FC Barcelona’s 2018-19 Potential

How will FC Barcelona fare in this season’s competitions and what is needed to accomplish their goals?

I’ll come clean right away, I’m a lifelong FC Barcelona fan. My favourite player is in fact Leo Messi. There will be bias in this post. Now that that’s out of the way, let’s get to my commentary.

Personally, I believe that Barcelona is prepped to have their best season since Lucho’s first. Their archrivals have lost a 50-goal-a-season player and haven’t added anyone significant either. In this, Barça has their potentially easiest domestic double of recent memory. Likewise, the Champions’ League titans look vulnerable for the first time in the past 5 in their hunt for their next continental title.

Meanwhile, from a roster standpoint, Barça have upgraded in every position. However, the question remains, will Barça be able to move on from the loss of Andres Iniesta from the squad. While he was used more sparingly than years previous in the last campaign, who will be responsible for replacing his creativity and stability in the midfield. It would appear that Coutinho is the player who is most primed to take the role, but it appears that he might be a fluctuating member of the midfield, given his prowess on the left wing as well. Personally, I believe Coutinho is the most suited player for the LCM role and should be the undisputed starter in the position.

This brings me to my next point; what formation is ideal for this current Barça. Under Valverde last season, Barça relied heavily on a 4-4-2 formation, a large difference from the 4-3-3 that was used in all the seasons I can remember before that. However, I feel that this often made the team vulnerable in the midfield and the usual Barcelona domination at the center of the position. I think it is to this formation that Barça must return. The midfield of Busquets, Rakitić, and Coutinho is strong and ready to be the world’s best. All three are proficient in playing the quick tiki-taka passes that was once synonymous with the Blaugrana midfield. This is the year Barcelona can bring the midfield back to the forefront.

Another question lies in the forward line. Is Dembélé ready for the spotlight? Can Suarez still perform? Yes. To both. The formation should have Dembélé on the left, Suarez in the center, and of course, Messi on the right. This forward line is a combination of speed and finesse. Even when Suarez might be falling off a little bit, there is the option to drop him, play Messi as a False-9 and insert Malcom into the line-up. Defensively, Barcelona is sound as ever and anchored by one of the best goalkeepers in the sport doesn’t hurt. It is up to the Valverde to ensure that everyone is well rested and there isn’t a drop-off in performance in February/March as has become routine.

From a tactical perspective, Barça has lost a lot of its identity. While still dominating the midfield against weaker mid and low-tier teams in La Liga and the Copa del Rey, the midfield domination of 2008-2014 has been lost against a lot of the bigger teams. No longer does Barcelona have the best midfield in the world, they play against them in the greatest rivalry in football. It is in this area that they have to strengthen tactically. The largest issue is that the team lacks the creativity and close passing of years gone by. Suarez and Dembélé are constantly making runs, they just need to be fed appropriately. However, the team is reluctant to play the risky passes and through balls necessary to match the runs of the forwards. It is for this reason that Messi often gets relegated to dropping very deep for the ball and harbor the responsibility.

Ultimately, the team must stop this Messi-reliance if it hopes to challenge for titles. This doesn’t mean that they have to stop relying on Messi, no team would do that should they have him in their ranks.

If the team is able to inject creativity and risk into its style (the conservative approach often backfires, see the Roma quarterfinal game last season that didn’t happen) in order to really be a threat for continental superiority this year. And that is the goal of the team. To win the Champion’s League is rightfully the club’s aspiration for this year. The team has won the domestic double repeatedly over the past decade. However, having Real Madrid win the Champion’s League 4 of the last 5 occasions and an embarrassing self-destruction in Rome has left the Barça faithful starved for European glory. In order to achieve this goal, Barça must rotate the squad efficiently and effectively and remain well-rested throughout the season.

This season can be one of great success or failure for the Barcelona giant. The team is prepped for their best season in years, but so are their expectations. The year will be a tide for the fans either way, a return to the glory, or fall towards a second-tier superpower.