

## **“The money gamble” aka the philosophy change, part 2**

Hello and welcome to part 2 of “The Money Gamble” series. If you haven’t read part 1, I strongly advise you to do so.

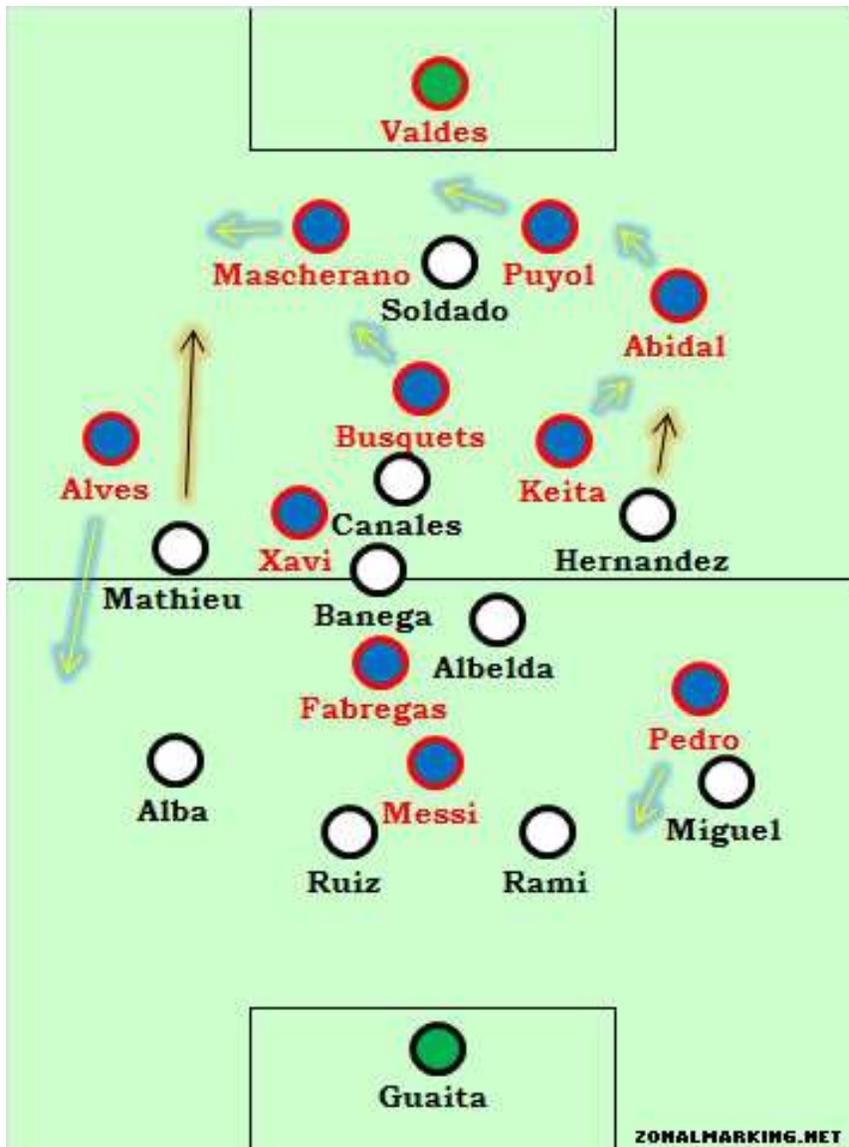
In this article, I will focus on things that I failed to touch upon in the first edition, as well as some more analysis on recent fixtures. Keep in mind that this edition will be slightly more opinionated in nature (and longer...).

### **Looking back into the glory days**

Pep Guardiola brought a lot of success to Barcelona using a squad formula that was unique at the time: a group of about 15, first team quality versatile players who can play in different positions.

This formula had helped Barcelona during the Guardiola era; however, in the 2011-12 season, Guardiola was criticized for too much experimentation.

(Valencia 2-2 Barcelona. September 22, 2011)



Because Alba was tracking Alves' runs, Mathieu was allowed to bomb forward. This dragged the entire team out of shape. Mascherano covered the right flank, Puyol covered him, Abidal covered Puyol, Keita covered Abidal, Busquets had to help out in defense and Xavi was isolated with no passing options. Just imagine how just one experiment of playing Dani 1 vs 2 with Mathieu and Alba left the entire team stranded.

After the second half, with Barcelona behind Guardiola shifted to a 3-4-3. He realized that Alves was not good enough to take on two defenders – he needed someone ahead of him, a wide player, who can come inside and open up space.



Barcelona scored and hung out for a draw, but the result could well have been in Valencia's favor.

Another example of over-innovation came against what was effectively the title decider for Barcelona. If they lost, Real Madrid would win the title.

(Barcelona 1-2 Real Madrid. April 22, 2012)



Guardiola played two proper wingers to stretch the play AND overloaded the midfield. Either Guardiola had less faith in his attacking roster, and/or he wanted to deploy Iniesta in an advanced position to overload the midfield and pressure Khedira and Alonso.

While it may seem silly to play an attacking player in a destroyer role, advanced destroyer or not, Guardiola had no physical attacking midfielders in the Yaya Toure mold and was faced with no other option than to play Iniesta.



Even the addition of Sanchez as a striker, allowing Messi to drop deep and have more space, didn't work.

Guardiola was criticized for playing players out of position. However, consider the two circumstances:

- Opposition teams started loving to park the bus against Barcelona. A 5-0 demolition of Real Madrid, for example, will never happen ever again. Teams don't want possession. Teams don't want to play a high defensive line, or pressure Barcelona to concede the ball. Teams are happy to see Barcelona reduced to a passing side with no penetration. In his final season, Guardiola didn't have many physical players who could make a difference.
- Guardiola had been at Barcelona for more than three years. This may not seem like much, but it is vital to understand Bela Guttmann's rule before drawing conclusions:

## The rule of three

Bela Guttmann, the famous Hungarian manager, once said: *During the first season, the coach gets to work quietly, the second is more difficult, and the third one is fatal* (1).

His philosophy centered upon attacking football. His influence in South American football due to his stint at Sao Paolo led to the birth of the 4-2-4, a formation that led to Brazil's 1958 World Cup victory.

(Brazil 5-2 Sweden. June 29, 1958)



Coming back, what he meant by the third year being fatal was that after achieving so much success, players tend to become bored and/or complacent and opponents start to work out counter-strategies. Additionally, if teams (like Barcelona) play a high pressing game, players can burn out due to physical as well as mental exhaustion. Coupled with the fact that Guardiola only had 15 core team players, supplemented by versatile players who filled specific roles, it is no surprise that Guardiola only won the Copa del Rey in his final year in charge (in 2012).

To counter this problem, Luis Enrique has a larger squad, but uses his rotational policy to good effect so that players are fresh and prepared for every match. But more on that later.

## Lucho, the people's manager

Luis Enrique himself was a versatile player and, therefore, has brought diversity to the squad. As a player, he would, according to Mourinho, play in *midfield, right wing, left wing, No.10, centre-forward, right-back, left-back - he was even capable of playing in goal* (2).

Just look at the versatility of Enrique's new signings:

<b>GK</b>	<b>ter Stegen</b>	<b>Bravo</b>	<b>Masip</b>
<b>RB</b>	<b>Douglas</b>		
<b>LCB</b>	<b>Mathieu</b>	<b>Vermaelen</b>	
<b>LB</b>	Mathieu	Vermaelen	
<b>DM</b>	<i>Rakitic</i>		
<b>RCM</b>	<b>Rakitic</b>		
<b>LCM</b>	<i>Rafinha</i>		
<b>CF</b>	<b>Rafinha</b>	<i>Suarez</i>	
<b>RW/RS</b>	<b>Suarez</b>	<i>Rafinha</i>	
<b>LW/LS</b>	<i>Rafinha</i>		
<b>LM</b>	<i>Mathieu</i>		
<b>RM</b>	Douglas		
<b>ST</b>	Suarez		
<b>AM</b>	Rakitic	Rafinha	

*Bold means preferred position, normal means for stop gap/temporary measures. Italics means not recommended and youth/other players would rather come in.*

*Positions below the red lines are for tactical purposes only, they are not starting positions...yet.*

Just 6 outfield players and 3 goalkeepers, and yet the tactical possibilities are endless. This theory is further exacerbated by the extension of Roberto's contract (on which an entire segment was written in my previous article), and the possibility of playing Pedro as a full back. Yes, as a full back.

<http://www.sport-english.com/en/news/barca/pedro-would-play-full-back-for-enrique-3420224>

Let's just take a moment to reflect on the team as a group of people. Forget tactics and ability and whatnot. It is incredibly easy to forget that the players have their own personality and their own way of playing football.

Just by analyzing the recent quotes of Luis Enrique, it is clear that he is focusing on the players more than on tactics – take a look:

On Piqué: *his attitude is wonderful. I love the way he behaves. He's so optimistic, such a good person. He is in perfect condition to help us* (3).

On Luis Suárez: *He's training as if he was playing tomorrow. He makes a huge contribution to training sessions, and to matches too. He's settled into the group and is fully adapted. He's a very expressive person and it's contagious. He was a very good signing. And if we can already tell that now, imagine what he'll be like when he starts playing* (4).

On being the manager of Barcelona: *I have to be loyal to the way I work, to the way I view football, and that's what I have to do with my players: impose my view of life and football, to go to different stadiums and represent a unique and incredible Club, and prove to them that they are in the best profession in the world. I have to take advantage of the complicity that I have for being a former footballer and get the best out of my players* (5).

*A manager is a leader. He needs to demonstrate knowledge when it comes to managing the group, the egos, the personalities, and motivation* (6).

It is clear that rarely does he ever talk about tactics – and when he does, he talks simple:

On the 1-0 victory against APOEL: *We found it hard to make the right choices over the final metres. We have great, quality players but we didn't get through on goal for a variety of reasons. We weren't at our best over the final metres. We weren't moving the ball around fast enough.*

*They put ten players behind the ball. It's not easy to attack a team like that, but they did create some danger. We scored from a set piece and we're working on those, so I'm glad it came off ... We managers worry when things don't go to plan. These aren't easy games, APOEL played a serious game ... We'll be showing the players what they need to get better. We can't settle for this, we have to play better. I am sure we can make even better players of the players we have* (7).

On Messi after the victory against Athletic Bilbao: *Messi is not just the best player in the world for the goals he scores, or for his assists, but for everything," Luis Enrique said. "He is the best player in the world even in defense, that is the perfect version of Messi. Messi is outside all praise.*

*He does things you do not see even in Oliver and Benji [a childrens cartoon], or the Playstation, what he does touches the impossible. We have got used to it, but it is a delight and a privilege to have the best player in the world in your team. Without a doubt* (8).

He seems to be focusing more on motivating players and pressing than on anything else!!

But this is probably a good thing – he has total control of the dressing room and can form a team rather than a group of individuals filling up his roster:

*Will I go hard on the players? I don't know what you mean by that. I'm positive, always positive. I want to help the players because we need to an all-encompassing job on the pitch. Players tend to have an individual focus and my objective is to make them think collectively. We need to communicate. I will be very demanding in my role* (6).

That is key – not just BE collective, but THINK collective. For example, knowing not just that a player is behind you, but also how much. That on-field collectiveness is what will make Barcelona less Messi-dependent and will help the diminutive Argentinean play without too much pressure on his shoulders, no matter who his strike partner is.

This will also help in pressing. Barcelona play with so much rotational movement, it is difficult to assign man-to-man marking. Therefore, if, for example, Xavi has just lost the ball up field to player X, he will be the first line of defense and the rest of the players will scatter – one or two will press X with Xavi, the next four or five will man mark the players closest to player X, and so on. This scattering requires split second decision making, and requires intense practice, energy and focus. Enrique has already made it clear that fitness is first and this will surely have a marked effect on Barcelona's gameplay.

### **Coming back to tactics...**

My last article was so long that I mistakenly forgot to touch on one very important aspect of the Barcelona system – the goalkeeper.

#### *The false 5*

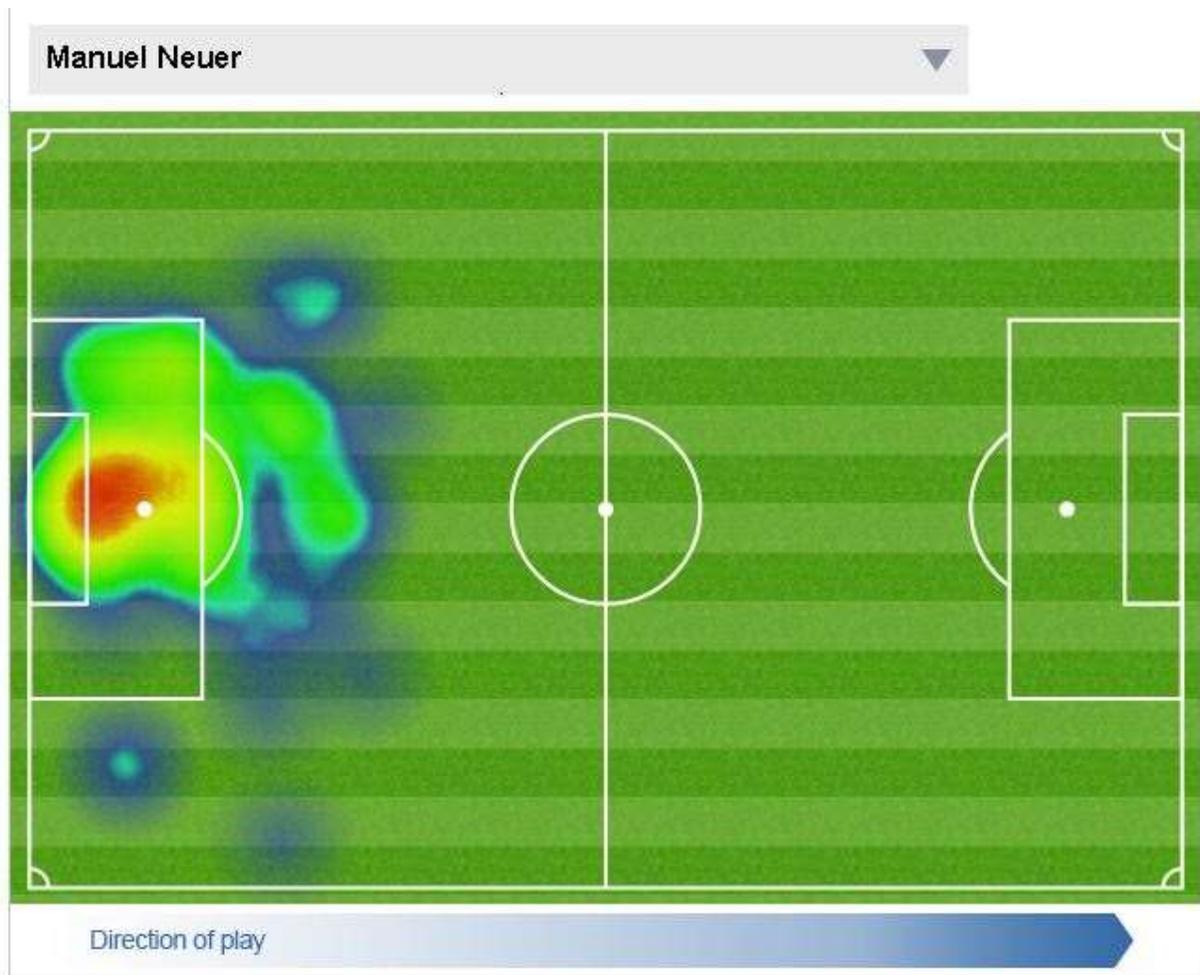
If you have watched Germany vs Algeria in the World Cup, your heart may have skipped a beat a couple of times – six, to be exact.

Just watch Manuel Neuer clear up long ball after long ball that eludes the German defense:

[http://www.reddit.com/r/soccer/comments/29ii9p/manuel\\_neuers\\_outfield\\_clearances\\_and\\_saves\\_in/](http://www.reddit.com/r/soccer/comments/29ii9p/manuel_neuers_outfield_clearances_and_saves_in/)

(If gifs are not your thing, use this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEsmYcF6lrc>)

And take a look at the heat map of Neuer:



Just notice how he covers a THIRD of the pitch. What this proves is that having a sweeper keeper is essential when *the back four plays a high line...[sweeper keepers] have to react quickly and play as an extra defender and stifle the opposition forwards, if they beat the offside trap... which automatically makes him a 'fifth defender' (9).*

For a keeper to fulfill this role, he needs to be good with his feet and should have the vision to read the game.

Advantages: It allows the defenders to maintain a high line and support the attack while with the ball.

Disadvantages: A slight error can result in conceding a goal. Even Manuel Neuer nearly conceded twice while picking up 50-50 balls.

This evolution seems to support Luis Enrique's statement that *when we don't have the ball we're eleven defenders, and when we have it we're eleven forwards (10).*

Note his words carefully – 11 defenders/forwards, not 10 defenders/forwards and one goalkeeper. The goalkeeper will be crucial to starting build up play, playing long, diagonal balls and sweeping up loose balls.

Claudio Bravo and ter Stegen have some of the best passing ranges around, and they make up for their lack of height using their agility and reading of the game. Therefore, expect Luis Enrique to utilize his goalkeepers in more proactive roles.

In fact, expect? Ter Stegen seems to be doing this already!!

Against APOEL,





In the same match (not so much of a sweeper-keeper attribute, but he wants the ball so bad!!!):







(Obviously, it went out of play)

Additionally, Bravo is no stranger to this role. Against Eibar, he anticipates that he should go for the ball. Even though Mathieu plays it out anyway, it shows his skill at reading the game:





Bravo signals for the ball, but Mathieu passes it out anyways:



However, as I said before, even a split-second delay can be catastrophic:









From this angle it is clearer to see that a lapse of concentration by Pique could have cost Barcelona dearly. He doesn't care about Ander Capa, he is ball-watching – the last thing a defender should be doing. But more on Pique later:



Another advantage of having a sweeper keeper is that there is an extra passing option – there is always a player proactive in the final defensive meters of the pitch:



(Picture taken from the Barcelona vs Eibar match)

Just to prove my point (a little bit more), here are pictures taken from the Barcelona vs Ajax match, in which ter Stegen played:





Finally, because both goal keepers boast incredible distribution accuracy, they can play accurate, long balls even under pressure. From the same match:







## Team Analysis

This section will deal with specific points of Barcelona's games so far. As the heading suggests (or doesn't suggest), this is NOT a match-by-match analysis; neither is it a comprehensive review of tactics (like in the previous article. It is simply a section dedicated to specific aspects of the team and squad management, with the use of games to prove and disprove notions and conjecture.

So, before we start analyzing the facets of Barcelona's play, let's just take a look at the results so far:

### *La Liga*

24 August 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	3-0	Elche
31 August 2014	Villarreal	0-1	<b>Barcelona</b>
13 September 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	2-0	Athletic Bilbao
21 September 2014	Levante	0-5	<b>Barcelona</b>
24 September 2014	Málaga	0-0	<b>Barcelona</b>

27 September 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	6–0	Granada
4 October 2014	Rayo Vallecano	0–2	<b>Barcelona</b>
18 October 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	3–0	Eibar
25 October 2014	Real Madrid	3–1	<b>Barcelona</b>

Apart from the Malaga game, which we will get to in a moment, this is a consistent record, and tough away games such as the one at El Madrigal (Villarreal) have been conquered.

#### *UEFA Champions League*

17 September 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	1–0	APOEL
30 September 2014	Paris Saint-Germain	3–2	<b>Barcelona</b>
5 November 2014	<b>Barcelona</b>	3–1	Ajax

The Champions League form has looked quite worrying – Barcelona were far from their best in these two games. But again, that’s what this match analysis is for!!

Since I have already analyzed the Elche and Villarreal games in the previous article, I will be writing about all other games in this article.

#### *At the beginning...*

Barcelona usually need time to “settle” into the game so that their passing rhythm is established. However, it is at this time – when Barcelona is most shaky – when teams have started to pressure Barcelona.

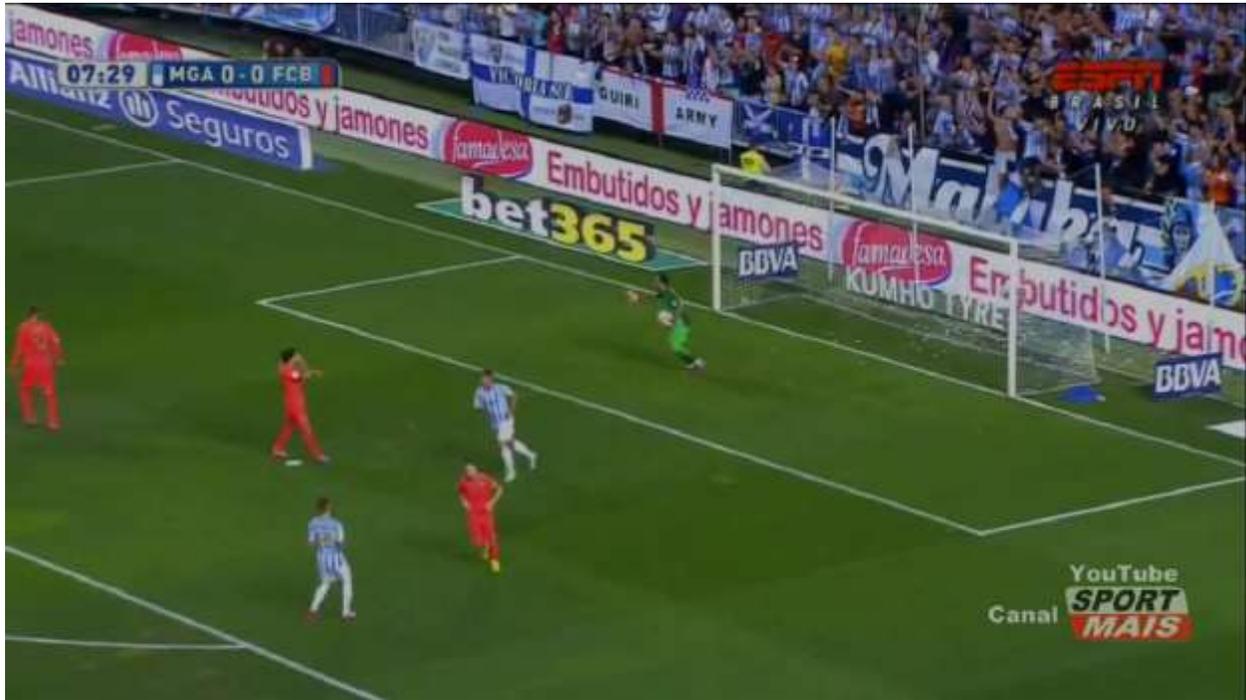
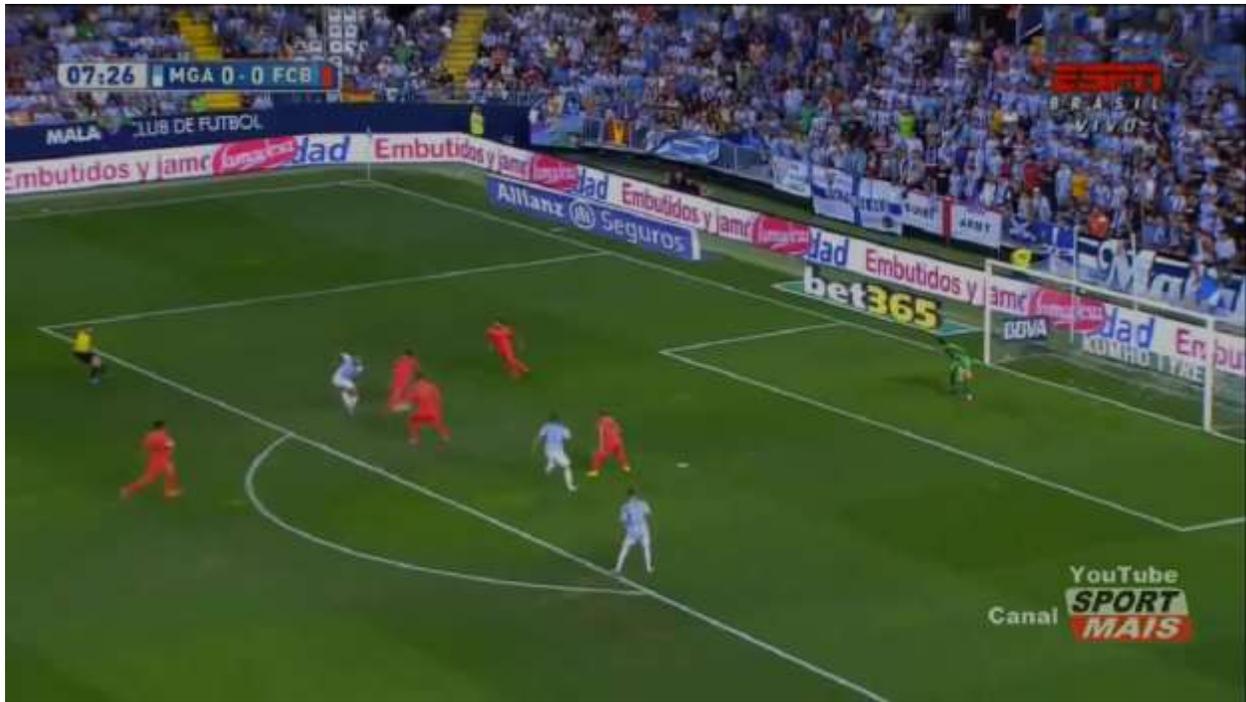
In most games, within the first few minutes teams have fantastic goal scoring opportunities:

Against Bilbao,



Against Malaga,





Against APOEL,





Pique was just on him!! How did Aloneftis get past him so easily? More on that later...



(A quick note – a lot of criticism has been directed towards Sergi Roberto, but in fact he has been fulfilling his role as a box-to-box midfielder beautifully. Guess who is pressuring the attacker (De Vincenti) to head wide in the play shown above? Roberto. Anyway, moving on...)

Against PSG, we even conceded a goal and two free kicks in the first 10 minutes, but I have decided to write a separate section about that match.

It is clear that Barcelona need to work on making sure that they don't concede early on. Both building from the back more patiently and trying to score in the early minutes of the game are just a few alternatives.

*The impotent potency...*



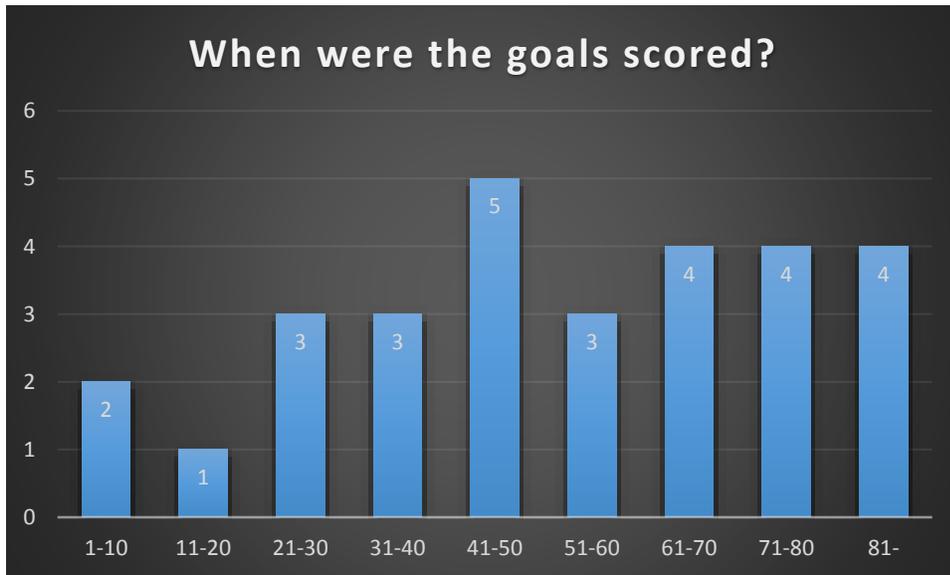
*What should I do? Let's see...*



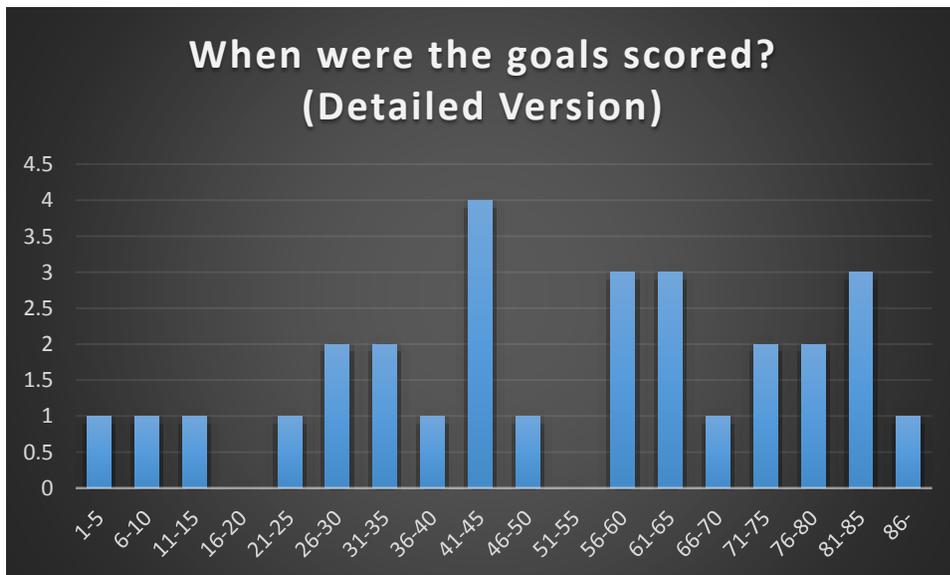
ATTACCCCKKKK!!!

Enough articles online have been dedicated to how Barcelona's attack is impotent and only scores goals at the last moment. However, as usual, I decided to analyze this for myself.

Take a look at the bar chart below, which takes into account every goal scored in competitive matches (data is attached after the article for your reference).



The most goals were scored around the 41-50 range and between 61-90 minutes. Further breakdown of the data makes the picture a little clearer:



I would like to use this graph to refute this accusation of Barcelona's attack being best when the defense tires out. The trend in the graph is way too random and capricious to come to a conclusion. Just because

no goals were scored in the 16-20 range doesn't mean that the attack switches off. Secondly, there is very limited data – only 12 matches have transpired and 29 goals have been scored. It is way too ambitious to make a sweeping statement at this stage – after all, how can one distribute 29 goals over a 90 minute interval? In my next article, when sufficient goals have been scored (and conceded), I will come back with more detailed analysis on this point.

### *The curious case of Samba Boy...*

I'll just get to the point – Alves needs to leave. Whether it's just the starting XI or the roster itself, I don't really care. Alves has been so pathetic – both in attack and defense – it amazes me how Montoya has played just one match so far – and that too when Alves was injured in his knee.

Not only is Alves terrible in defense – which is well-documented – he has lost even his ball control and non-existent crossing ability and, therefore, adds no width to the team.

Even in games where he has “done well”, his crosses tend to be wayward. Against Granada, he once crossed into no-man's land:





And as we all know, his defending borders on pure nonsense. Against Real Madrid, he left the ENTIRE right flank open:



In fact, it was a similar error from Alves which led to Pique handball inside the penalty area:









From a different (and clearer angle):



Some of his “attacking” errors lead to goals too. Against PSG, Alves started dribbling the ball, lost it and earned a yellow card trying to get the ball back:





PSG scored off the resulting set-piece, but more on set-pieces later.

This picture is absolutely iconic. A STRIKER is tackling the player that Alves should have tackled, but was too lax to do so:



(Against Granada)

The same thing happened against Rayo.



In the same match, Munir was replaced by Pedro in the 59<sup>th</sup> minute:



Munir had covered 7 km in under an hour. SEVEN kilometers. He was essentially manning the entire right flank!! In comparison, Iniesta was hauled of TEN minutes later, yet covered 7.8 km.



Lucho's new formation demands the use of full backs crucial to adding width to the team. If Alves cannot accomplish that, then he is not the right right-back (pun intended) for Barcelona.

In fact, Alves is lax in basically every aspect of the game. Just take a look at his attitude ON THE BALL against Real Madrid:







The ball is taken off him, a counter attack ensues and Alves is, where? Notice that 4 seconds pass between the second last frame and the last one, and yet Alves has not even APPEARED in the defensive third of the pitch!!

People often say that Montoya is not an attacking threat – I beg to differ.













Even after being in the final third of the pitch and having taken a shot a goal, he tracks back efficiently:



The fact that he is a defensive fullback by trade gives our defense and midfield more options:



(Alba is in the left hand bottom corner of the picture)

Because Montoya is playing in a more withdrawn role, Busquets doesn't have to drop deep as the third center-back like he usually does. Not only does this mean that the defense is more solid, it adds a passing option in the defensive third of the pitch.

Now, you may argue that the amount of space on the right flank has to be exploited as much as possible. Well, for that, you need a high stamina player – Douglas is one of them.

In a tough away game against Malaga, he played well both defensively and offensively:





The only reason he passed to Rakitic as there was no one in the box when he received the ball.

Later on, he shows some lovely piece of skill:





You could argue Rakitic should have crossed the ball, but again, no one in the box!!

*Sandro vs Munir*

True, Munir has been nothing short of amazing – even in difficult games – like against Bilbao:







And again, in the same match:







Are you noticing a pattern? He is just too reliant on his left foot!!

Moreover, it is no coincidence that Barcelona scored two goals – their only two goals – against Bilbao when Sandro came on.

For the second goal:







Notice how Sandro is positioned differently in each frame – he is such a mobile no. 9 that Neymar is left unmarked. He almost acts as a shield for Messi and Neymar to thrive.

Other times he is positioned extremely well:





From a different angle:



Moreover, Munir doesn't have the composure that Sandro has.

Against Granada, Munir spurned a brilliant chance to put Barcelona ahead:





Munir ran towards goal, instead of making sure that the ball would come to him; in a last-ditch attempt to control the ball, he sticks out his foot backwards which doesn't help either. A more composed Sandro would have let the ball fall to his right foot and tapped it in.

Munir, having had a disappointing game, was replaced by – you guessed it – Sandro.



Anyways, talking about composure – against Ajax, Sandro uses his weaker foot for a world-class finish.





Rakitic plays it to Munir, who in turn passes to Pedro









*Even Xavi and Iniesta are proud (and Messi is flabbergasted)!! REMEMBER THE NAME!! SANDRO RAMIREZ!!*

Believe me, his quick decision-making and confident execution were outstanding for a kid that age playing in that scenario.

When Munir went off for Sandro against APOEL, he positioned himself well to receive a brilliant pass from Sergi Roberto:





(OK seriously, why is there so much hate on Sergi Roberto? He is a fantastic player and is a box-to-box midfielder, and we have never had such a physical and hardworking midfielder since Yaya Toure. Plus, to thread such a pass with four defenders blocking your path of sight requires incredible vision).

And again,





Against PSG, Alves was hauled off in favor of Sandro.



Munir takes a shot which is agonizingly close...





From this angle, it is easier to see Sandro's instinct. Notice how his position in every frame is different...







Sandro also makes those runs that only a poacher has the gut instinct to make. Against Eibar, he came SO close to scoring from a header:





Now don't get me wrong – Munir is a fantastic player and has world-class upside. However, we cannot expect him to be a goal scorer – he is more of the holdup player:

Against Rayo, Munir receives the ball and lays it off to Neymar:



*That pass from Bartra – Pique who?*



Neymar does well to hold his line and score:





Munir's decision making in the final third of the pitch leaves a lot to be desired – again, he is too reliant on his left foot:





Why does he turn away, being so close to the keeper? It's the same thing over and over again – Munir is not a goal-scorer. He needs to work on his weak foot ability and composure if he really wants to become an all-round, unpredictable striker.

[The philosophy change](#)

Finally. The real reason why this article is called the philosophy change is this. The section where I can express my own opinion and not be limited to facts.

A more apt title would be “the philosophy tweaks”, but you get the idea – Luis Enrique has made changes to the squad to suit the modern times.

Today the game is played both at a faster pace and more physically than before. However, there are several tactical flaws which still need to be fixed.

### *The do-or-die...*

The midfield battle is where, increasingly, the game is won or lost.

Therefore, the midfield has become even more important than ever under Luis Enrique. Not only do the midfielders dictate the pace of the game, they must cover for the attacking full-backs.

And here comes issue number one: Xavi CANNOT cover for Alves, or any attacking fullback for that matter. He doesn't have the stamina or pace to do so. He is most effective when playing in a regista role a la Pirlo at Juventus – no defensive responsibilities with two shuttlers/box-to-box midfielders (in Juventus, two out of Marchisio, Pogba and Vidal) who cover every blade of grass on the pitch:



Against Eibar, Mascherano and Sergi Roberto were those players.

Furthermore, his eye for a defense-splitting pass remains unparalleled, and his pin-point passes can unlock any defense. An example from the match against Granada:





From a different angle:



To evade a nine-man defense requires pure genius. However, my point is that Lucho cannot expect him to be the engine of the team. We have Rakitic for that. Xavi will more or less be a leader off the pitch – a mentor to his Croatian successor and an inspiration for the young guns.

### *A case for the defense...*

Barcelona have not improved defensively.

A better way of saying it: Barcelona plays defenders who cannot defend, and the roster has players who can defend properly but never play.

### *The Hit List*

First on the list is Gerard Pique. Where do I start? He lacks pace and, supposedly, lacks ball control.

Against Ajax,







He gets robbed of the ball so easily, he needs to PUSH Ricardo Kishna off the ball.



Against Real Madrid,







A fantastic block by Mascherano denies what could have been an embarrassing goal.

Pique does what Pique wants to do. His defensive positioning is absolutely shocking.



Where is Pique? Yes, very nicely positioned ahead of poor Mascherano, who has to cover for the “center back”. Even Alba has to come infield and cover. All Pique does in the next frames is follow the ball.





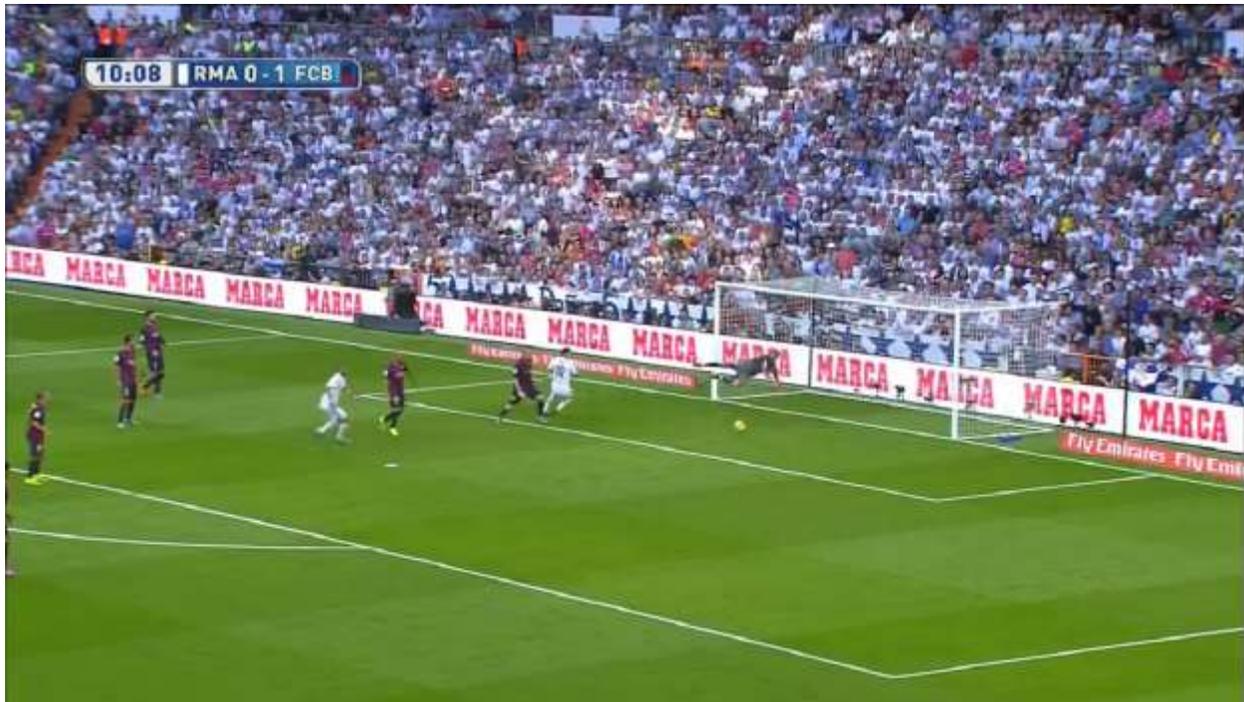
From a different angle, it is clear to see what Pique is doing is schoolboy defending – running back aimlessly towards defense.



In fact, sometimes he is ALWAYS following the ball. Against Real Madrid he goes out of his way (literally) to gift Real Madrid a goal scoring opportunity which could have changed the complexion of the match altogether.



Thankfully, Benzema's shot hit the bar.



And his errors don't end there. Despite being one of the tallest players in the squad, he misjudges headers. Yes, headers!!





And it's not just by a few inches, the ball travels miles away from his head! Look at it from a different angle:



You may think that, oh, it's Pique, at least his passing would be good. Think again. After halftime against Ajax:



Pique attempts fewer passes, which means that either a) he has less faith in his abilities or b) his teammates fear his lackadaisical approach. It might even be both.

He really needs to go. He is beyond repair and excuses such as “he will thrive with a leader like Puyol” need to be discarded immediately. Leadership means taking responsibility for yourself first – practice what you preach. Barcelona needs two confident center backs in the lineup – not one player doing the defensive work of two.

Second player: Mascherano. It’s time to face the hard reality that he is NOT a center-back. This is evident in his style of play: he isn’t the best player as far as marking is concerned.

Against Real Madrid, he loses concentration when Madrid have the ball, giving Benzema a brilliant chance to score. Had it not been for Bravo’s amazing reflexes, it would have been a goal.







Additionally, and predictably, he lacks an aerial presence. Against PSG, he lost an aerial duel, by a long shot, against Matuidi, a player who is just 5'9" (180 cm). But then again, Mascherano is 5'7½" (174 cm).



Even though I have put him on the hit list, it's really a plea to Lucho. Please, oh PLEASE, play him as a defensive midfielder! He is one of the best in his favored, NATURAL position and adds much needed mobility to the team.

Third, and final player on the list, is Alves. I have talked about him in excruciating detail, so nothing more needs to be said other than: enjoy the English way of playing. The grass truly is greener on the other side, quite literally speaking.

As I said before, the full backs are practically playing as wingers – they provide the width that the forwards don't and practically play as defensive wingers. If that is the case, why not play a defensive winger as a fullback?

Let's take a look at why **Pedro** will be perfect as a full back in the Lucho system.

1. He has good dribbling skills, contrary to popular belief, and can therefore play 1 v 1 against the opposition fullbacks.

(Against Bilbao)







2. He has competent crossing ability

(Against Eibar)





3. Most importantly, though, he has played as a winger for a long time. Being a La Masia graduate, he knows the system and has good decision making. Perk: He plays those one-touches we all love, except that these one-touches are leading to goal scoring opportunities.





Pedro quickly plays a one-two with Messi.





GOAL!!

4. He knows when to hold his line – just like a true winger. This will add the width to the team which Lucho wanted in the first place.







He brings his run to a screeching halt, so that he can hold his line again.







Unfortunately for him, his shot hit the post.

One thing that he may need to improve, however, is his left foot. He is too reliant on his right boot.





By the time he turns, a defender is on him and his shot is more or less forced and goes out of play.



*Corners and free kicks and throw-ins galore; why does Barcelona have to snore?*

Yes, yes – the usual prerogative: Barcelona are awful at set-pieces. Bla Bla Bla.

Actually, it's surprising how WORSE set-pieces has become from game to game.

Enjoy the slide show!!

Against Bilbao:



*How nicely marked*

Against PSG:





*Oh, the marking was right!!!*

The very next set-piece:









*Ummm.....what?*

From a different angle:







Another set-piece:



*Mathieu clears the ball calmly*

And another,









Just before the ball is in the net, there are three PSG players in scoring positions. THREE.

This is how PSG defend a corner:



A first man – a tall guy, usually the number 9 (Cavani in this case) – who heads the ball out of danger. The rest just mark their individually assigned players.



As predicted, Cavani heads it out.



But poor marking outside the penalty area could have cost them a goal.



*OOOHHH!*

Lucho, realized the efficacy of this tactic from a previous set-piece. Ingenuity – really.



Rakitic passes the ball nowhere.



BAAAAM! Mascherano appears and slams the ball.



Sirigu was forced into a wonderful save.

Anyways, coming back to defending set-pieces.

Against Rayo,





(15:02)



We even scored from this set piece – one which we are, technically, supposed to defend!







(A bit counter-intuitive to my point about Pique's passing, but very few teams play with such a high line of defense).

Lucho seems to be learning – he uses Sandro as the first man in this case:



Sandro blocks and gets the ball.



Against Eibar,



Tight marking prevents any chance of conceding.



Neymar, the 1<sup>st</sup> man, clears.



Another reason why Pique should pack his bags. He is UNMARKED and yet cannot even DIRECT his header towards goal. (The ball is marked with a red arrow – believe me, it goes quite high in the air)



Anyways,





This time Munir heads the ball out of danger.

Against Real Madrid,



Who is marking Ronaldo?





Arguably, it was a hand ball as a result of Ronaldo's (admittedly amazing) header from, you guessed it, Pique.



From this angle...



...yup, it's a handball.

The next one is even worse. Everyone is trying to mark every one – in the end, no one marks anyone.







Real Madrid create confusion in the box. Or, in better words, Barcelona create their own mayhem.





Everyone just ends up ball watching!!

This is the state of set-pieces at Barcelona. Why? Because we don't have players who can mark players through the end.

What is interesting is that Barcelona are using a mix-match method of both zonal and man-to-man marking. Xavi and Iniesta are playing at the edge of the penalty area to cut off surprise corners (zonal), yet everyone else seems to be playing a man-to-man system.

In my opinion, Barcelona should play a zonal system, since it will *only needs 2 or 3 good headers of the ball because the other players perform tasks that do not require aerial ability* (11).

Also, zonal marking will help start attacks more efficiently and opponents will be caught offside if the first header is not directed properly. The need to defend the “second ball” will be eliminated.

And if the first ball is directed properly, there are three players to clear that out – the two defenders and the goalkeeper.

***Finish your homework, then go get some pizza.***

Barcelona have been heavily criticized for their “humiliating” losses. However, the real reason why Barcelona are losing is that they are not taking their chances and killing off the game.

Against PSG, Barcelona could have easily gone ahead 2-1, but Neymar missed an amazing chance:





Against Real Madrid, Barcelona could have leveled 2-2, which would surely have given them the momentum and put Real Madrid on the back foot:











That shot from Mathieu deserves to be seen from a different angle:





Barcelona are clearly lacking confidence in the final third. However, I am sure that with the return of Luis Suarez, we won't be seeing any more of this.

**OK. After all that criticism, what do you think is the ideal Barcelona?**

Not much that needs to change, really.

My ideal starting XI is:



Players that miss out: Masip (reserve GK), Vermaelen (for Mathieu), Montoya (when defensive solidity is needed), Douglas (untested), Xavi (impact sub), Adriano (see Montoya).

Players that need to find pastures anew: Pique (not going to happen, but even a long benching is good enough), Alves.

You may have noticed that the total number of players on the formation board is 15. Guardiola loved to keep 15 core team members – that is exactly the principle I am following. Also note that this squad will be heavily supplemented by youth players such as Sandro, Munir, Samper, Halilovic, Adama, Ié, Diagné, etc. (At the end of the article, I have attached, for your reference, the list of the most exciting prospects in La Masia – the conveyor belt of talent at Barcelona never seems to stop!!)

Explanation of the arrows: I think most of it has been explained. As for the midfield, I believe that two shuttlers will help link up all three phases of play – defense, midfield and attack. Iniesta has, surprisingly,

been minding his defensive duties quite well but, with his recurrent injury problems, Sergi Roberto and Rafinha are extremely hardworking and have an eye for a pass.

In fact, Rakitic and Roberto are fulfilling these roles already – and doing a good job too!!

Against Levante, Rakitic on one end of the pitch makes a Mascherano like tackle to clear the ball, and then scores an absolute bullet of a shot from outside the penalty box.





And then,





At the end of the first half against Ajax, here were the stats that popped out and said one thing very clearly – Rakitic is the engine of the team. No doubt about that.



In the defensive phase, Barcelona are no strangers to adopting a 4-4-2 formation, something I touched upon earlier in the first article.



In fact, Lucho is quite comfortable with tightening the lines and playing deep:



(Against Granada)



(Against Eibar)



*Tighten the lines!! MORE!!!*

Also, the ideal Barcelona will be able to defend against intelligent passing by pressing efficiently.

Against Bilbao,









Against PSG,









Both situations could have been avoided had Barcelona pressed in “packs” of three or even two. This requires the whole team, including Messi, to press.

(By the way, Messi has an ankle injury, which explains his relative absence against Real Madrid. Get well soon D10S!!)

Finally, the ideal Barcelona will keep possession well and not lose the ball – something that, surprisingly, Barcelona have become poor at. After the PSG game, Mundo Deportivo slammed a high figure on their front page – 54.



54 lost balls. Yes, Barcelona gave away possession 54 times.

Not much to be said here – Barcelona are a possession-based side and I’m sure this was a one-off.

Luis Enrique has a lot to do. He has to control his players according to his hard-working philosophy, but Lucho has some tough decisions to make. The future of Alves and Pique is one. The future of the team is another.



*O really?*

Yes, really.

This has been a good (long) article, and therefore I am going to stop right here. I'm going to be taking a break from "The Money Gamble" series, and will focus on other aspects of football in general – history, politics, special moments in football, racism, etc.

Until next time, Forca Barca!!

Vamos!!

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Below is the appendix, which contains data of all goals scored and the future young talent that buzzes through La Masia at present.

## APPENDIX

### When were the goals scored?

Team	Minute Scored
Ajax	7
Ajax	24
Ajax	94
APOEL	27
Bilbao	79
Bilbao	84
Eibar	60
Eibar	72
Eibar	74
Elche	42
Elche	46
Elche	63
Granada	26
Granada	43
Granada	45
Granada	62
Granada	66
Granada	82
Levante	34
Levante	44
Levante	57
Levante	64
Levante	77
PSG	11
PSG	56
Rayo	35
Rayo	36
Real Madrid	4
Villarreal	82

## The future of Barcelona



Along with Rodrigo Tarín (CB, Juvenil A) and Elohor Godswill (RB, Barça B), these players all have the potential to make it big at Barcelona. (Hot tip – Watch out for Lee, Carles Pérez and Ayoub in the attacking department).