

# Youth development work in Barcelona: the role of playing philosophy

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A successful strategy for training players for the first team is the most important factor for success in youth promotion for professional clubs<sup>1</sup>. 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 Zivc<sup>2</sup> is not a dogma, but should instead serve as an example to explain the various aspects.

## **Development process for a playing philosophy<sup>2</sup>**

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 favour 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 behaviours 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 gameplay 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 practised automatisms at a young age.

**Playing philosophy as a factor for success:** If a standardised playing philosophy is practised 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 internalised the playing style required there over the years.