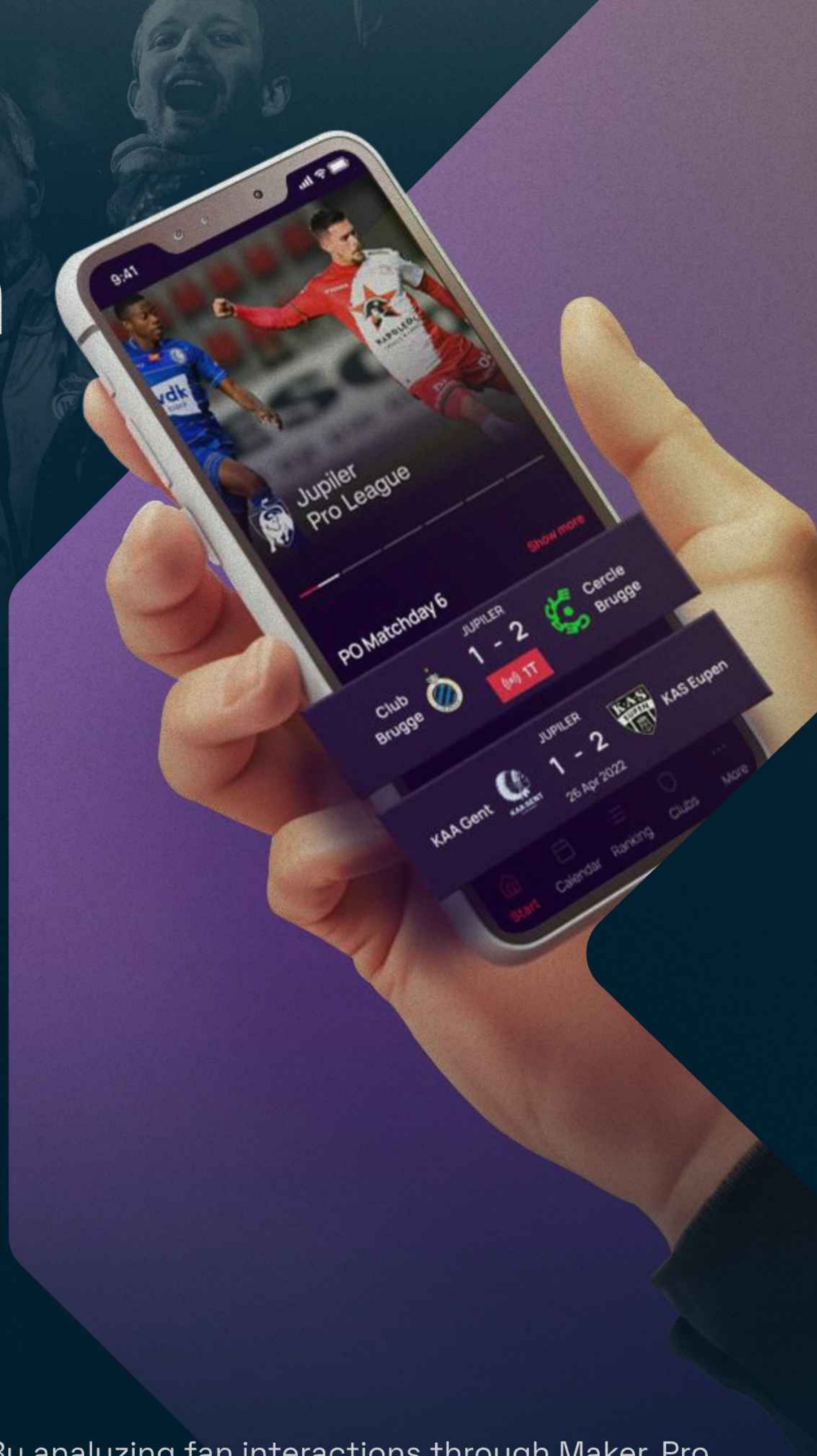
Redefining sponsor metrics

Presenting an engaged and active digital audience has also helped Pro League to transform its sponsor relations and establish new, personalized KPIs. **"We have agreed new performance metrics like how many fans are active on our fantasy game, or how many vote for the man of the match,"** said Lycke.

"This would not have been possible before and gives us a new way of interacting with commercial partners. They all can see the value of digital and want to activate in some way on these channels, which results in revenue growth for the league."

Measuring success is now a collaborative and creative process between Pro League and its network of partners. Every new partnership now begins with a presentation of data that can be measured, before agreeing on a series of KPIs that are periodically evaluated from that point on. **"It gives partners a feeling that they are growing together with us,"** Lycke added.

"What is really exciting for partners is to see the wide range of ways they can reach our audience and be heavily targeted, for example by focusing solely on our fantasy game or on women's football," he continued. **"Our data is the key leveraging point for partner interactions, which is helping us meet commercial objectives while enhancing the digital transformation of clubs across the country."**
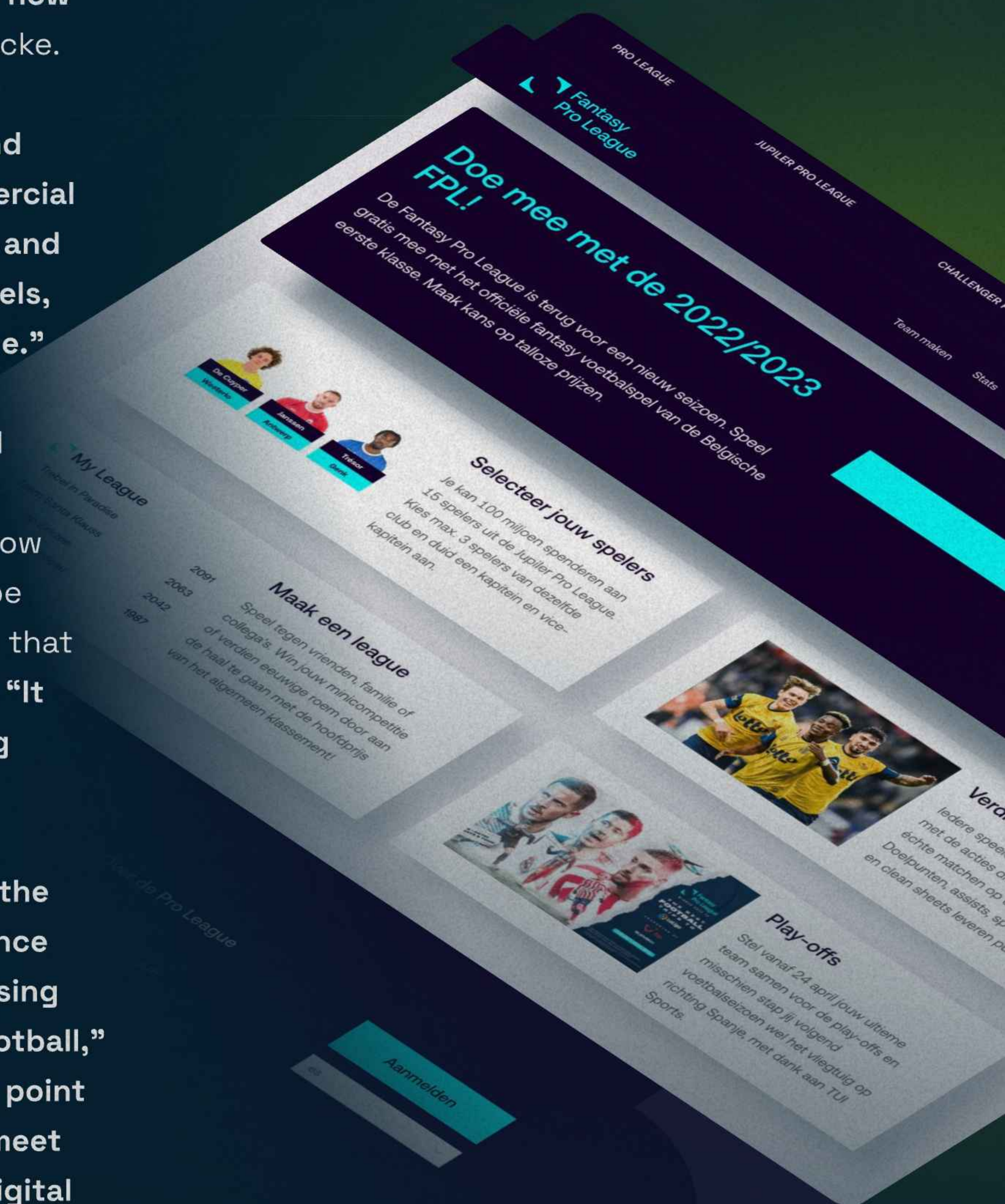
Results

A year after initiating its data warehouse and transitioning to Maker, the impact on the Belgian Pro League has been transformative, with seismic results including:
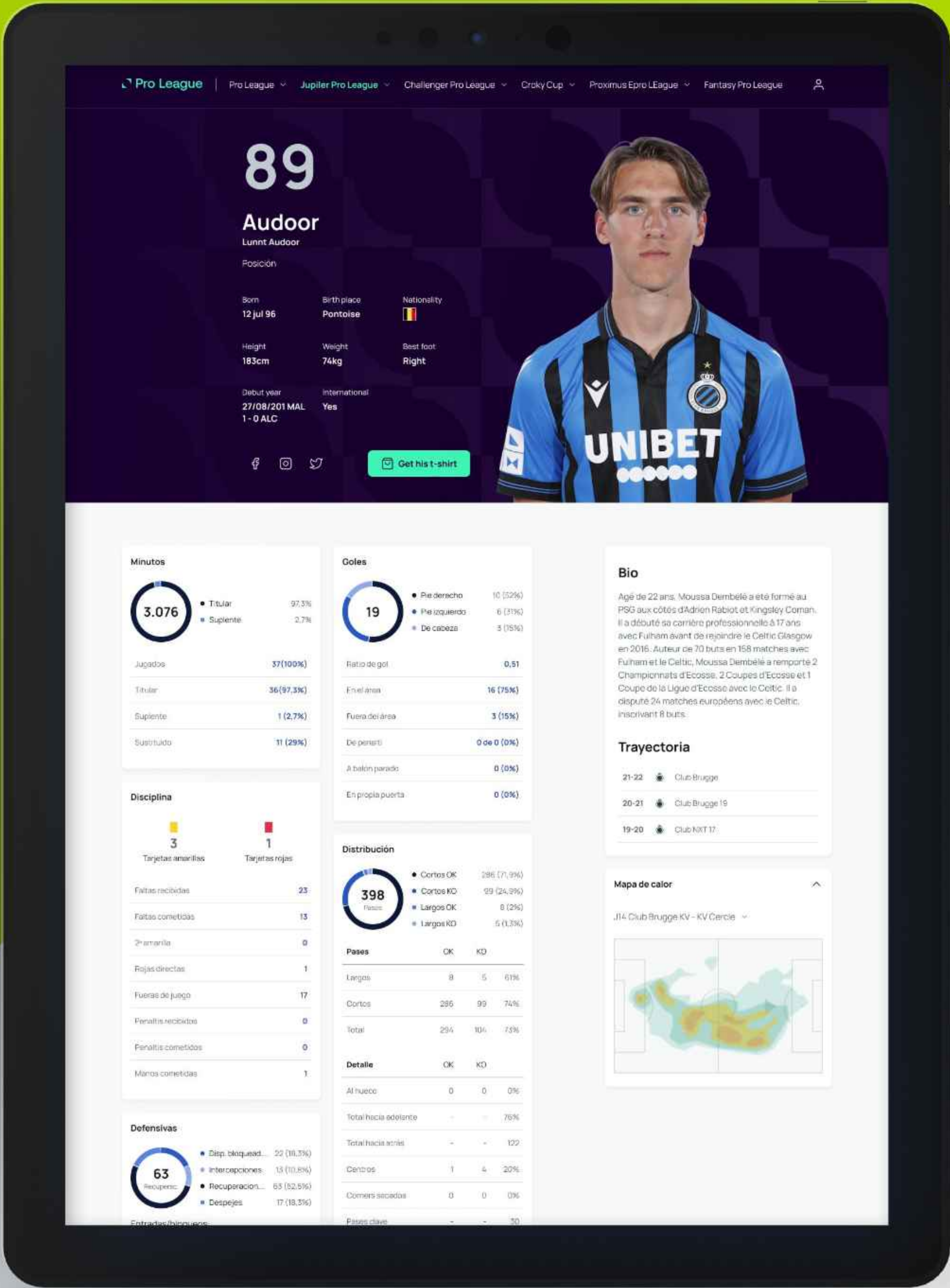
300%

INCREASE IN SESSION TIME ON THE NEW PRO LEAGUE OFFICIAL APP.

A 9x

INCREASE IN ONLINE FAN ENGAGEMENT AFTER INTRODUCING ITS NEW VOTING SYSTEM.

200%

INCREASE IN FANTASY GAME DOWNLOADS.

"Sportian gives us what we need to be proactive with our data management and to innovate for the future," Lycke concluded.

"We are custodians of football and need to leave it in a healthy state to be enjoyed by the next generation.

Partnerships like these keep us ahead of the curve and allow our audiences to enjoy the sport on their own terms. It's exciting to think where we may go next."

Sportian