

Ones for the Future

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Put a little trust in your players and you can make monsters out of men.

Pep Guardiola did that and he proved everyone wrong. Today, Sergio Busquets, Thiago Alcantara, Pedro Rodriguez, Gerard Pique are the established, world-class players they were always meant to be. All it took was trust from the manager, some opportunities with the first team and they were good to go.

After Guardiola left for his 'gap-year', the succeeding managers at FCB used La Masia graduates and youth products sparingly. There weren't that many opportunities anymore to break into the first team. This can be seen from the fact that the last player to break through from La Masia and become a starter for Barcelona is Sergi Roberto. That was in 2014.

Luis Enrique was the opposite of Pep when it came to youth. Clearly highlighted by the fact that he loaned out or transferred 7 youth talents/academy products upon his arrival. Even the talented Denis Suarez (who this post is about alongside Samper, Marlon and Alena) was loaned out by Enrique. Veterans and much-loved figures such as Puyol and Valdes left the club the same summer. So without realizing it, behind the scenes, we were starting to lose our identity, even if that year everything was papered over by the treble.

Before the start of the 2015/2016 season – Luis Enrique's second year in charge – the man with the most appearances ever for Barcelona left in the summer. Xavi Hernandez left a legend, deservedly so. The very same window, 2 more youngsters were loaned/transferred out. That's 9 already now.

Third season now. Another legend left the club. This time in the form of Brazilian rightback Dani Alves. 4 more youth talents loaned/transferred out. Two of these were some painful ones though as Sandro Ramirez (Malaga, now Everton) and Munir El-Haddadi (Valencia, currently back at FCB) both scored against Barcelona in the 2016/17 league campaign and put us through some real trouble. These players were sent out of the club and replacements like Paco Alcacer and Andre Gomes were brought in for big money, despite not being needed. Their positions could be covered twice over with the talent and academy we have.

The second player in focus in this post, Sergi Samper, was loaned out to Granada (who were eventually relegated) for the season. There's a heartwarming photo of him and fellow La Masia graduate, Sergi Roberto exchanging shirts after Barcelona vs Granada last season. A talented boy with huge dreams unsure of his future, exchanging his shirt with a friend.



He didn't know whether he'd back at Barca one day. Thankfully he's made it here and I don't expect the same mistake to be made twice.

Denis Suarez finally was brought out from his loan and was part of the 2016/17 campaign.

He's an exceptional player with a style resonating that of Andres Iniesta. Keeps the ball close to his feet, likes to dribble and make space. Loves a goal or an assist too. And just like Iniesta, Denis Suarez's physique, being small and agile, allows him to beat his marker with ease, sending them in the wrong directions often because of his deceptive movement. Opposition players are always a bit late to stop him. He's already whizzed past once they make their tackle. Another thing to love about Denis is his versatility and ability to play both at the wing and in midfield. If that sounds familiar, it should. Iniesta often played at the left-wing as well. Not a very vocal player (just like Iniesta), he makes sure to do the talking with his feet. He's definitely one to watch in the future and with Valverde at the helm, things are looking bright. For Denis Suarez himself, Sergi Samper, Carles Alena and Marlon.

Ernesto has already given the boys their opportunities. A fresh season and a fresh start to prove themselves. In the game versus Juventus today, they really shone. They showed us exactly why they deserve to be where they are and how it was

really wrong of Enrique to not even give them a chance. I know it's a preseason match but the signs are very very encouraging so far. It seems that the right man is here – especially since he's a great friend of Pep and has played under the immortal Johan Cruyff.

With Denis out of the way let's start off with Marlon and Alena. Although Marlon Santos (pictured below) did not start the game, he's shown wonderful development.



As the season was coming to an end and Javier Mascherano got injured, Marlon got his chance. And he performed. He turned out to be another centre back that Barcelona need, the type the club uses: a ball-playing defender, who is calm and assured in possession while showing no fear in his defensive duties. He made a huge save in the second half versus Juventus today where the opposition forward would have easily scored had Marlon misjudged the tackle. The ball was played from deep over the top and it required a lot of intelligence on his part to get on top of the play and end it. With Gerard Pique and Mascherano aging now, Marlon and Umtiti look set to form an unbreakable defensive partnership at Barcelona for year and years to come.

Carles Alena was another addition to Barcelona's squad last season as injuries and a lack of players seemed to call out for him.



He was given chances in friendlies and smaller fixtures but today he shined. While we knew what Marlon and Samper were capable of, Alena was the one we needed to see. And he delivered. Great overall passing from the 19 year old who found space frequently and was eager to exploit it. His sharp movement highlighted his intelligence throughout the game.

With Denis and Neymar operating out on the wing, Alena could prove to be the successor to Iniesta alongside Roberto in midfield. His addition to midfield would mean we have Iniesta, Roberto, Denis, Alena, Busquets, Samper and Gomes available. A lot of talented players who only need some attention and an opportunity. If the mistakes of previous managements are avoided then we're set for the future – in the very positions that made our team the best in the world. A return to the Xavi-Iniesta-Busquets days may be possible now with the right vision. Ernesto does seem like the man to line it up.

And now, onto the brightest of them all: Sergi Samper Montana. He's the one on the right in the photo at the top by the way.

You'd think a youngster, whose career has only really begun, would look uncomfortable and out of place in midfield trio with Iniesta and Roberto. But no, Samper made sure his name is one to remember. With chances of Verratti or any other dominating midfielder joining FCB this window almost non-existent, the trust that Ernesto has put in Samper may be the solution. If not the solution, a step forward in the right direction. His playing style has been likened to that of Busquets and he's been dubbed the 'successor' to Busquets as well. But not only that, he's been likened to Xavi as well – Samper's playmaking and vision really stand out from other talents and midfielders in the world.

The club may have found a gem in this player. With the ability to play as a defensive midfielder like Busquets and yet have the technicality to be used as controller in the middle of the park, that's something special we have on our hands now. The club needs a controlling mid like Marco Verratti but we seem to have found one right at home. A prospect like this really excites me and shows positive signs for the future. We have a CDM who has the ability to be an enforcer in midfield. We better not lose this chance now. A replacement for Xavi might be on the cards finally and if not Xavi, a replacement for the next best thing, Busquets, is available.

In the game versus Juventus, the focus was on a reenergized Iniesta after all those injuries, a well-rested Messi and a seemingly unsettled Neymar. Neymar did stand out today for his two world-class goals but Samper deserves credit. The passmap shows you that he had the most touches of the ball and look at his position – completely central. Exactly where Busquets is found. Samper was pulling the strings from here and had good distribution with the teammates surrounding him.



Positions & Passing Network Barcelona at Juventus

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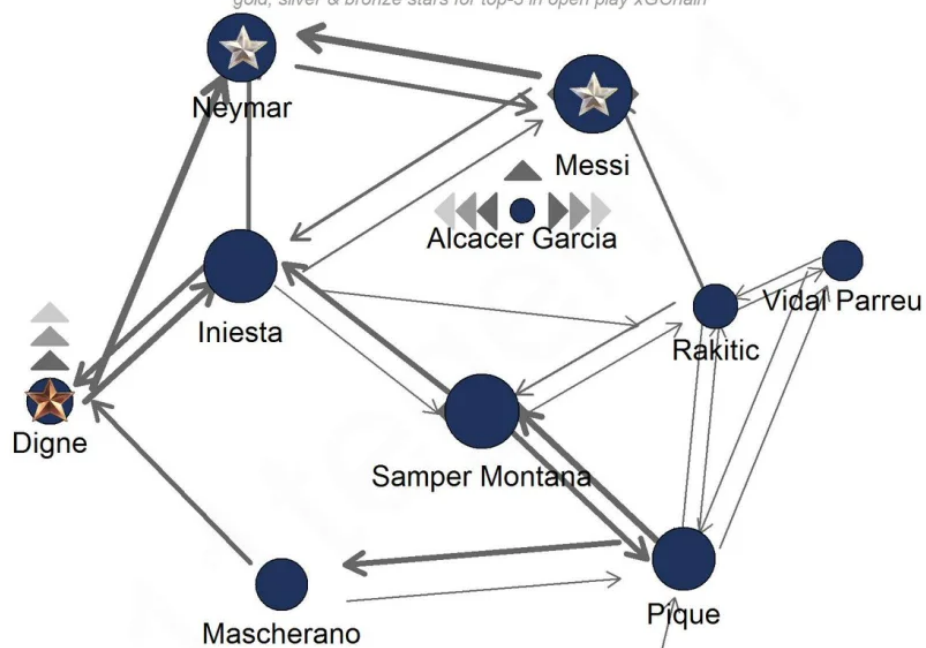
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dot size ~ touches

dot position ~ average of touches

gold, silver & bronze stars for top-3 in open play xGChain



@ 11tegen11

He started in place of Busquets and did not set a foot wrong. Was in the right position at the right time always and ready to crush any opposition play. Quick passing with a wonderful range, communication with Iniesta and above all, Xavi-esque turns with *that* vision. Was on a completely different level today in midfield and that should be enough to earn him a place in the team for the season whilst appearing regularly. The boy is a genius and a master of the game in the making. More chances and trust from the manager is all he needs and some guidance from the master himself, Andres Iniesta Lujan, would go a long way as well. This is evidence of our new #26 can do:

You clearly see the superb decision making skills and intelligence he possesses on the ball. What a player. He run over the Juventus players and was a nightmare for them, popping up everywhere as well as getting moves started (like that Neymar move in the first minute).

This is a special moment for us (especially me) as we may be witnessing the making of the next greats in football. I certainly hope that these players make their mark on the world one day because they really can put on some absolutely gorgeous displays.

Johan Cruyff would be pleased if he was here.

Image sources:

https://twitter.com/SergiSamper/status/817433927157764098/photo/1http://img.bleacherreport.net/img/images/photos/res-9a77e8a6805e1904ccf970cea7cd9bff_crop_north.jpg?1479835883&w=630&h=420http://as01.epimg.net/futbol/imagenes/2016/08/04/primera/1470345039_760711_147034

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