

Youth development work in Barcelona: the role of playing philosophy



A successful strategy for training players for the first team is the most important factor for success in youth promotion for professional clubs¹. It is obvious that the professional team's playing idea is a common theme that runs right through the training. The playing philosophy also offers a clear framework showing the basic principles for the style of play and training. But what exactly does a playing philosophy cover and where does it come from? This article is part of the series on the FC Barcelona's recipe for success and shows a possible development process. It looks at how players, coaches and youth development work can benefit from the playing philosophy.

Definition of playing philosophy

Philosophy, which according to Wikipedia is the 'love of wisdom', in this context means: knowing how and in what framework play should take place. So, it is a matter of having a clear idea of the style of play and attitude, without which target-oriented training would be very difficult.

Even if acting in line with a common training objective appears worthwhile, many clubs work without any overarching objectives. The coaches in the youth sections are then initially faced with the challenge of developing their own playing philosophy. After all, it is only in this way that playing style, basic formations, positional play and automatisms can provide an overarching framework for targeted training content. It is also certainly possible to shape training using instinct and then win at the weekend, but the framework gives the path to achieving the training goals a transparent structure. All those involved gain a clear idea of the objectives and milestones for achieving them.

The model shown below on the development of a playing philosophy by Thomas Zivic is not a dogma, but should instead serve as an example to explain the various aspects.

Development process for a playing philosophy²

1. Deciding on a playing style
2. Idea of the basic formation on the pitch
3. Idea of the basic tasks of the player positions
4. Idea of automatisms in certain phases of play

1. The playing style as the foundation of the playing philosophy

Decide on a playing style at the beginning of the development process. Of the two pure forms of playing style, (1) ball possession and (2) gaining possession, FC Barcelona is well-known to favor ball possession: the match is shaped with short passes, in order to then change the rhythm with a pass further down the pitch and thus gain goal opportunities. The other playing style was demonstrated by Chelsea during the Champions League 2012. Playing with the aim of 'gaining possession': let the opponent approach, guide him into certain zones, and then launch a counter attack.

2. The basic formation to implement the playing style

Of the 3 basic formations, 4:3:3, 4:4:2 and 3:5:2, from which further arrangements and playing systems can be derived, all of the teams at FC Barcelona are oriented towards 4:3:3. Even in the lower youth teams, which use 3:2:1, the basic formations are geared towards position-specific training for the subsequent 4:3:3 formation.

3. Position-specific basic tasks

The position-specific tasks can, of course, vary depending on the coach, player types and opponents. However, if the basic principles are anchored in the playing philosophy, every coach and player, right down to the lowest youth level, can refer to this framework. At FC Barcelona, these include e.g. the pass to the first line as the first option for the goalkeepers. A further example is the offensive tasks of the outside defenders, who first learn to help shape attacks during 7-a-side games. Another is the strikers, who learn how to mirror the ball on the ball side in the 3:2:1 system up to U11.

4. Idea of automatisms

In this connection, automatisms represent behaviors that take place by themselves without further attention. Individual automatisms are cognitively anchored by repeating them numerous times. Team-related tactical automatisms are rehearsed moves involving at least two players. In the model by Thomas Zivic, a clear "idea of the processes in the various phases of the match" is an important factor for the coach in order to shape the way in which the team plays. At the lower youth level, no theoretical tactics are learned, even at FC Barcelona – here, the focus lies on teaching the players techniques. However, there is a range of forms of game play that prepare even the youngest players for tactical challenges, so they learn tactics without being aware that they are doing so. Here, too, it is immediately

clear that the first team can benefit from this if the players have already learned practiced automatisms at a young age.

Playing philosophy as a factor for success: If a standardized playing philosophy is practiced throughout the club, all of the players from U10 to U18 know what needs to be done in certain phases of the match. The players who then manage to make the move to the first team have already internalized the playing style required there over the years.

The DFB (German Football Association) on the playing philosophy of FC Barcelona: Possession of the ball right from the beginning³

The Dutch school

In search of the pure football secret of successful youth work you quickly realizes that there is none. Rather there is a clear concept, the entire Club lives with all of its employees. The Dutch influence is unmistakable – all principles of the famous educational philosophy of Ajax Amsterdam in the 1990s find themselves daring. With their idea of the voetbal total are Johann Cruyff and Rinus Michels, the founder of this concept.

Starting point are two questions: how we want to play football? How do we achieve this game way?

All teams at FC Barcelona play as wide and high as possible when in possession of the ball. The match thus mainly takes place in the opponent's half of the pitch. All of the players are technically so strong in their respective age class that they can keep the ball in a ball possession match, divert the game safely numerous times, and thus play out gaps for a successful attack via a vertical game or individual action. Due to the very high game in the opponent's half, when the ball is lost, it needs to be hunted down and won back immediately under the highest amount of pressure.

Anything in the 4-3-3

All teams of FC Barcelona players up to the U8 junior license based on the 4-3-3 System. The offensive and defensive basic orientation is always the same, the mechanisms on the individual positions are identical. Therefore be also for the forms of training in the younger age groups the positions of the 4-3-3 'taken'. The number sequence is set and runs the team parts ascending from back to front and from right to left. Also the Scouting is bestimmt by the 4-3-3: players who are committed, or recorded at La Masia, need to 'fit' into the system. From the U13 junior teams, they are finally set to a position. Speaking of sighting: nearly 70 percent of the approximately 250 talents are Catalans, so

come from the region. About 20 percent are Hispanic, 10 percent foreigners. And not everybody lives in La Masia: the boarding school beherbergt about 80 players, which also roughly one-quarter plays not football, but basketball or hockey!

Ball possession game from the beginning

All teams of FC Barcelona play in possession of the ball up wide and high. The game takes place mainly in the opposing half of the playing field. All players are in their respective age groups technical so strong that it in the ball possession game keep the ball, times sure to move the game and play out as gaps for a successful attack by vertical game or individual actions. Due to the very high game in the opposing half, it applies to ball loss immediately with highest pressure to chase the ball and regain. Watch the trainers on it that it especially difficult opponent, a targeted air ball on the other side, or a pass in the depth to play - the only means to directly transfer the their own defense standing up.

All teams should exhibit this behavior in the sweepstakes. The game results are secondary, although almost invariably set victories at this game way. Only the U19 juniors are required, that they are at the top of the National Championship.

Learn more about the game philosophy and training forms for their implementation in the current issue of [fussballtraining 12/2012](#). The video below explains the educational philosophy of the FC Barcelona on UEFA.com.

Lucien Favre about Barcelona⁴

They embody a philosophy. Johan Cruyff has been installed at Barca. Ball circulation, a match alternating between speed and rest. Accelerating at the right moment, in order to play the opponent out of its positions. Game intelligence. That is my philosophy as well.

Pep Guardiola⁵

On the style of play: I have the ball, I pass the ball; I have the ball, I pass the ball. We have the ball, we pass the ball.

On home-grown talent: The player who has come through La Masia has something different from the rest, it's a plus that only comes from having competed in a Barcelona shirt from the time you were a child.

On principles that the players learn right from the start: I like to win, I like to train, but above all, I want to teach people to compete representing universal values: values based on respect and education. Giving everything while competing with dignity is a victory, whatever the score line suggests'.

Xavi Hernández: This is Barca.⁵

I make myself available to help you; I look at you, I stop, I keep my head up and look, and, above all I open up the pitch. That comes from the school of Johan Cruyff and Pep Guardiola. This is Barca

References

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