

The Eccentric Genius

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1982/83.

After five years at Barcelona, where he laid the foundations for the next 4 decades of football, and a season in LA, Washington, and Levante each, Johan Cruyff decided to come back to his old club Ajax. That return season ended on a high, with the club winning the Eredivisie and KNVB Cup double. Cruyff, now in the twilight years of his career, looked set for another season at home.

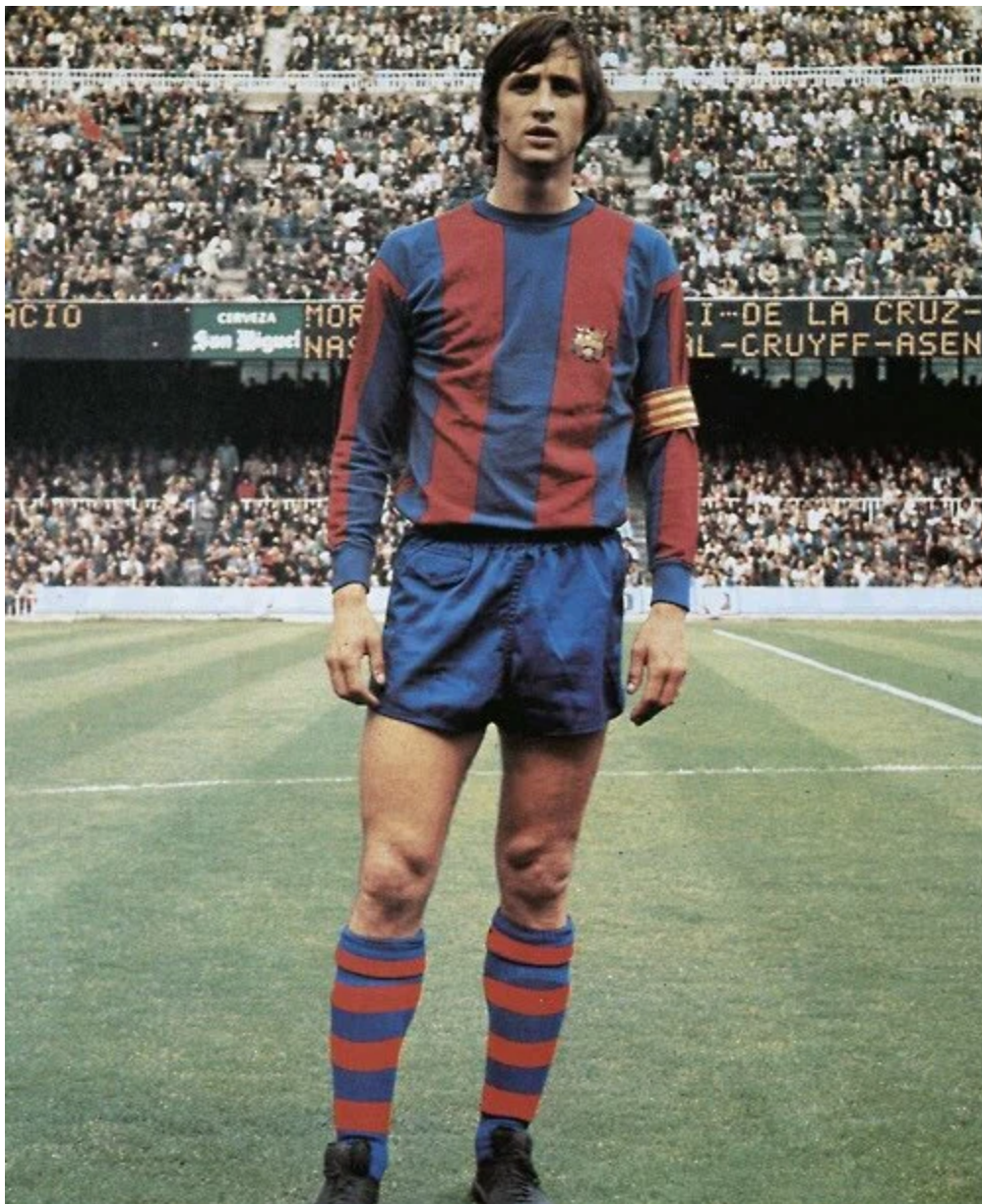
However, the unthinkable happened. In a sudden change of events with Ajax, Cruyff made the move to their biggest rivals Feyenoord – the equivalent of leaving Barcelona and joining Real Madrid in the Netherlands. The fans, the media, and everyone else Cruyff had associated himself with were absolutely shocked. Feyenoord won their first league title in a decade with Cruyff on their side.



But truth be told, Cruyff was always the man who did the unthinkable. 3 Ballon d'Ors, 3 European Cups, a turn named after him, countless league titles, incredible goals, the World Cup final, and so much more still does not do any justice to the career he had and how he changed football forever. That's more evident from how Cruyff influenced minds like Sacchi, Ferguson, and Guardiola in their style of play, players like Laudrup, and is basically why the current FC Barcelona exists as he

set up the academy La Masia, through which players like Guardiola, Xavi, Iniesta, Valdes, Puyol, Pique, Messi, and Busquets came.

Barcelona was his greatest work without a doubt. When Cruyff arrived, he named his newborn son Jordi – a Catalan name – instantly winning the hearts of the people in the region and led Barcelona to their first league title since 1960 and put up a dazzling 5-0 display against Real Madrid. He was well worth breaking the transfer record for.



That was not the end, however. Cruyff would return to Catalunya after another role at Ajax – but as a manager this time. He built the “Dream Team” and brought in people like Koeman, Romario, Stoichkov, Laudrup, and Txiki Begiristain, now at Man City with Pep. 4 league titles in 4 years soon followed, dominance in every aspect of the game, and FC Barcelona’s first European Cup (the old UCL). The football was scintillating in that era. And that was what mattered to him primarily. Not the trophies nor the glory. He set the stone for next generations with his style of 3-4-3, from the 4-3-3 he played in under Michels at Ajax, and with his adaptation of ‘totaalvoetbal’ (total football).

“We couldn’t believe how many attackers were in the team, and how few defenders. It was a revolution!” – Eusebio

He kept everything simple and attack-minded: defending with the ball, the goalkeeper acting as the first striker and the striker as the first defender, and attacking in quality within a system, rather than relying on individual ability.

“Technique is not being able to juggle a ball 1000 times. Anyone can do that by practicing. Then you can work in the circus. Technique is passing the ball with one touch, with the right speed, at the right foot of your team mate.”

He was a man of principles and never backed away from them. Even if the whole world was against him.

“If you have four men defending two strikers, you only have six against eight in the middle of the field: there’s no way you can win that battle. We had to put a defender further forward. I was criticized for playing three at the back, but that’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard. What we needed was to fill the middle of the pitch with players where we needed it most. I much prefer to win 5-4 than 1-0.”



In a time where football was seen as a battle of physicality, Cruyff took the other road. He credited ability and intellect much higher than strength and used shorter, smaller players in his team, when everyone else saw them as misfits in football.

"I had short lads like Albert Ferrer, Sergi or Guillermo Amor; players without great physiques but who pampered the ball with their touch and pressed the opposition like rats," he recalled. "Even Pep wasn't all that physically, but with the ball he was intelligent. That's what I wanted."

It was Cruyff's personality that people respected and admired all around the world. The crazy antics, educated stubbornness, and outrageous statements ("I'm not religious. In Spain, all 22 players make the sign of the cross before they enter the pitch. If that actually worked, all matches must therefore end in a draw.") were simply facets of his unprecedented genius. He was truly, one of a kind.

"If I wanted you to understand it, I would have explained it better"

This is the very man who made a bet with Stoichkov that if he scored in a game, he would be paid 100,000 ptas. Cruyff then proceeded to sub him off at halftime and as Stoichkov was walking back to the benches, all Cruyff had to say was "Give me the money."

Simply put, there would be no La Masia, no style of play, no Messi, no Xavi, and no Iniesta without Cruyff. That is exactly why he is the most influential person in FC Barcelona's history and one of the greatest players to ever grace the game.

"If the 175,000 FC Barcelona members, or socios, queued up in an orderly line, night after night, to massage his tired feet, cook his dinner and tuck him into bed; if they carried his golf clubs round Montanya's hilly 18 holes; if they devoted 50 per cent of their annual salary to him, it still wouldn't be anywhere near enough to repay the debt that those who love this club owe Johan Cruyff" – Graham Hunter

It's hard to believe that two years without Cruyff have already passed. I end here with the words of Pep Guardiola:

"Cruyff painted the chapel, and Barcelona coaches since merely restore or improve it."