

"The money gamble" aka the philosophy change

With the advent of what many consider is the Luis Enrique era (2014 -), there has been much hype and excitement about signings, tactics and what not. Instead of succumbing to the highly biased opinions of newspaper reports and armchair football managers, I decided to do a little analysis of my own. Please keep in mind that this is a LONG post, and sometimes some things may seem repetitive; however, I have tried my best to make it interesting and non-monotonous.

So, on your mark, get set, and GO!

The pointing of fingers - here, there, everywhere...

1. Splashing the cash

Till now Barcelona has spent over 150 million euros on players. This seems like a hefty figure and, not surprisingly, many talk about Barcelona's very own Galactico policy.

I have two things to say:

One, PLEASE!! Barcelona are NOT Real Madrid, who buy players for marketing purposes. Do they really need James Rodriguez when they already have di Maria and Isco? Why would they sell Xabi Alonso without adequately replacing him? Did they really need Beckham when Luis Figo was playing on the right wing already? Barcelona's policy is to buy players to complement the academy and to fix the positions the squad lacks quality or depth in.

As President Bartomeu said: *If we can't find them in the academy we have to buy them from elsewhere. Decisions like Rakitic and Suárez were taken because we didn't find these types of players in Barcelona B (1).* Remember that Barcelona have historically always tried to recruit one type of player into La Masia: one who is short, agile and technically gifted. Although not completely impossible, it is quite rare for a tall player to be a successful La Masia graduate. Therefore, La Masia ends up having an excess of great midfielders and a shortage of everything else. That is why, looking at the signings later on, you will see that Barcelona have only brought in one midfielder, three goalkeepers (one promoted), two defenders and one striker.

Secondly, I'm sorry, but gone are the days when every signing can be a bargain. The market is bigger therefore prices are bigger. For example, Barcelona got 9.5 million euros for Adriano, and Mascherano for 22 million euros, in 2010. But this is 2014 and clubs are more competitive in the market now, and the fact that Barca can still bring in quality players for less than 25 million euros is commendable, also given that this is a World Cup year.

More on signings later.

2. We trust our future stars, don't we?

Where are the youth players? Why must Barca spend so much?

Firstly, Barcelona has thirteen players in the squad who were raised in La Masia. Thirteen out of twenty three, which could increase if two youngsters are called up to complete the 25 man squad quota, not to mention that players can still be registered in the B-list, or even called up whenever Lucho wants.

That is more than Pep EVER had, so don't start talking about how Pep favored the youth and all, because Luis Enrique is trusting the youth too.

Season	Number of Players registered in first Team squad	Number of youth players in first team squad	Number of B team registered players who were called up to play one or more competitive matches
2008-09	24	11	8
2009-10	21	10	6
2010-11	20	10	11
2011-12	22	12	9
2012-13	23	15	5
2013-14	25	17	3
2014-15	23+	13+	?

We WILL talk about the 2013-14 season in quite some detail, so hold on!! Believe me, I was shocked too when I saw that figure. SEVENTEEN!!! But I'm getting carried away. Ahem, let's move on.

3. The Holy Trinity - Can Tri-unity be achieved?

Three individuals!! How can they survive together??

What about the values of Catalunya – humbleness, dedication, sincerity?

I think we have forgotten the great days of 2008-09, which featured the attacking trio of Samuel Eto'o, Thierry Henry and Lionel Messi.

Samuel Eto'o – In May 2005, he created the chant *Madrid, bastards, hail the champions (2)* when Barcelona won the league.

In February 2007, he refused to come on as a substitute during a league match (3).

In 2007-08, he repeatedly criticized Ronaldinho, saying that he would miss his training sessions due to partying. Obviously, that is fair, but all this shouts out anything but humble.

Thierry Henry – Admitted to *screaming for the ball (4)* while captain at Arsenal, and that his teammates would sometimes give it to him even if he wasn't in the best position.

The minute Pep came, he announced that Eto'o was not a part of his plans, but changed his mind when he saw Eto'o's humility in training.

What I feel is that firstly, Luis Enrique has the disciplinarian approach that would suit Luis Suarez and secondly, players usually become sacrificial towards the team due to their arrival at a bigger club, like in the case of Thierry Henry, or both, as in the case of Eto'o.

(Sure, Eto'o left after a year, but there were many factors in that decision, which would probably warrant another article, so we can save that for later.)

I WILL talk about the Holy Trinity from all possible perspectives, including tactical, so hold on!!

4. The "mes que un club" prerogative

The 2013-14 season has been quite eventful for Rosell's board. With so many allegations since he assumed office, he has made some decisions that infuriated fans, it's hard to gauge Rosell's reign as anything but successful.

Let's take a look:

2011: A sponsorship agreement with Qatar Airways. While I do believe that Barca needs sponsors due to inflated markets, why Qatar Airways? Barcelona have just taken the very essence of La Masia and turned it over: *La Masia's model incorporates educational training programs, accommodation, meals, medical care, attention to the needs of children and sports development plans. FCB forms people before athletes... (5)*. So, technically, if FC Barcelona was an X company, they would form people before their X profession. Right? After all, if Barca want a sponsor, they do it right, right?

Just to note, Qatar Airways' parent company is the Government of Qatar itself. So let's take a close look at the very nice things that the Government of Qatar is doing with its workers.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5R9Ur44XV8>

Shocking. Just shocking.

I agree that sponsors are important and, since this article is about football, I will not go into too much financial detail. However, think about this:

- 1) Barcelona's Qatar Airways deal nets €30M (\$45M)/year, whereas Manchester United's new Chevrolet deal nets about €67M (\$80M)/year.
- 2) Manchester United signed a new contract with Adidas for €95M (\$100M)/year, after their Nike deal expired. Barcelona have not renegotiated their deal with Nike, which expires in 2018, since 2008 (\$43M/year).

If money is needed through sponsorships, at least make sure you are getting your money's worth!!

Seeing Qatar Airways painted on every seat in the Camp Nou makes me sick. It really does.

And, as you will find out later, Barcelona sign Fabregas to cover this entire operation up, but more on that later.

2012: Vertonghen was PUBLICALLY offered to Barcelona for €12M (6), and who did Barca buy? Oh yes!! Alex Song, for €19M! You know what's worse? Song, at Arsenal, never played well as a center back or as a holding midfielder, and was tactically undisciplined. He excelled in a deep-lying playmaking position, where he would give assists to van Persie et al (7).

2013: Neymargate - Bought for a "transfer fee" of €57.1 million + 2 million in variables (if he comes in the top 3 voting of the Ballon d'Or in next five years). To be honest it isn't as much of a deal as the press make it out to be, but there is clearly a dearth of leadership when a socio (Jordi Cases) asks why so much was paid and Rosell said nothing. In fact, he then said in court that he *never read the contract's small print (8)*. Shocking?

However, about the tax evasion within the deal, remember that institutions want to pay as little tax as possible, whereas the government wants as much as possible. Corporate tax law is so convoluted even corporates can't interpret it fully, so don't be too worried about this.

In fact, here is an interesting fact. Beko, Barcelona's newest sponsor, is a brand of Arçelik A.Ş., which in turn is controlled by Koç Holding. One of Koç Holding's banks (yes, BANKS!) was accused of tax evasion and was forced to pay a sum of taxes and fines of amounting to over \$50 million (9).

So, tax evasion is NOTHING to worry about.

Transfer ban for next two seasons – The reason Barcelona spent...

FIFA announced: *The Disciplinary Committee acknowledged that young football players are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in a foreign country without the proper controls. This particular fact makes the protection of minors in football by the sport's governing bodies, especially by FIFA, even more important.*

With regard to the case in question, FC Barcelona has been found to be in breach of art. 19 of the Regulations in the case of ten minor players and to have committed several other concurrent infringements in the context of other players, including under Annexe 2 of the Regulations.

So that gives us a focal point of reference to look at: article 19 of FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players. Let's take a look at this now-famous piece of law.

Article 19: Protection of Minors

1. International transfers of players are only permitted if the player is over the age of 18.

2. The following three exceptions to this rule apply:

a) The player's parents move to the country in which the new club is located for reasons not linked to football;

b) The transfer takes place within the territory of the European Union (EU) or European Economic Area (EEA) and the player is aged between 16 and 18. In this case, the new club must fulfill the following minimum obligations:

i) It shall provide the player with an adequate football education and/or training in line with the highest national standards.

ii) It shall guarantee the player an academic and/or school and/or vocational education and/or training, in addition to his football education and/or training, which will allow the player to pursue a career other than football should he cease playing professional football.

iii) It shall make all necessary arrangements to ensure that the player is looked after in the best possible way (optimum living standards with a host family or in club accommodation, appointment of a mentor at the club, etc.).

iv) It shall, on registration of such a player, provide the relevant association with proof that it is complying with the aforementioned obligations;

c) The player lives no further than 50km from a national border and the club with which the player wishes to be registered in the neighbouring association is also within 50km of that border. The maximum distance between the player's domicile and the club's headquarters shall be 100km. In such cases, the player must continue to live at home and the two associations concerned must give their explicit consent.

Barcelona have been previously banned from playing Lee Seung Woo in competitive fixtures; however, with this ban, Barcelona are now banned from playing the following players in any competitive fixtures: kind of like a year-long Luis Suarez ban (training and friendlies are allowed):

Lee Seung Woo - Korean, Cadete B (U15s)

Paik Seung-Ho -Korean, Cadete A (U16s)

Jang Gyeolhee - Korean, Cadete B (U15s)

Theo Chendri - French, Cadete A (U16s)

Patrice Sousia - Cameroon, Infantil A (U14s)

Bobby Adekanye - Dutch-Nigerian (U14s)

The 10 players because of whom Barcelona faces a potential year-long transfer ban are Antonio Sanabria (now at Roma), Giancarlo Poveda, Andrei Onana and Maxi Rolon, in addition to the above players.

It is clear that Barcelona is in violation of this article. To learn more about this, read this article (since I'm 17 years old and have no clue about sports law).

<http://www.barcelonafootballblog.com/22233/fyi-article-19-fc-barcelona/>

I'm not even going to talk about the Intel and Beko sponsorships, because both are just marketing gimmicks - the former on the inside of the shirt and the latter on the side.

Yes, we have had some ups and downs, but remember that Rosell's board warrants scathing, not Bartomeu's. He has handled the situation very well, and thankfully is not a Rosell puppet. Would any president be bold enough to spend over €150M on transfers? Would any president clear up the mess of his predecessor within days of assuming office, by announcing the Neymar deal?

http://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/embed_code/30401489#

Plus, note that Laporta, for all his merits, did have his setbacks that went unnoticed, such as the Villagate transfer, where there was a confusion over the transfer fees (10).

At least till 2016, we have a board that is not afraid to make tough decisions, which is a good sign of things to come.

Lastly, let's not forget that even now the influence of Barcelona is worldwide, and Barca hasn't lost our "identity". Most notably, in 1999-2000, *the present managers of Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, Chelsea, Ajax, PSV Eindhoven and Southampton were all either playing or working at Camp Nou (11)*. Just take a moment to realize this. The managers of some of the best clubs (in terms of brands (12)) in Germany, England, Netherlands and Spain were all together, at one point, gracing the Camp Nou pitch or dugout. Our influence is still very much alive and kicking, and the fact that Barcelona decided to go for a manager who played and captained the side, instead of a more experienced manager, says a lot about the faith Barcelona has in its personnel.

Saying our goodbyes - a serious stare in the face at failure

I have, and always will be, a staunch believer in small squad sizes, as far as Barcelona is concerned. In 2008-09 season the only reason fans saw beautiful football was because of the on-field consistency and chemistry that had been developed by playing week-in and week-out together. Keeping a small squad size ensures squad harmony and makes sure that managers are always keeping checks on the deadweight.

Last season, Tata Martino, hired at the last minute, did the opposite. With a bloated squad size and a good-natured yet erratic rotational policy, Barca ended up not playing certain players, even when they were available.

Here is a look at the squad and the minutes they played.

Kit Number	Player	Starts	Appearances	Goals	Mins
1	Valdés	29	29	0	2610
13	Pinto	14	14	0	1260
25	Olazábal	0	0	0	0
2	Montoya	16	18	0	1491
3	Piqué	33	33	4	2949
5	Puyol (c)	12	12	2	1003
14	Mascherano	27	30	0	2441
15	Bartra	15	20	1	1429
18	Alba	16	17	0	1352
21	Adriano	26	27	4	2216
22	Dani Alves	27	28	3	2475
27	Patric*	0	1	0	22
4	Fàbregas	33	40	13	2855
6	Xavi (vc)	29	33	4	2675
8	Iniesta	27	37	1	2498
12	Dos Santos	0	3	0	19
16	Busquets	32	34	3	2863
17	Song	15	24	0	1399
19	Afelay	0	2	0	4
24	S. Roberto	8	22	0	912
7	Pedro	28	40	17	2426
9	Alexis	30	38	18	2632
10	Messi	27	30	41	2304
11	Neymar	23	30	12	2075
20	Tello	6	24	4	762
23	Cuenca	0	0	0	0
28	Adama*	0	2	0	17
29	Dongou*	0	2	1	29

*Players who were called up from B team (canteranos).

Was Tata a good manager? Very much. In fact, he still is. He just couldn't handle the pressure from the media and fans. He got the squad running with his high pressure style of football. However, his tactics required high stamina as his brand of football was more direct as compared to previous seasons. With a squad that contained only 13-14 potential first-team players, rotation just didn't work. For example, Tata ended up playing Alex Song at CDM and Sergio Busquets in a more Xavi-esque role against Sociedad. Needless to say, Barcelona lost 3-1.

(Some of his tactics were interesting though, and we'll touch upon this later)

Anyway, the squad needed cutting and pruning to facilitate the core players, not a decimation of the core players itself. Therefore, playing Pedro and Alexis all the time simply because Tello and Cuenca aren't good enough is simply ridiculous.

Remember that the aim of Luis Enrique was to build a squad that is both versatile, deep, and competitive. Basically, Luis Enrique wants 25 players, or less, who could play in the starting eleven without any problem.

So, before we get to the squad, let's analyze the departures, one by one.

Victor Valdes: A club legend who wanted to leave by running down his contract, Valdes has always been regarded as one of the best goalkeepers ever to grace Barcelona's pitch. His leadership and dedication will be missed, both on and off the pitch.

Jose Manuel Pinto: See Valdes!! Even though he played very rarely, he was an admirable backup and played adequately whenever called up to man the posts. His humility will be missed.

Oier Olazabal: He didn't play a single match last season, and even got injured in training. He would rather get more playing time at Granada.

Carles Puyol: Where do I start? Dedication, humbleness, courage, determination, leadership, I could go on forever!! Tarzan has left a huge hole to fill in defense, and he will be missed, both as a player and a person.

Jonathan dos Santos, Ibrahim Afellay, Isaac Cuenca: These players have very limited skill sets. They take up squad space which would rather be filled by someone else. They have the additional complication of being injury-prone too.

Afellay is a player with a lot of quality and can still resurrect his career: his ability to play in midfield and attack, and his height and pace still are assets he can work on.

Cuenca, once a brilliant break-out star, has seen his career blighted by injury. He is versatile player, a no. 10 who can play brilliantly on the wings and provide width just like Afellay, and I believe in his ability to do well at Deportivo.

This is the kind of game where Cuenca makes sense – Guardiola told the highly technical player to literally stand near the touchline and provide crosses (which he is actually good at), and lo and behold, Barcelona won 3-1 against Milan in the Champions League on April 3, 2012.



But injuries and mismanagement have finally led to rescinding of his contract.

In sum, Both Afellay and Cuenca are brilliant technical players capable of adapting to different positions and player roles, and I wish them every success in reviving their careers.

Keirrisson: Paid €14M for a player who didn't even kick a ball at the club. After a series of unsuccessful loan spells, he finally returns to his homeland to rediscover the magic goal scoring touch that warranted such a hefty fee.

Bojan Krkic: From Barcelona wonder boy to Ajax flop, it's such a shame for what once was a glittering career. His confidence was battered by lack of appearances in the Guardiola era, and he has become an average player in my opinion – his decision making leaves a lot to be desired. I wish him all the luck at Stoke - he still has the quality to succeed.

Cristian Tello (€8M Purchase Option): A player who needs to realize his potential somewhere else, and if he does Barcelona can always bring him back for no additional charge. This represents great business: Barcelona basically receive a fee to get a player off their books AND get to decide whether they need him in the future or not.

Denis Suarez: A player who, like Rafinha, is VERY versatile, playing on either wings, as a false 9 or deeper a la Iniesta. However, while Rafinha is more physical, Denis Suarez is more technical, and the sheer number of midfielders in the squad means that his development will be interesting to watch.

(Barcelona didn't have much of a choice. When Suarez signed for Barcelona B in 2013 there was a clause in his contract that would automatically make him a first team member within one year. I wish him all success under Emery, who will certainly get the best out of Denis.)

Deulofeu: His career has been on neutral for a year, but this loan will decide whether he will make the grade at Barcelona or not. His appearances are guaranteed due to a clause in the deal which, otherwise, forces Sevilla to pay a hefty fee. He has regular game time, a very good and demanding coach in Unai Emery, and La Liga experience guaranteed already. The onus is on him to succeed as a player and, more importantly, as a team player.

Cesc Fabregas: He is a player that usually needs another article, but I will make this as short as possible (but this article is so long, what do I know about length?!).

Fabregas was signed in 2011 after a successful season when Barcelona won the Champions League and La Liga, and was edged out of the Copa del Rey in extra time in the final by Real Madrid.

Let's take a look at the midfield of the 2010-11 season.

CM: Xavi, Iniesta, Keita, Afellay (Played mostly as a winger)

DM: Busquets, Mascherano (Played mostly as a CB), *Keita* (filled in more as an advanced destroyer, adding the steel to midfield Iniesta couldn't, but his natural position is obviously as a pure destroyer).

This doesn't look too deep a midfield, but remember that Guardiola never liked too much depth anyway (13). He liked having quality over quantity - 15 versatile players who were first team material. Additionally, that season Thiago emerged as a hot prospect and appeared in 17 matches (10 as a starter), which is pretty impressive, given the fact that he had to be plucked out of Barcelona B to play first team matches.

So, was Fabregas' signing needed? No, as simple as that. It was a purely emotional signing, based not so much on the widely-known anecdote of the Arsenal star idolizing Pep, who in turn gave Fabregas his no '4' shirt when Cesc's parents got divorced. As we mentioned before, it was a way for Barcelona's new board to paper over the controversial shirt sponsorship deal that they had signed, by showing how they "adhered" to the feelings of socios.

A marriage made in hell.

But Pep is no Louis van Gaal. When Juan Román Riquelme was signed for €11M in 2002, van Gaal called it a "political signing" and the incoming Boca Juniors player's time at Barcelona is a forgotten memory. Pep, totally faithful to Cruyff's ideology - the best players in the squad go on the pitch - added an extra midfielder to facilitate Fabregas ahead of the Xavi-Iniesta duo, behind the strikers, to create a 3-4-3 positioning:



Sometimes, he would be even further up the pitch, to create a 3-3-4 formation, with Messi and Fabregas acting as a double false 9.

Remember this?



However, Fabregas is not a pacey player by any standards. His defensive positioning is poor, and while he can press, he can't press effectively, essentially losing his stamina. It seemed as if Arsenal had taken all the Barcelona out of him, because Barcelona ended up paying for a poor carbon copy of Messi. Denied a free role as he was offered as Arsenal, he never fit in tactically speaking. He leaves to play as part of the parked bus, the very football he had to come up against for three whole years, and I hope he can succeed in his future endeavors.

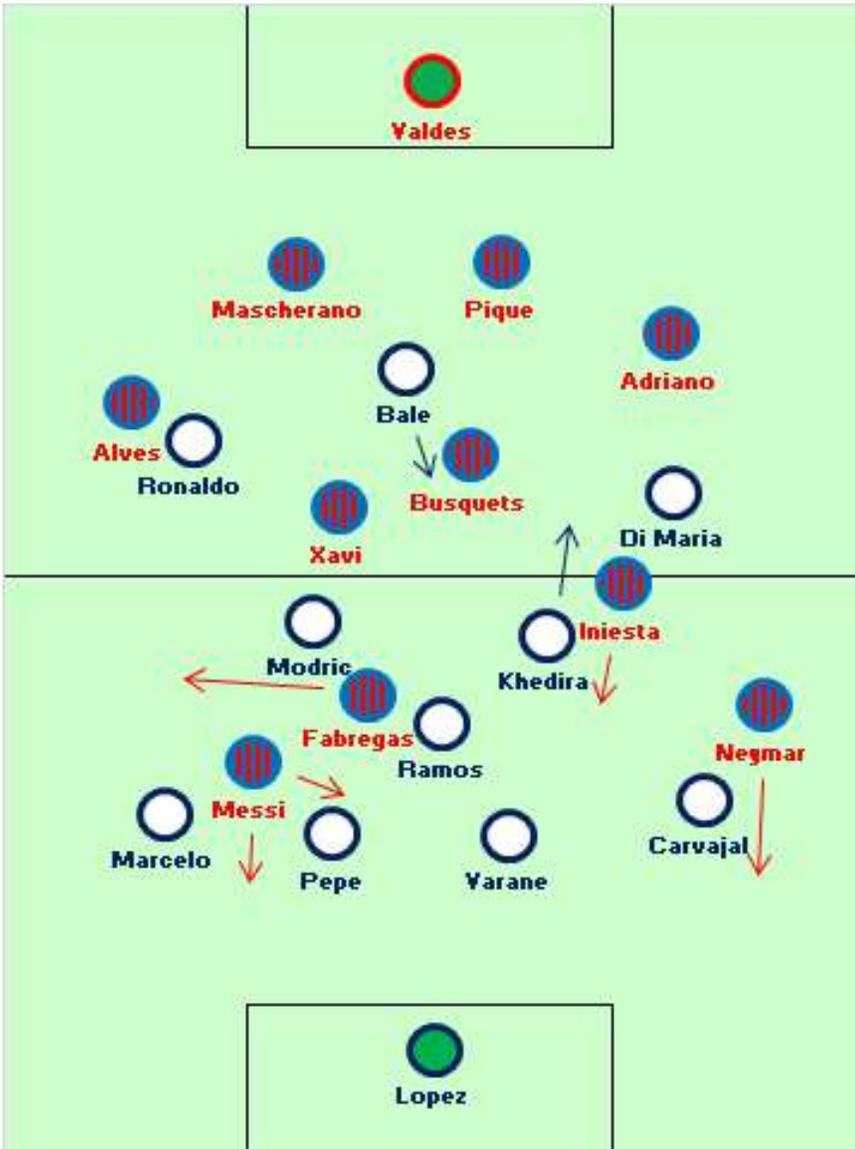
Alexis Sanchez: A signing that was much needed; however, the sale has its pros and cons.

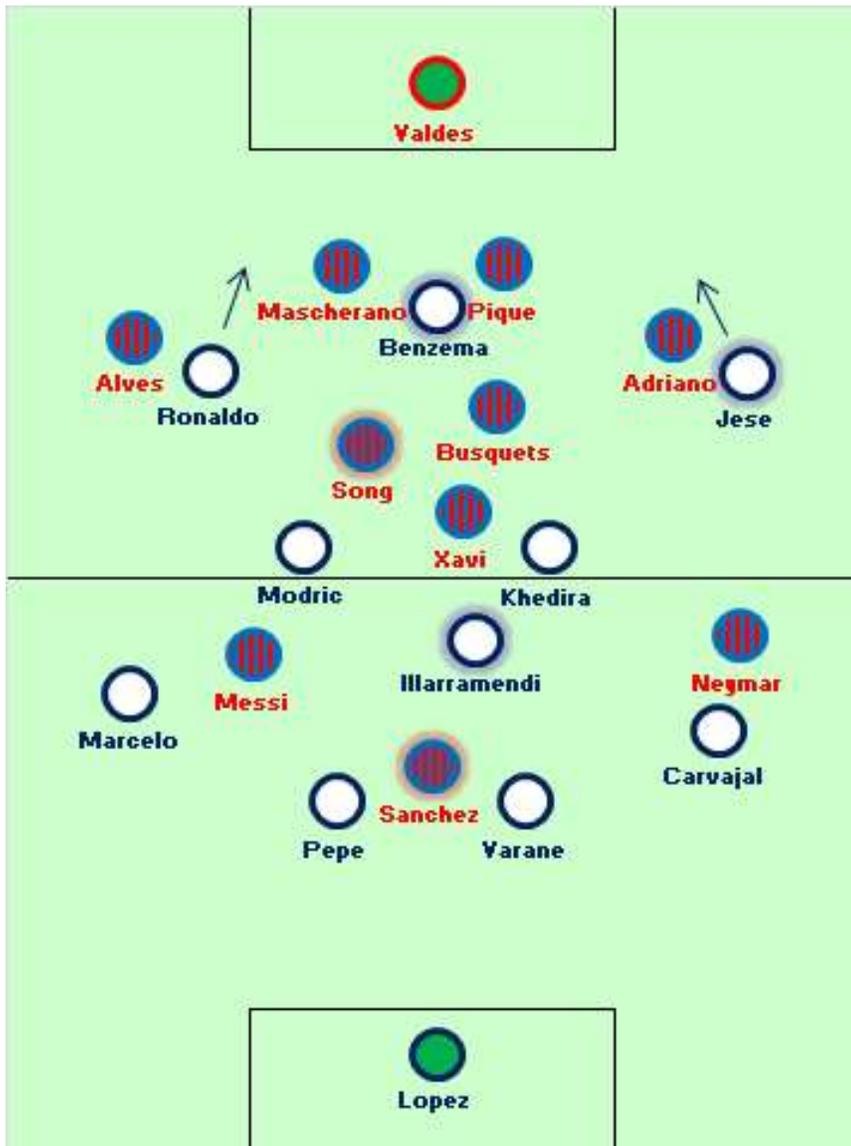
In 2011, Barcelona had just sold Jeffren and Bojan to Sporting CP and Roma respectively. Our forward lines consisted of Villa, Messi, Pedro, Cuenca (promoted) and Afellay (injured). Barcelona needed to reinforce the depth of our attack, and who better than the most promising youngster in the world (14)?

However, the problem is, Sanchez is a LOT like Messi (they even have the same height - 5'7"). He played as a false 9 for Udinese and was given a free role. Sound familiar?

Even then, he worked hard for the team, gave every game his best, and often churned out outstanding performances - all as a winger, or striker, or no 10, or no 9.

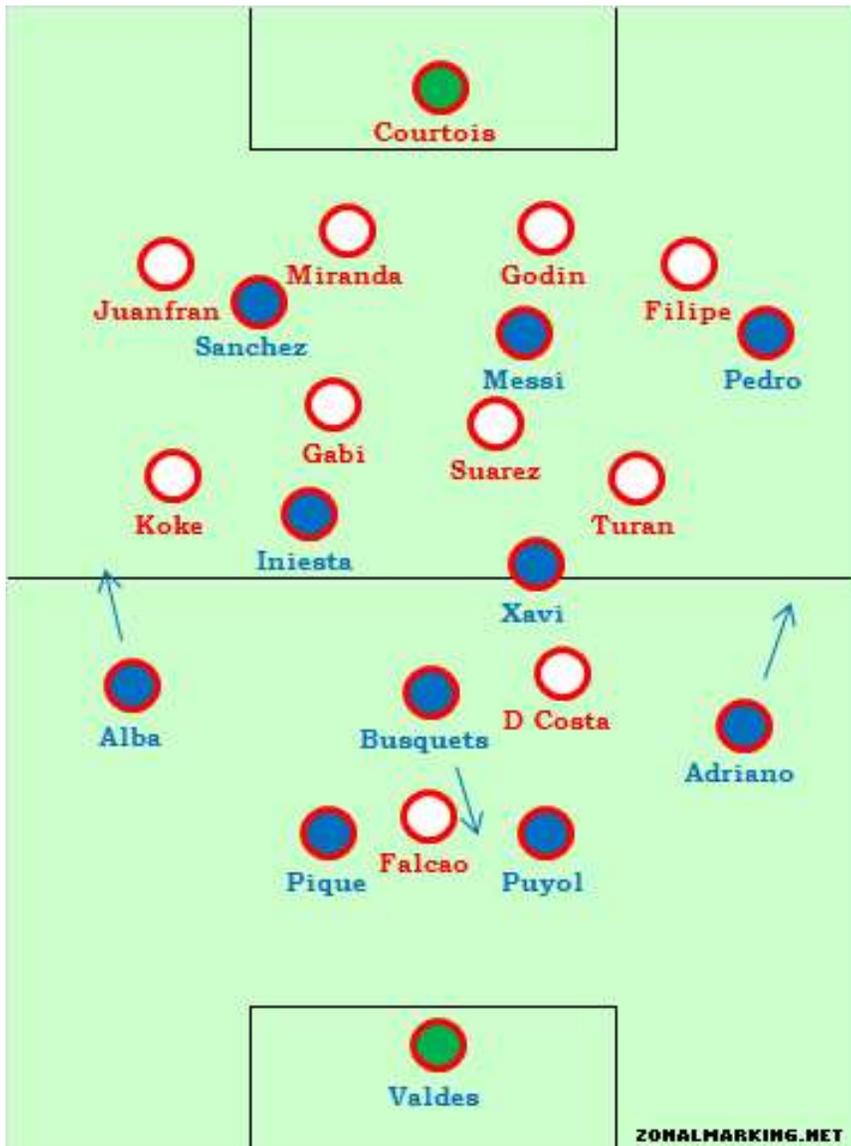
Tata, seeing that Real Madrid were effectively stopping Fabregas (who was playing as a false 9 and dragging Ramos out of position), brought on Sanchez as a no. 9.





Needless to say, Sanchez scored a brilliant goal, one of the best of the season, to hand Barcelona the 2-1 win (October 27, 2013).

Sometimes, he played as a left winger too (Barcelona 4-1 Atletico. December 16, 2012). (More examples to come later).



But, most of the time, he played on the right, creating width and making runs behind the defense.

Remember this? (Barcelona 5-0 Villarreal, August 29, 2011).



Another thing: Barcelona desperately needed a no. 9. You could argue that while Sanchez is a playmaker first and poacher second, he really displayed a remarkable poaching ability in his final season, and I would agree too. Check out the videos below.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tt2y176nLpo>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUcVPad5F54>

That positioning in every goal is classic no. 9 material. However, when he does have the ball at his feet, he draws defenders towards him, but then isn't sure about what to do (even though he still is one of the best dribblers around) – do you pass to the best player in the world or go for the spectacular? Suarez is definitely an upgrade tactically speaking, as he is a poacher first, the best no. 9 in the world right now in my opinion, and he is as hungry, if not more, than Alexis. (It's definitely more - we saw that in full swing at the World Cup...). He is taller and more physical too.

Again, I wish Sanchez the best of luck. Even though he was a player who didn't, on paper, fit our Messi-dependent squad, he managed to make his mark on the team. What sums this entire transfer up is that Sanchez played best when Messi was on the injury table.

While Barcelona do lose a hard-working dedicated player, there's no way Suarez and Sanchez can be in the same roster. Sanchez is a world-class player who deserves a starting spot, and squad harmony is important to: unhappy players can spell trouble in the dressing room.

Luis Enrique – the versatile player, what tactics shall he use this year?

Notice that the above rhyme...

Oh who cares? Let's jump right in!!

Given the versatile squad, Luis Enrique will really have to scratch his brains to figure out a system that suits all players. His biggest asset – a diverse, strong squad – is also his biggest headache. And while we fans can just take a dose of Paracetamol, Lucho must think carefully and deeply. Hopefully my time and effort of “deep thinking” makes us fans a little less worried.



Think, son. Think. Or you can think of nothing and press all day like crazy.

What this segment of the article will focus on is the squad and the tactical possibilities with the squad at Luis Enrique's disposal.

The roster

Just to remind you, Lucho wants a COMPETITIVE, VERSATILE and DEEP squad. These three words will be important, as they constitute how strong a squad really is.

So let's take a look.

Yellow means from youth system. Red means new signings/promotions. Green means both.

Kit Number	Position	Name	Age	Contract Ends	Height
1	GK	ter Stegen	22	2019	189
2	RB	Montoya	23	2018	174
3	DF	Piqué	27	2019	192
4	MF	I. Rakitić	26	2019	184

5	MF	Sergio	26	2018	189
6	MF	Xavi	34	2016	170
7	FW	Pedro	27	2016	169
8	MF	A. Iniesta	30	2018	171
9	FW	Suárez	27	2019	181
10	FW	Messi	27	2018	169
11	FW	Neymar Jr	22	2018	175
12	MF	Rafinha	21	2016	177
13	GK	C. Bravo	31	2018	185
14	MF	Mascherano	30	2018	174
15	DF	Bartra	23	2017	183
16	RB	Douglas S.	24	2019	172
18	LB	Jordi Alba	25	2017	170
20	MF	S. Roberto	22	2019	177
21	LB	Adriano	29	2017	172
22	RB	Dani Alves	31	2015	173
23	DF	Vermaelen	28	2019	182
24	DF	Mathieu	30	2018	190
25	GK	Masip	25	2017	180

Firstly, notice the average height of the players, which is about 178 cm, and the average age, which is about 26.5 years, with a standard deviation of about 3.4. Also notice this: Lionel Messi is the joint-*shortest* player in the squad, alongside Pedro. Thirdly, notice how EVERY signing Barcelona have made is a six-footer or above (except Douglas).

For the first time, the squad is relatively tall. This gives Barcelona an advantage in the air, and the ability to defend set-pieces, something which has been Barca's enemy for far too long.

Also, the squad is in top shape. It's a versatile squad and each player offers something different. Luis Enrique has quite some brain-scratching to do, but we shall talk more about tactical systems later.

So, let's jump right in to the squad!! (New signings are mentioned with transfer fees). Also, notice that, except for the goalkeepers, there are three sections for every player: a general section, position, and drag and drop – a brief tactical analysis of each player in the team. Most of the time you shall see "more on this later" – please don't get pissed, there is a separate tactics section for which this serves as a prelude.

The men between the posts

Marc-André ter Stegen (€12M): He has been a hot commodity for what seems like forever, even though he is only 22. The German keeper boasts an excellent passing ability and also has amazing reflexes. With a spectacular leap to cover up for his non-Courtois-like height and the agility to come off his line quickly, ter Stegen is our custodian for the future. Barcelona's goal seems to be in the safe hands of the sweeper-keeper.

Claudio Bravo (€12M): Coming off a successful campaign with Real Sociedad and the Mexican national team, Bravo adds much-needed experience to the goalkeeping department and to the team. Even though he is 31, he is a more-than-capable backup and will take charge while ter Stegen adapts to life at Catalunya. His passing range is unparalleled, even better than Víctor Valdés!!

Jordi Masip (Promoted): An excellent season as first-choice in the 'B' squad has been dutifully rewarded with a promotion to the first team...bench. Even though he will not get much playing time, he will learn a lot and hopefully get some playing time. The quickest and most agile of the three, he is certainly an upgrade over Oier Olazábal, with all due respect. One to

watch out for, and I would certainly be surprised to see him loaned out in January due to lack of playing time, given Luis Enrique's tendency to favor younger players.

A complete revamp of the Barcelona goalkeeper roster was certainly on the cards, but it doesn't get better than this. Even if the defense makes mistakes, which I'll get to in a minute, Culés won't have to hold their breath every time there is a one-on-one situation.

You still don't believe me that Bravo has a better passing range than Valdés? Take a look:

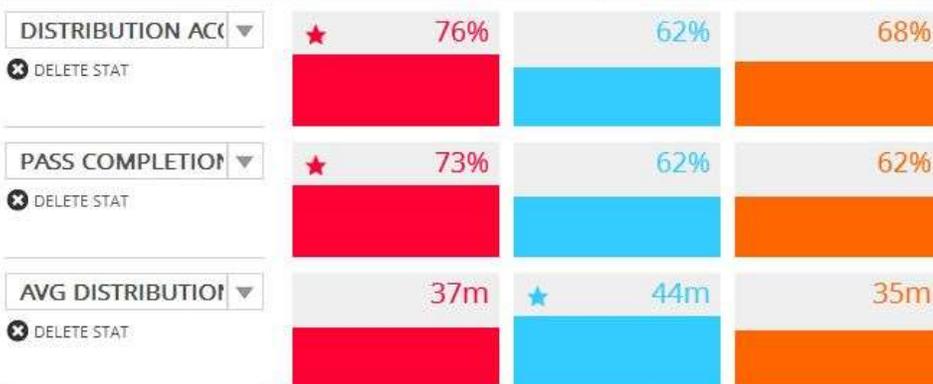
1. Choose the teams or players you want to compare by interacting with the cards.
2. Select which stat you want to compare from the drop-down menu.
3. Share with your friends.

Filter

- Show totals
- Show average per game
- Show per 90 metrics



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The new blessing of unicorns

The fact that "blessing" is the collective noun of unicorns is quite fitting.

Finally, Barcelona have loosened the purse strings for defenders. Three defenders, to be exact. Yes, my friends, THREE!! (Although one of them is an Alves-like right back, but anyways...)

Gerard Pique: In the 2011 Champions League final, Pique was top notch and, apart from his switching off that led to a goal, he led the backline well in the absence of Puyol. However, it has all gone downhill from there. I'm not going to get into all the Shakira jokes, but I think he is not just losing concentration, but his fitness is pretty poor too. Usually, teams have three top center backs, but the reason Barcelona has four is because Pique is currently a liability - whether he returns to his former glory remains to be seen. If Lucho plays him, it'll be because the coach seriously believes that Pique can improve on the pitch. Expect him to be benched quite frequently otherwise.

UPDATE: After the game against Villarreal, I have to say I am impressed with Pique's performance. It is safe to say that the squad has four top center backs.

Just look at the sheer quality of this tackling against Villarreal. He tackles AND plays a first-touch pass. Superb.





If you think that wasn't amazing and basically his job, take a look at this:



Yes, he heads the ball while ON THE GROUND.

Positions: CB

Drag and drop: I see him playing as a right-central, or on the right-hand side of a three-man defense.

Marc Bartra: Seriously, I feel so sorry for him. One of the best young center backs in the world in my opinion, and he barely gets a chance. For all the reasons I admire Tata Martino as a coach, I will never understand how he only made 15 starts in ALL competitions. Luis Enrique should trust him and give him a starting berth. He really deserves it.

Positions: CB/RB

Drag and drop: Same as Pique, but given his pace can also cover at right-back if a defensive option is needed.

Jeremy Mathieu (€20M): A controversial transfer in terms of transfer funds, but one that was needed nevertheless. He adds pace AND height to our defense. He will definitely give Pique a run for his money.

Positions: CB/LB

Drag and drop: He will either play as a left-central or on the left side of a three-man defense. Can cover for left back too if a defensive option is needed. In his days at Valencia, he played as a winger ahead of Alba, who played as a left-back. This is interesting to note, as it means that if Barcelona come up against a side looking to exploit the right flank, there is a possibility of playing with a dual-fullback partnership with a lot of chemistry. If you want proof of this, you will get it...soon.

Don't worry, he is class too!!







Although, that being said, he needs to work on clearances – one of the many clearance mistakes he made is below:





That could have been catastrophic...

Although, he is an attacking set-piece threat too.





Thomas Vermaelen (€10M + variables = €18.8M): What a bargain!! TEN million euros for a club captain!! Aside from the fact that he is injury-prone, his leadership skills and defending will be invaluable, and it'll be fun seeing someone else shouting at Pique for a change!! Honestly, given Barcelona's excellent fitness and physio team, we could see a revival of the old Vermaelen – the man with quick feet, a high leap, and plenty of goals.

Positions: CB/LB

Drag and drop: He will either play as a left-central or on the left side of a three-man defense. He can cover at left-back too, which he did while at Arsenal a couple of times.

Attack, attack, and never come back

It's time to roll out the full backs. I'm sorry, wing-backs. I'm sorry again, wingers.

Dani Alves: I could write an entire article about him, but there is no need to. He is staying for one more year anyway, and I see him as a mentor to Douglas rather than as a starter. His chemistry with Messi is all that keeps him in contention for the much coveted right back spot. He has lost his explosiveness, but we will get to that in a moment.

Positions: RB/RM

Drag and drop: Why is it that Barcelona employed a 4-3-2(3)/3-4-2(3) before they played a 2-5-2(3) against Elche with the ball? Why was Dani Alves in midfield and not playing as an out-and-out winger we see so frequently of him?



Notice the space in front of Alves and how further up the pitch Alba is.

It's because Dani Alves just doesn't have the stamina to run up and down the pitch for 90 minutes. Playing him in a more defensive role makes sense for two reasons: a) he adds more stability to the backline by minding his defensive duties (even though defending isn't exactly his strength) and b) he conserves his stamina for clear attacking situations.

Such as this one.

Messi gets the ball and dribbles it.



Notice how Alves is the HIGHEST-positioned player.

Realizing the four Elche players coming on to him, Messi chips the ball beautifully to Alves, who, like a winger, has held his line and then makes a run...



...but he is just marginally offside.

Don't forget, his chemistry with Messi is unparalleled. Look at his positioning when he crosses the ball first time to an open Messi against Villarreal, who heads the ball back to him (but the goalkeeper reaches the ball first).





However, his pace HAS decreased. Note that the 2008 Alves would run after the ball like a madman. Now, not so much. For example, in the game vs Villarreal, Busquets sees how clogged the midfield is and threads a long ball to Alves.





Believe me, Alves of old would have comfortably been able to cross that first time. However, being 31 years of age, you simply can't keep up that brand of pace any longer. As you'd expect, the ball goes out for a goal kick.



He still has a year left, and with his crossing aptitude declining, he could do himself and Barcelona a favor by leaving next year for pastures new. Until then though, expect Montoya and Douglas to start stepping up.

So, expect to see more of this:



That defending!!!

And less of this:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGk9aZaoBA8>

Montoya: The one and only defensive right-back. He could be the key to giving the defense some stability, especially given Jordi Alba's and Adriano's tendency to bomb forward. With the eventual departure of Alves, expect him to play a more prominent role on the right flank.

Positions: RB/LB

Drag and drop: Can play as a full-back on either flank. He played against Athletic Bilbao, so more on him in a separate article.

Douglas: I actually don't know much about him, but based on this tactical analysis, it looks like Barcelona have an Alves replacement. Whether he is quality or a bust, remains to be seen.

<http://aliveforfootball.com/blog/scout-report-barcelona-new-recruit-douglas-pereira/>

Additionally, for your reference, this interview highlights his progression from striker to full back. Yes, you read this right: STRIKER.

<http://www.fcbarcelona.com/football/first-team/detail/article/douglas-its-as-a-full-back-that-i-want-to-find-my-place-on-the-world-stage>

Alba: The speed, stamina and chemistry with Iniesta has made him a world class left-back. He is defending well too!! Nothing much to say, expect that with Alves leaving, Alba may be afforded a more attacking role on the left.

Positions: LB/LM

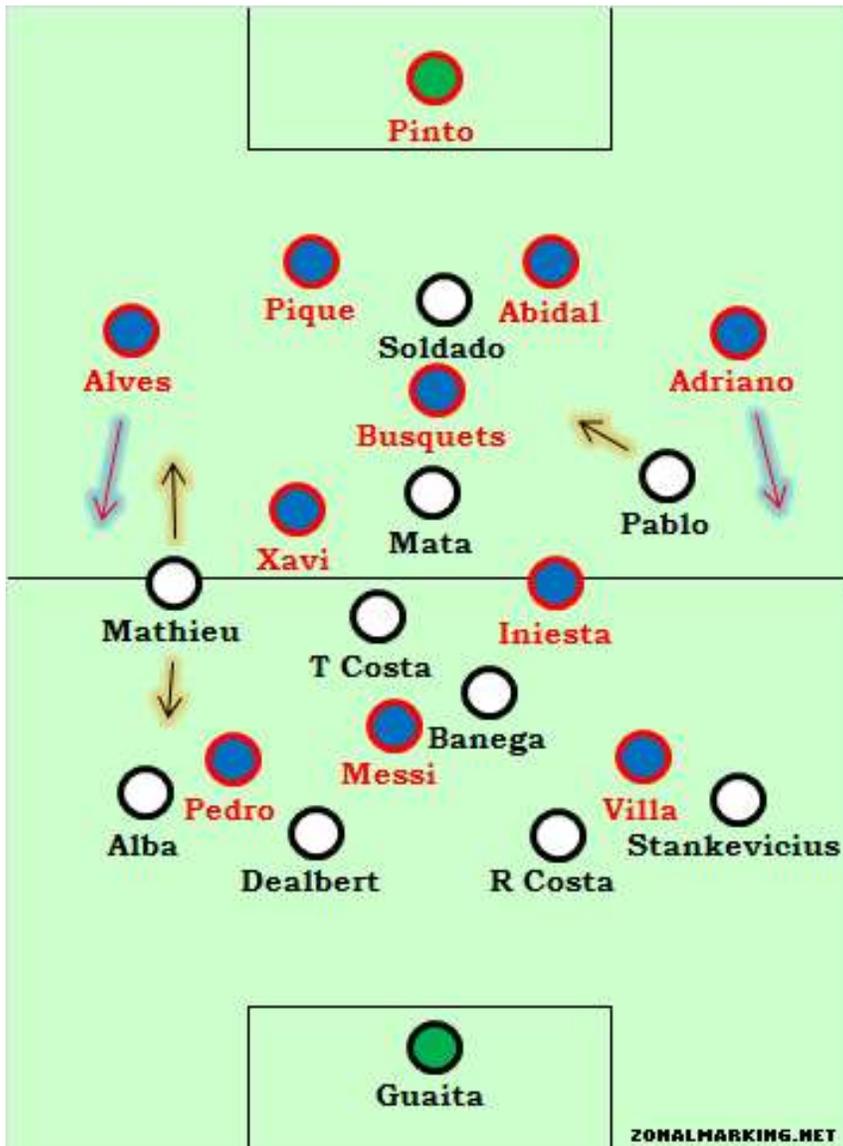
Drag and drop: His chemistry with Mathieu will be vital for Barcelona's defensive play. First choice left-back, no doubt!

Adriano: A reliable backup on either flank, he adds a goal scoring threat to the defense. However, he cannot be deployed as a typical winger – he is, by trade, a full-back (or, in Barcaspeak, a defensive wing-back).

Just take a look at Barcelona's structure against Valencia when they won 0-1 Barcelona (March 3, 2011).



Guardiola, realizing that Alves was being neutralized by the amazing Alba-Mathieu duo (again, more on their chemistry later), made changes in the 63rd minute.



Guess who scored the goal? Adriano.

Sometimes, he is used as a winger – but only so that the full-back can overlap effectively.

Again, against Valencia (Valencia 2-2 Barcelona, September 22, 2011), Alves was neutralized.



To break the Mathieu-Alba duo, Adriano came to the fore in the second half.



However, this was made ineffective by the introduction of Piatti, and the use of Alves as a center-back (never saw that coming!!).

Moral of the story? Play Adriano as left-back (right-back if required), and see him score golazos.

The team engine, VROOOOOM!!

Barcelona still boast quality and versatility in midfield. Proof? Xavi is on the bench. XAVI. The man who epitomized passing as an art is on the bench. That says it all.

Busquets: Not much can be said about the destroyer, who is one of the best in the world. Surprisingly, Busquets now has more license to go forward and create turnovers higher up the pitch. Just look at the goal he creates out of a mistimed pass.



Look at Busquets, he is a blur!!



A tackle-cum-pass leads to a turnover created – Messi receives the ball.



A brilliant first touch to caress the ball...



...two more to evade the Elche defense...



...and a shot which nutmegs the last defender in his path.



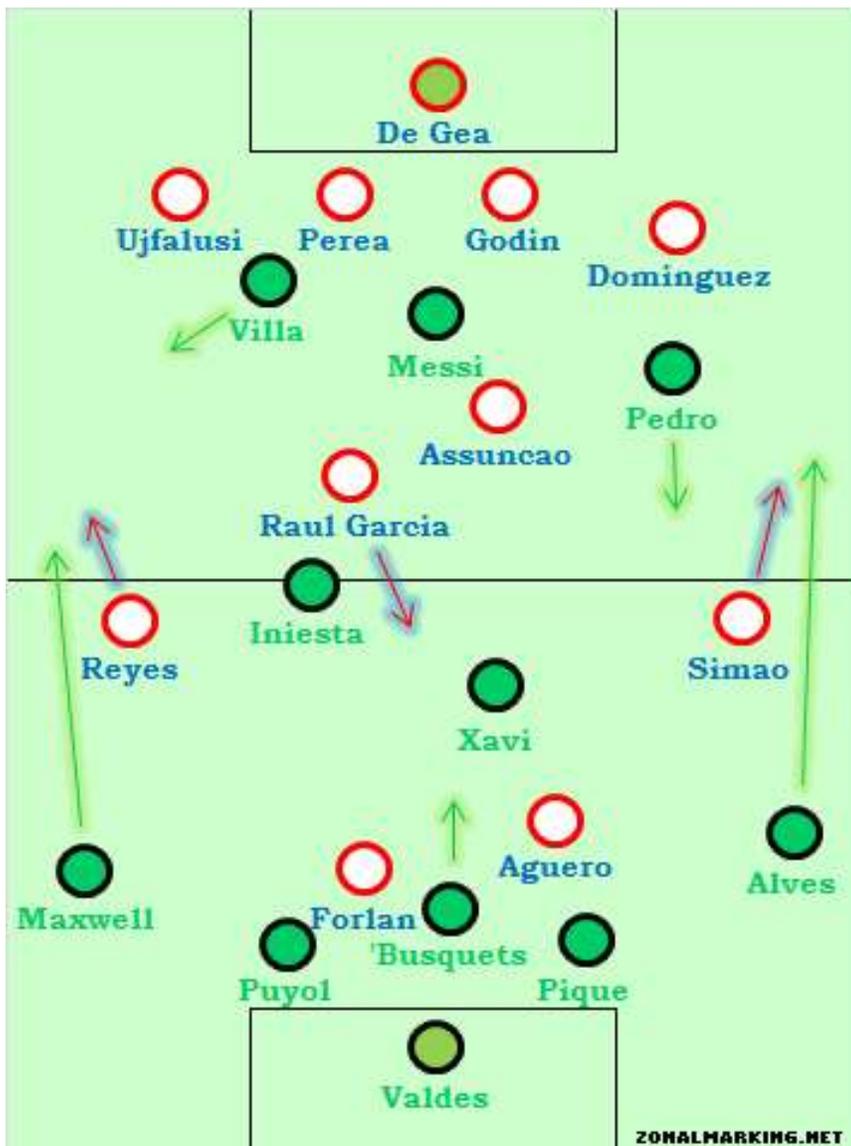
Time slows down as the goalkeeper watches, helplessly, the ball inching towards the net.



Yes Leo, we know you like scoring goals for fun!!

Positions: CDM

Drag and drop: He will play in the Busquets role as always. What is surprising to note is that before, he played the role of a modern center-half. (Atletico 1-2 Barcelona, September 20, 2010).



By playing more advanced without the ball, Busquets creates an interesting formation, and more on that later in the “pressing” section.

Mascherano: Why is he STILL playing center-back? There is a reason. Actually two: Bartra and speed. Not only is Bartra still developing in strength (15), Mascherano adds speed to the backline. He has the passing range and tackling ability to play as a center-back: lack of height may be a problem, though. I see him as a useful backup until Samper becomes pivotal to the team.

Positions: CDM/CB

Drag and drop: He will play as backup to Busquets in midfield, and to Bartra in defense. Expect him to feature more often than not, especially when Barcelona play a more physical opponent.

Sergi Roberto: There will be a separate section on him under tactics: he is an interesting case!!

Rakitic: WOW!! Who would have predicted Rakitic would play as well as he is doing now? Terrific stuff from him. Adds much-needed energy to the midfield.

Positions: CM

Drag and drop: The Xavi role is his for the taking. Because of Busquets' new role, Rakitic plays in a double-pivot with him. This brings more defensive stability to the team. Also, his versatility will be crucial for Barcelona. Take a look at his position in the first half with Sevilla against Barcelona (1-1, March 14, 2011):



In the second half, he drops back:



Nevertheless, he played both roles efficiently, and Barcelona had problems all night with the Croatian-Swiss. He should get as many minutes as possible.

UPDATE: After Mascherano was sent off, Rakitic played CDM as Busquets dropped into defense. While it was only a two-minute cameo, it demonstrates Lucho's willingness to tinker around with Rakitic in different positions.



Xavi: Age is just a number. While he has lost his pace and stamina, and is not the most physical of players, he has not lost his eye for a pass – or space, for that matter. Neither has his agility let him down. We will analyze his role in more detail when we look at the Villarreal match, which Barcelona won 1-0 at El Madrigal.

Positions: CM

Drag and drop: Xavi shall play a bit-part role in the Xavi role. Not many times you can say that!!

His work off the pitch may be more important, though. By staying an extra year, he could potentially mentor Rakitic (and Sergi Roberto if needed) on the intricacies of his role.



I just had to put those two pictures in (both were in the same minute) – Xavi's expression is priceless!!

Iniesta: Iniesta without Xavi is like bread without the butter. Nevertheless, expect Iniesta to play a lesser role too. He isn't getting any younger and is frequently injured. What is most pressing to Lucho about Iniesta is that without him, Barcelona struggle to create chances; furthermore, there is no able deputy for Iniesta.

Positions: CM

Drag and drop: Iniesta shall play actively in the Iniesta role, but expect him to be frequently sidelined and rested for important games.

You might see this happening a lot:



Messiah and the supporting cast

Messi: Not much needs to be said, except for the fact that you can expect him to be an automatic starter. Plus, his passion and desire to work hard for the team is back. I have never seen him argue with a referee:



Positions: CF

Drag and drop: Free role. He can do whatever he wants, press whenever he wants, and yet still stick to the rotational movement expected of Barcelona's style of play. While it may seem as if Messi covers less ground as compared to other players, he actually runs as much, if not more, as compared to his teammates. Drifting in between the lines, creating space and drawing defenders towards him needs lot of work without the ball.



Yes, Messi is running after the ball. Don't see that very often!!

Rafinha: One of the more versatile players in the squad, and a person Lucho knows from his stint in charge at Celta Vigo. The younger of the Alcantara brothers seems to be making headlines for his high energy and physical game, even though he isn't necessarily tall. An attacking version of Mascherano, or a physical version of Messi with surprisingly good dribbling skills, is what one can categorize him as.

Positions: CF/LW/CM/RW

Drag and drop: A substitute for Messi when required, a not-so-amazing-but-still-capable replacement for Iniesta, and an energetic winger. He is, by far, the most tactically ambiguous player, simply because the one position he is perfect for is taken up by a certain Leo Messi. Expect him to be trained by Lucho to play a more attacking midfield role a la Iniesta – there isn't enough depth in that position anyway.

Neymar: The tricky winger has finally found his goal scoring boots and is even playing some fantastic passes. Expect him to nail down the left wing spot this year.

Positions: LW/CF

Drag and drop: Left winger, and the most like-for-like replacement for El Pulga.

Suarez: The third and final piece of the Holy Trinity jigsaw puzzle. Barcelona are missing him – his intelligent movement, his height, strength and stamina too. Expect him to bite into the hopes of his opponents.

Positions: RW

Drag and drop: Right handed striker.

Pedro: An able substitute. Really not much to say after that. He offers energy and pace and width whenever necessary.

Positions: LW/RW

Drag and drop: Should man either flank with marked proficiency whenever asked to do so.

Whew!! Got through that!!

(For your reference, transfer fees are below.)

http://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/embed_code/38597191#

Last, but definitely my favorite part of the article, is the tactical analysis of Lucho's Barcelona side. It's actually quite interesting to note that Barcelona have employed such varied tactics in the past three games. I shall talk about Bilbao in my next post, but the Elche and Villarreal games shall be heavily scrutinized as a part of this tactical analysis.

Depth Chart

Bold means starting spot, normal means for stop gap/temporary measures. Italics means not recommended and youth players would rather come in. Green highlight is Sergi Roberto, Yellow highlight means youth player from Barcelona B listed in the Champions League B-team.

Positions below the red lines are for tactical purposes only, they are not starting positions and are technically not a part of the Depth Chart.

Squad Depth Chart								
GK	ter Stegen	Bravo	Masip					
RB	Alves	Montoya	Douglas	Adriano	Bartra	Ié	<i>Diagne</i>	
RCB	Bartra	Pique	<i>Mascherano</i>	Ié	Diagne			
LCB	Mathieu	Vermaelen	<i>Adriano</i>	<i>Diagne</i>				
LB	Alba	Adriano	Mathieu	Montoya	Vermaelen	Grimaldo		
DM	Busquets	Mascherano		Samper	<i>Rakitic</i>	<i>Diagne</i>	Ié	
RCM	Rakitic	Xavi		<i>Samper</i>				
LCM	Iniesta		<i>Rafinha</i>	<i>Halilovic</i>				
CF	Messi	Neymar	Rafinha	<i>Suarez</i>				
RW/RS	Suarez	Pedro	Sandro	Munir	Messi	Halilovic	Adama	<i>Rafinha</i>
LW/LS	Neymar	Pedro	Munir	<i>Iniesta</i>	<i>Rafinha</i>	<i>Messi</i>	<i>Adama</i>	<i>Halilovic</i>
<hr/>								
LM	Alba	Adriano	Grimaldo	<i>Mathieu</i>				
RM	Douglas	Alves						
ST	Suarez	Munir	Sandro	<i>Pique</i>				
Enganche	Messi	<i>Halilovic</i>	<i>Neymar</i>					
AM	Iniesta	Rakitic	Halilovic	Rafinha				

This is a fantastic squad. Competitive, deep, AND still the youth players have a chance to prove themselves and break into the first team.

Let's jump right in.

1. A story of dedication and loyalty

Remember how we were talking about Sergi Roberto and that he was an “interesting case”? This is the time to talk about him.

You may be thinking why Roberto is not mentioned in the depth chart. It’s simple really. Roberto is not a typical Barcelona player. Seriously, as ironic as it sounds, he is not the dazzling magician. He is a workhorse, a box to box physical machine, and technically sound.

What I would love to see, however, is Roberto take on a Keita role.

But what exactly is the Keita role? And why is it so important? Let's roll back the years...

Keita was the only new arrival in 2008 who lasted the entire Guardiola era and left in his shadow.

Keita was a hardworking, physical and selfless midfielder, but could play almost any position on the pitch. Adding steel and energy to midfield, he became a Guardiola favorite.

He would sometimes come on as a substitute of a winger to press the opposing full backs, which served a twofold purpose. Not only did he limit their attacking threat, he would help stretch the play, crucial for Barcelona's style of play. He was also a threat in the air and as a goal scorer, making him a very deadly part-time winger.

He would come on as a substitute for one of the wingers, such as Villa in 2010-12, if the score was in Barcelona's favor.

Don't believe me? Here's footage from the Champions League Final in 2011, which Barcelona won 3-1.

Villa comes off for Keita.



His first touch of the ball is fittingly a header.



Look how, without the ball, he is quite close to Manchester United's right back, Antonio Valencia.



However, being a defensive midfielder by trade, he would always play in place of either Busquets or, more frequently, Iniesta, who was quite injury prone before (or would play on the wing as an extra attacker).



Arsenal 2-2 Barcelona. March 31, 2010.



Sevilla 2-3 Barcelona. May 9, 2010.

Sergi Roberto, like Keita, is physical, a defensive midfielder by trade, technically brilliant, and has high levels of stamina. However, Sergi Roberto is the better passer of the two, having been brought up at La Masia. He is also a better dribbler.

This dribbling is just pure class:



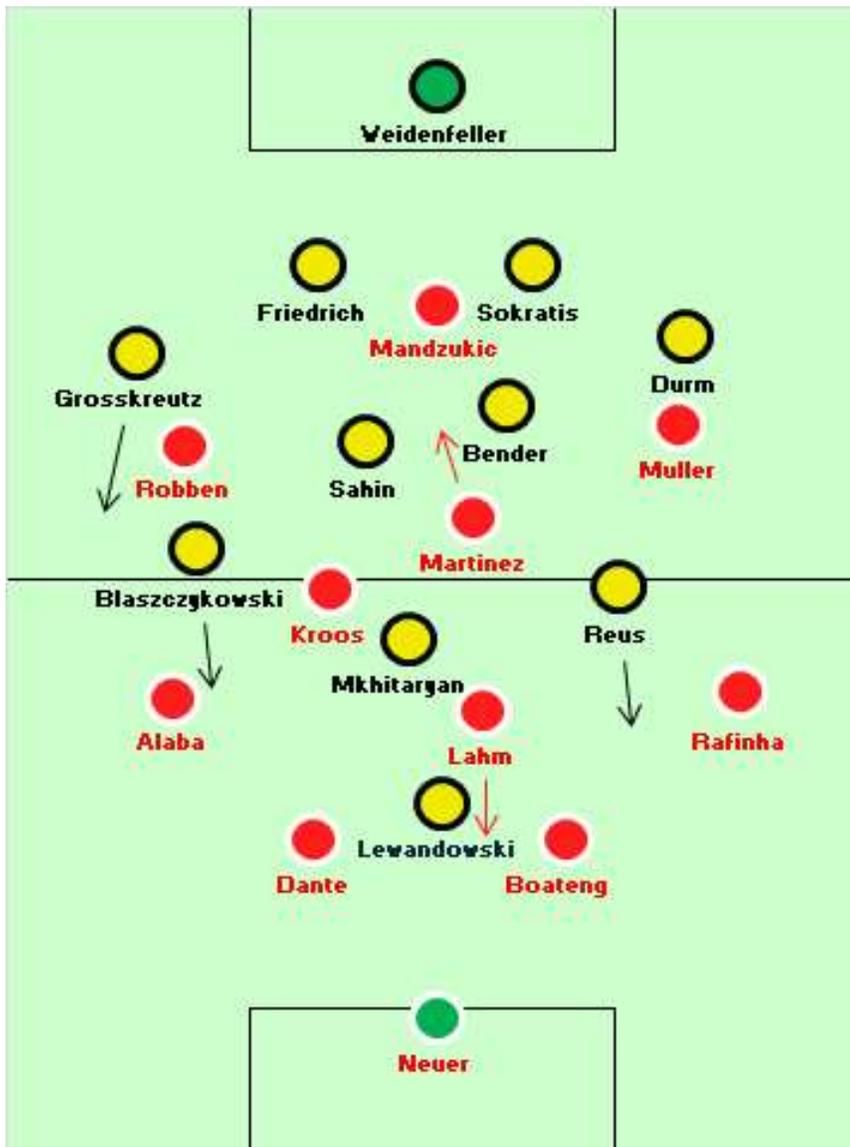
Notice how far away the player Roberto evades is.

I don't believe in calling people "the next" great player – its unnecessary hype and, anyway, each player is unique. However, I admit his skill sets resemble both Keita and, to a certain extent, Flamini.

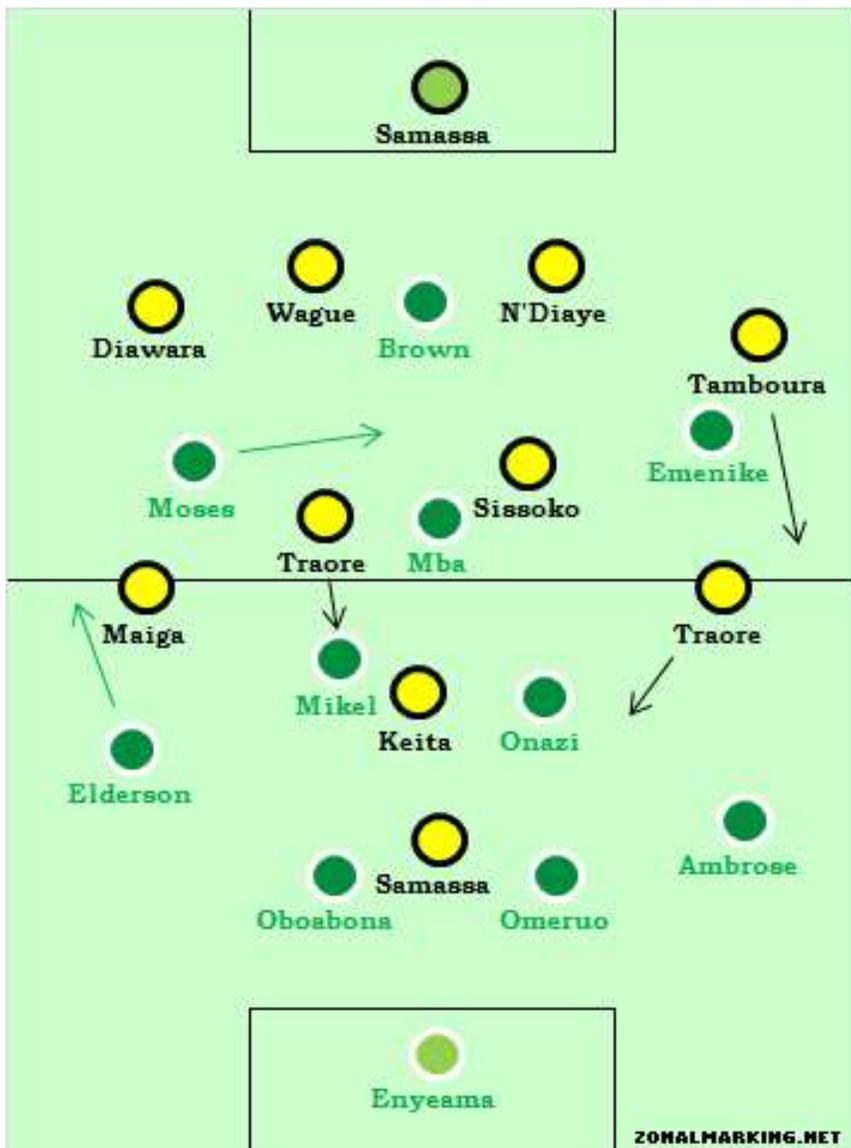
Something about Roberto makes him unique. Is it because he can play in a double pivot, a Xavi role or even an attack-minded Iniesta role? Is it his work ethic and box-to-box physical style? It is all of these, and more. He is loyal, like Keita, to the manager. Whenever called upon, without any fuss, he plays the role he is asked to do.

Another role that Sergi Roberto *could* be asked to do – one which he will excel at more naturally – would be as an advanced destroyer.

In Dortmund's 3-0 loss to Bayern (November 26, 2013), Javi Martinez played as an advanced destroyer which pushed back the defensive double-pivot of Bender and Sahin.

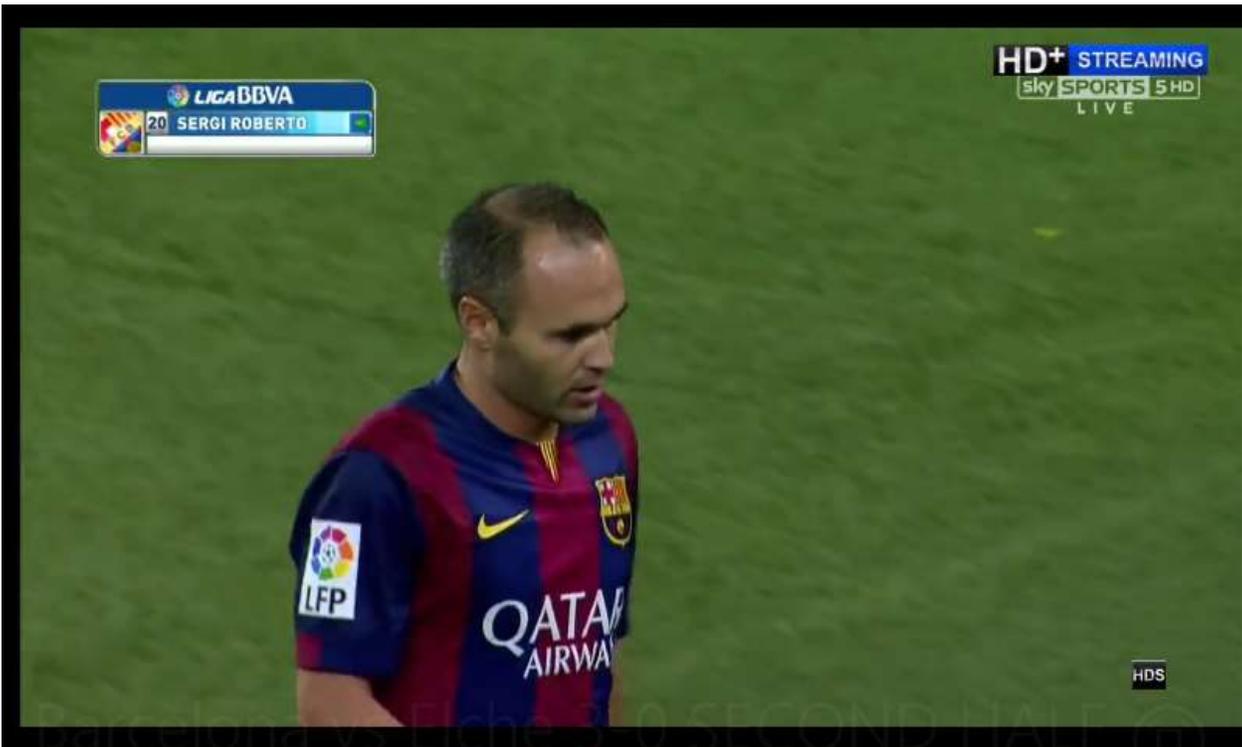


Keita has played this role before too. (Nigeria 4-1 Mali. February 7, 2013.)



Sergi Roberto could be the key to unlocking physical defensive midfielder pivots. You would expect Rafinha to play this role; however Rafinha's strengths are in attack and not in defense. Besides, Roberto is more tactically disciplined and even gives players like Busquets and Rakitic the license to roam forward.

Iniesta is replaced by Roberto:



Roberto has the ball in this picture. Notice how far ahead Rakitic and Busquets are.



Another example:



Keita, like Sergi Roberto now, would fill up the green boxes as shown in the depth chart. Additionally, Roberto's versatility means he can fill in as a right-back, but I think there is enough depth in that position.

Alternately, Luis Enrique can achieve the same task by bringing off the striker for Pedro instead, whose pace might actually help him in his defensive work.

In fact, he has done this already.





Pedro is a full back. Wait, what? Oh yeah, Pedro is a full back. But that's only because behind him is the right back he is supposed to track.

Mind you, Pedro is 27, Roberto is 22 and still has time to develop in the Busquets or Xavi mold. However, Pedro is just not as physical and naturally defensive as Roberto. It's an interesting dilemma. Should Pedro have a dual role as an attacker-cum-super-sub-defender to accommodate the younger player? Or is Sergi Roberto not good enough to replace the greats in midfield?

2. To press or not to press, that is the question...

When a team applies suffocating pressure, they sure do win trophies. Applying this pressure efficiently requires "hunting in packs" - the team must do it together and coordinate it well. Lucho's game plan without the ball entails:

- The wingers track the opposing fullbacks without the ball, limiting their attacking runs. (Just like Pep)
- Messi presses if the ball is near him, (Just like Pep) whereas the rest of the team create two banks of four each without the ball (wait, what?)

Let us analyze this last point a little more in detail. Usually, Barcelona play with a true winger and a striker as wingers, for example, Neymar-Suarez and Pedro-Munir. Without the ball, they drop into midfield, to create a fluid 4-4-2/4-4-1-1 or a 4-1-4-1/4-5-1 formation.



Lines don't get tighter than this

For example, in the game against Villarreal, Barcelona conceded a set-piece, and look at how high Sergio Busquets is positioned.



A few seconds later, another set piece, and Busquets realizes he needs to help tighten the lines. And so the ranks of four become harder and harder to penetrate, set-piece after set-piece.





Even then, Villarreal play a clever long ball, which opens up the defense really well.



Conceding a corner, Barcelona gift Villarreal the best chance of the night.

It starts with dos Santos playing a pass to Cani.



Cani dribbles and passes it back.



Dos Santos delivers a cross to the far post.



And Alves looks on as the ball hits the knee of Victor Ruiz, the best defender of that match and formerly from La Masia, and goes out of play.



What does this mean? It simply means Barcelona still need to work on defense and tightening the lines a la Atletico Madrid in the defensive phase. (And, of course, Alves needs to work on his defending, or Lucho could start showing more serious interest in Douglas or Montoya).

As Lucho fittingly said, *when we don't have the ball we're eleven defenders, and when we have it we're eleven forwards (16)*.

This "hunting in packs" has, for the first time, arrived at Barcelona:



Maybe this will make you feel proud about Barcelona's pressing:



Or this:





3. *Attack, attack, attack*

The traditional attack of Barcelona has always been two wingers who stretch the play and Messi who plays between the lines. However, this has become ineffective. Why?

1. Messi has less space to explode into.
2. Defenses are focusing their energy at keeping Barcelona out of the penalty box, in the hope for squeezing out a point.
3. Wingers usually make runs behind the defense – how can wingers do that if there is no one to give that incisive pass?

Messi in his early days – 12/13 years old played as an Enganche (Argentinean, in Spanish it is called a mediapunta), which means as a traditional number 10 – a fast, incisive player with an eye for goal and excellent playmaking abilities. Frank Rijkaard instated him as a left-winger and then shifted him onto the right wing, seeing that Messi could cut inside and shoot Ronaldo-style. Then Guardiola shifted him again to the center, this time as a false-9. However, defenses can easily nullify this tactical change by simply letting Messi come on to the opposition defense instead of the other way round. The reason Messi is “back to his best” per se is because of another positional change – back to his Enganche position.

Even getting space on the right wing has become difficult. Below, Alves sees Messi is free and passes the ball, but Messi, barely having got the ball, is surrounded by defenders:



If you want a more literary way of describing this “free role”, here is an excerpt from “Football in Sun and Shadow”, a book by the great Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano, who puts it beautifully:

He is born in a cradle of straw and a tin hut, and he comes to this world embracing the ball. He knows how to play as soon as he learns how to walk. The ball seeks him, it recognises him, it needs him. In the bosom of his foot, it rests and slumbers. He takes the shine off the ball and makes it talk, and in that two-person chat millions of mute figures converse.

(Not exactly relevant to this article, but it is so accurate as far as Messi is concerned that I was tempted to put this in)

By dropping deeper from a false 9 to a no 10, Messi has more space available to either play an incisive pass or run towards goal himself. Additionally, the wingers are playing much narrower, almost like strikers, so that Messi’s passes are shorter and more accurate. This tactical change also allows the wingbacks to bomb forward into space instead of another player.

Additionally, the full backs are now facing more one-on-one dribbling situations – something which Jordi Alba (specifically him) thrives in:





Coming back though, the free role gives Messi the flexibility to start from anywhere and end up at the center of the box:





That pass took out six defenders. Six!!

Take this example for instance: Messi, realizing the tight defense is collapsing onto him, plays a long ball to Alba (a bit counterintuitive to my point about the strikers playing narrow, but note that Messi can only do this as the two strikers draw opponents to mark them). Alba, helped by his unreal pace, plays a first touch cross (which amounts to nothing). Notice how, in the last picture, there are five players in the box.







Eleven attackers indeed!!

A better example: Messi lays the ball in the path of Munir. He, in turn, tried passing to Rafinha, who, well, wasn't there.





Last, and best example of how one pass can evade the entire defense:





In Messi's new role, we can truly appreciate his playmaking abilities which usually go under the radar. Expect this trend of gutsy through balls to become regular and anonymous with Messi and Barcelona's evolving style of play.

The reason why strikers are positioned so close to the box is so that they are in more potent scoring positions:







That ball is a blur!!! (Took me a lot of time to get that screenshot!)

Or even this (note how much space Neymar has):



However, one thing that Lucho will need to work on is training his wingers to shoot first time:







Sure, that tackle was an arguable penalty, but Pedro was miles ahead and should have shot directly instead of pulling back.

Finally, the advantage of this new change in attack means that Neymar can interchange more easily with Messi:



Remember that Neymar can play the passes that Messi can too:





Amazing pass, to be honest, and just look at it from another angle.



Note Sandro's positioning – he carefully holds his line and is ALWAYS looking at the right back (no 2 – Mario Gaspar).

4. *Putting the pieces together*

Before the season started, there were media reports suggesting an unusual 4-3-3 formation, which could be broken down into a fluid 4-3-1-2/4-2-1-1-2. In fact, BarcaBlaugranes wrote an article about it too.

<http://www.barcablaugranes.com/2014/7/18/5915331/suarez-messi-ney-mar-tactics-formation>

Interestingly, while not clearly distinct, Barcelona has been playing the exact same formation in their first two matches.

(Not too dissimilar from the traditional 4-3-3, but it does involve a little shifting around.)

What you would expect:



A little tinkering, and voila:



In the attacking phase, Barcelona tend to push their full backs up. However, interestingly, Alba is higher up the pitch than Alves (usually), given Alves' loss of pace and stamina which was touched upon earlier. Additionally, Busquets may or may not drop back into defense, resulting in a cross of many formations.

For example, against Elche, Busquets drops back to create a 3-4-3, and then 20 seconds later is the highest positioned midfielder (2-5-3/2-3-5):



Against Elche:



2-4-4?

We have talked in much depth about the defensive phase; however, there is one point to add. The 4-4-2/4-2-4 is an interesting pressing tactic: it allows four attackers to press four opposition defenders. In fact, it was Guardiola's favored formation WITH the ball too, when things were not in Barca's favor.

At the start of the second half against Villarreal:



In cases when Barcelona drop back, the 4-4-2/5-3-2 works perfectly, like it did against Elche (even with 10 men), whereas the 4-1-4-1/4-5-1 was ruthlessly exposed by Villarreal, as it was not implemented properly. In sum? Barcelona still have a LOT of defensive work to do if they want to succeed. The last thing we as fans want to see is situations like this:



I have been thinking about Barcelona's 1-0 loss to Atletico (April 11, 2014), when Barcelona were ridiculously poor all round and were lucky to have conceded just a solitary goal.



There were three key points in this match: Gabi pressing Busquets, Raul Garcia against Jordi Alba and Atletico's 4-4-2/4-6-0 counterattacking formation.

Let us focus on the last two. Goalkeepers, if faced with no option, will obviously kick the ball to the tallest player on the pitch. Since Garcia is 6' and Alba is definitely much shorter, Courtois kicked the ball to Raul Garcia more than any other player. Garcia won all his aerial duels with Alba.

Not only does this signal that a tall full back is sometimes a tactical necessity, it also underlines the defensive duties the wingbacks cannot ignore. Staying back and helping the defense first is the key to defensive success as far as the wingbacks are concerned.

The second part is the 4-6-0. Atletico pressed high up the pitch like crazy and Barcelona were simply outsmarted. If Gabi wasn't on Busquets, David Villa was. The strikers dropped back to help in the pressing by overloading the midfield. Usually, this is Barcelona's strong point: they play best when the midfield plays best – on and off the ball. Not only is it already a part of the system, it works in tandem with the 4-4-2 "dropping back" formation. Expect this as a regular feature.

Finally, as we said before, Lucho has a diverse and high quality squad. Sometimes, a more physical side may be named; other times, Barcelona may want to focus on squeezing a goalless draw out of a tough away game by using midfield dominance. I cannot say who should start and who shouldn't, because simply put I'm not Luis Enrique. It is his decision to

play whomsoever he wishes. For example, if he feels that he wants added height in the left back position, he can play Mathieu or Vermaelen. However, I have tried my best to give some specific analysis based on the first two games: choosing between two players ain't my job!!

This has been a LONG article. It has run for more than 70 pages on Microsoft Word (narrow margins, no less), not to mention hundreds of screenshots of real time action unused and taking up unnecessary space in my OneDrive cloud service, and about 10000+ words. It has taken me an entire month, and I better get back to my SAT Subject Tests and my college applications. But it has been amazing fun doing this. I have never looked at a team with such cynical scrutiny ever. What I plan to do in the future is a monthly, or once-in-two-months article on general tactical and player trends, in the same style as this article but obviously not as long.

In the next article, I will also be touching upon Bela Guttmann's three year rule too, the youngsters and the "false 5" role too, so stay tuned!!

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