

FC Barcelona - Futbol Base System

If a kid gets into the *fútbol base* system at Barcelona around the age of 10 and makes his debut for the first team aged 20, he should have amassed something upwards of 2,300 training sessions. Vast chunks of those 3,070 hours will be spent on routines which train possession retention. At many clubs the youth training will start with the physical, the development of power and stamina, followed by the tactical and then the technical. At Barcelona it is quite the reverse. Almost everything will focus on technique to start with, tactics follow soon after. Only at 15 or 16 will there be increased emphasis on physique, stamina and power.

*In the early years there will be emphasis on the core skills – **first touch, protecting the ball, exercises to teach positional play (movement with and without the ball, attacking and defensive pressing)** and so on. Seven-a-side games will be played, usually using an outfield lineup shaped as 3–2–1, where the wide defenders will play as wing-backs, the two behind the striker will use movements similar to Iniesta and Xavi, while the central player in the back three will either be a pivot like Sergio Busquets or a centre-half like Gerard Piqué.*

*It is called *fútbol base* because it's basic football education. If you have released the ball as the centre-half to the right midfielder, what do you do next? Where do you move to? What are your responsibilities? If you are the striker who has dropped deep to receive the ball from the "Xavi" player in midfield, do you play a wall pass? Do you turn and dribble? If possession is lost on the opposite side of the pitch to where you are, how should you react?*

This detailed programming of young players is consistent across the age groups. It is like ballroom dancing: the moves are set, but what separates those who are best of all is the ability to express themselves within set movements and rules. Deviate or fail to practice and you'll stand on your partner's toes, the judges will notice and you will dance no more. Over and over and over again the Barça *canteranos* will practice these movements which become ingrained, second nature, and which begin to separate them from the ordinary footballers of their age at other clubs.

Fran Sánchez, another *fútbol base* coach, explains how this process integrates those recruited later in their development. "We teach them general concepts initially and then add more detail later. We like to increase the level of difficulty gradually. We work with the whole group, so that the boys who have come from outside catch up with the others in terms of their understanding of our system."

Case study: The possession game

It is part of the Barça ethos that the possession they hope to dominate by having better first touches, quicker and more accurate passing and constant, intelligent movement should not be sterile possession. It has nothing to do with beating the other team into submission, everything to do with seeking superiority of numbers, establishing a key player in space

with time to see a killer pass and then taking advantage of the anarchy caused in the opposition defense.

Xavi explains it like this: “We are always looking to out-number our opponents, two against one, so if Puyol is on his own with the ball, I’ll say, ‘Bring it up, bring it up!’ He’ll bring it up to the point where the guy marking me is forced to break away and press him, so now we have two of us against one and I’ll shout, ‘Puyi! Puyi! Puyi!’ “You see, if I stay behind the guy marking me, I’m no use. I have to keep moving, so that we can attack. Once I have the ball, I’ll tell [Dani] Alves to get into position and I move towards his fullback. We just keep passing and passing and passing. We keep attacking.”

*Of paramount importance in the development of a Barcelona footballer is a simple possession drill called the **rondo**.*

There will be a circle of players, often seven or eight, with two defenders in the middle. The ball is to be passed between those on the outside of the circle without the two in the middle, who are intent on blocking, deflecting or seizing control of the ball, breaking the flow. Barça legend has it that this is a technique first invented, or at least applied in training, by Laureano Ruiz, the discoverer of Txapi Ferrer and a founding father of La Masia.

The first, most obvious, purpose of the exercise is to better the circle players’ ability to receive and distribute the ball under pressure with one touch or “half touch” movements. The second is to teach the defenders how to press intelligently. The two need to work in coordination to be successful.

The third is that, as eventually each player takes his turn in the middle, fitness is built which is tailor-made to the Barça playing style.

The fourth is team spirit. The circle players work together to keep the ball from the defenders.

If you watch the *rondo* done well at Barça you will find that they are at least as competitive as any five-a-side game at Manchester United, Arsenal, Milan, or Bayern Munich. Perhaps you have seen them do it before a match and thought “I could do that”, but that warm-up version is 10 times slower and less intense than the real deal in training. The circle players want to break records – how many consecutive passes, how long in possession; there are endless variations on the number of touches allowed, the number of defenders, banning passes between adjacent circle players and so on.

When you see it, you understand an anecdote which Xavi often tells about his own youth training days. Charly Rexach was taking the session and roaring at them, “Not one-touch football! Half-touch football!” That half-touch is in the Barça DNA. Look at Barcelona v Arsenal, the Champions League knockout tie from March 2011 and the goal scored by Xavi. It is 1–1 when Iniesta scampers away from Tomáš Rosický, Abou Diaby and Johan Djourou. His pass is aimed into Xavi’s run but it gets just the faintest flick-pass from David Villa, which prevents Laurent Koscielny’s intervention and Xavi scores. Villa’s is the “half-touch” which Rexach was roaring about 10 years earlier. It is not unique to Barça, but they often

use it better than everyone else because it is an intrinsic part of their development as players, as Xavi explains. “They taught us to know who was around us before the ball arrived and to be prepared to use a flick or a cushion or a volley in tenths of a second to keep the circulation of the ball flowing.”

For all the brilliant **ball control** which Iniesta, Xavi, Messi and Pedro possess, the moments when Barça open teams up with lightning passing, the ball moving at the speed of an ice hockey puck, stem from the *rondos*. Throughout their career they will do tens of thousands of them. For a coach, it's like a doctor putting a thermometer in a kid's mouth. Pay attention to the result and he'll know whether all's well or not. If these guys are suffering in the *rondo* then something's wrong – mentally, physically, confidence, concentration. Something's up. Arnau Riera was Messi's captain during his relatively short spell with Barça B. Arnau was talent spotted at a relatively advanced age – a compliment to him in that few are good enough to fit in if they spotted at a relatively advanced age – a compliment to him in that few are good enough to fit in if they haven't been nurtured there, but also a drawback as it is an intimidating culture to walk into. “When I began the first *rondos* in training I couldn't keep up,” he says. “I saw players like Thiago Motta effortlessly better than me at it and I phoned my father to tell him, ‘I don't think I can make it, these guys are so far ahead of me.’

*“One thing which stands out about the fútbol base training at Barça is that they want all their players to **think more quickly than their opponents**. The rondos help your touch, your passing, they train fitness and are very good technically, but what helps you most is if you are very sharp at knowing what's going to happen and what to do next. That's a defining trait of what is valued at Barça.”*

There are other vital concepts in the training of a Barça footballer. One, unusually for this team, concerns the use of the head. As Xavi explains, it is about **acquiring the vision necessary to make such quick decisions on the ball**.

“In Barcelona there are many concepts we discuss at training sessions,” he says. “Keep your head up’ is one. The ball is at your feet, but you need to keep your head high. If not, you're not watching the game. Another saying is ‘look before you receive the ball’. That's a really important one for shaping your stance to control first time and then knowing what move you have to make to release the ball quickly to the next guy.”

Throughout his junior career, Xavi had it drilled into his head: “Watch Pep, he has his head up.” “Watch Pep, he always knows when to give and where to give to.” These will be drilled in over and over again to every kid in Barça's *fútbol base*. It's easy to imagine Guardiola's name being replaced by that of Xavi or Iniesta, but both of those players think that Sergio Busquets is a more complete example of this teaching philosophy. His play is less spectacular, but Busquets embodies the work ethic, the control of possession and the speed of thought which once was Guardiola's. “Sergio doesn't get enough credit,” says Xavi. “He's a brilliant player. He doesn't dribble, he rarely scores, he doesn't do stepovers, but what a player! “Busi is the essence of what it means to be a Barça player. He's a hard worker with real class. The other team will mark one of us, man to man,

and he'll still use a first-time pass to get the ball right to you and you think to yourself, 'How did he see me? That was impossible!'"

The **"third-man run"** is not a tactic exclusive to Barcelona, but their superior technique and speed of passing means that few teams execute it better.

It's like the "find the lady" con with three cards, one of which is a queen. You think you know what's happening, you think you've followed the "lady" when, of course, you haven't and you lose your money when the con man turns over the card you selected.

Xavi feeds the ball to the feet of David Villa, who has dropped towards him and is facing the passer, back to goal. Villa has no intention of holding the ball up or turning. He is just a wall to play the ball off. Villa plays the ball, with one touch, straight to Iniesta, who, as Xavi was, is facing Villa. As soon as Xavi releases the ball to Villa, he starts moving. That run takes him away from his own marker and beyond the marker who has stayed tight to Villa. Xavi is now in a space into which Iniesta, also using a first-time pass, sends the ball. Ask any Camp Nou-trained player about this move and they'll tell you that it's almost impossible to defend against when it's done effectively and at high speed.

*A fútbol base education goes beyond the technical. The lessons are also psychological and include the **value of losing** plus an ongoing debate concerning the **balance between winning and learning** in the early years of development.*

Barcelona has built a winning machine and it may seem odd that the concept of losing is so important to it. In part, it is about learning to handle defeat with some dignity – a concept which Pep Guardiola holds dear, often speaks about and which is also taught at all levels of *fútbol base*. Albert Puig, technical secretary of the youth program at the Camp Nou, explains how he puts this principle into heated match situations. "I always tell my players that it's healthy to express anger and disappointment after losing a match, but that they should only allow that reaction to last from the moment the match finishes until they make it to the shower," he says. "The second the water hits their head they should remind themselves that football is just a game and that there will always be winners and losers."

Charly Rexach explains the danger that comes with unchallenged supremacy on the pitch. "Sometimes it's important to lose in *fútbol base*," he says. "There are times when you end up always winning because you're up against weaker teams. Then, when you meet an opponent of equal quality, your performance can slip because you're so unused to playing boys at the same level. Winning every match is not healthy because players get complacent. "If at half-time you're winning 3-0, you already know that you've won and you might think there's no point in going for 7-0 or 8-0. The coach must, therefore, add a challenge for his players. He has to tell them to play one-touch football, or run faster and so on. He needs to make changes like that so that the win will be well deserved."

Fundamental to Rexach's point is the debate between winning and losing in the early stages of the *cantera*. Is a winning mentality innate or can it be learned? How did ferocious competitors who are now addicted to winning at the highest level, like Víctor Valdés, Carles Puyol, Andrés Iniesta and Xavi become part of two eras, between 1999 and 2004 and then

from May 2006 to May 2008, when a total lack of trophies was reflected in the psychology of the dressing room?

Even **Pep Guardiola** plays around with the basic idea of what “winning” means. In Puig’s book *La Fuerza de Un Sueño*, he argues that: “Winning is not incompatible with a good early training. On the contrary, good early training means that youngsters develop into players who win, but who win the right way. They respect their opponents, behave at all times as representatives of the club, accept that there is someone in charge, have tactical discipline and work hard at training. That is the way to win.”

Alex García, who taught Messi, Piqué, Fàbregas, Bojan, Busquets and Thiago, partly explains the concept as encouraging players to learn by never settling for what they have achieved. “That group of Messi, Cesc, Victor and Piqué were all very competitive,” he told me. “They were born winners who chased every trophy. They were never willing to settle. That’s one distinctive thing about Barça players, they’re never happy with just being good enough. They could be winning 5–0 and they’d still want to score a sixth.”

Xavi adds: “Before you become a professional you need to learn and develop, but without losing your competitive edge. In Barça we all understand that. Development is a priority. The young lads learn footballing concepts and understand why we do things in a certain way whilst maintaining their competitive spirit, their desire to win. It’s good to express the anger you feel when you lose. In the *fútbol base* the priority is training and development, but the objective is to win.”

Fran Sánchez is the longest serving youth coach at Barcelona, despite only being 35 years old. “Competitiveness is always essential,” he says. “Whenever you play a game you go out to win and that has got to be the attitude of all our boys, from the youngest to the oldest. Today, society in general is super competitive and football reflects that, but obviously it’s important to us that we play the right way. It’s not about winning at all costs. We need to play our kind of football, show respect for our opponents and the referee and try to outplay the other team. Playing our style of football is essential, even if it means losing the game. “As they grow up these boys sometimes develop the belief that, ‘If I’ve won that must mean we’re better players than the others,’ but that’s not our philosophy. It’s perfectly possible to win a match without having played the right way and vice versa – we can play the right way and lose. What we’re interested in is that our opponents make it as hard as possible, so that our own boys have the chance to develop. Winning every match 10–0 does us no good at all.”

However, Thiago and Rafinha’s father, Mazinho, who starred for Valencia and Celta Vigo and won the World Cup at USA ’94 with Brazil, concludes the debate by providing some context and a perfect balance between winning and learning. He’s in tune with García’s sentiments. When Mazinho’s two talented sons were at school in the Galician city of Vigo, they had a five-a-side football coach who would tell the group, “The most important thing is to participate.” Eventually the Brazilian world champion took the guy aside and quietly told him, “You are mistaken. The most important thing for any of them to do is to compete”.

There is a constant queue of people from all over the world waiting to study Barcelona's training methods: managers, coaches, directors, you name it. Depending on who they are and what they ask for, they will be given varying levels of access. However, while the Barça staff are friendly and open about their work, they are skeptical about the worth of "spot" visits aimed at assimilating ideas that have evolved over a generation or more. Unless a person sees the development process in its entirety, then coming in for a couple of days to study the work done by a particular age group will only provide a partial and probably false representation. Furthermore, unless the club from which the person is sent is ready for a total overhaul of its scouting, development and training structure, as well as its basic football philosophy, then picking up "bits and pieces" of the Barça credo is a waste of time.

Pere Gratacós, Messi's last coach before hitting the first team, probably expresses the overall sentiment most bluntly. "Schools need to teach and if Barça can help coaches develop, that's positive, but it's not something you can achieve with a couple of days' work and study. It's the fruit of many years of planning; you can't just come here and observe for a couple of days and reproduce the system somewhere else."