



Unexpected Pragmatism



Yazdan Basir · [Follow](#)

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You'd think the team that broke 11 records last season — including the one for most goals, most wins, and being the first team ever to reach 100 points in the league — would just peak there and not think of getting any better the following year.

That's simply not how Josep Guardiola operates.

He's a student of Cruyff who follows what his mentor had to say:

"Being critical is always something positive because you are pointing out things that need improvement."

And that sums up Pep. He's a perfectionist who's never satisfied with what he has and always looks for an avenue to do more. Even if his team's 5-0 up and the match is about to end, a small careless mistake or momentary loss of concentration by any player is not tolerated.

The thing about managers like Pep is how proactive they are in rectifying their mistakes and weak points. They identify issues pretty early on, plan out what they're going to do about it, and are ruthless in getting rid of whatever is unnecessary at the club and does not fit into their plans.

This is where City's impenetrable defence this season comes in. People attribute Pep as a manager whose teams just constantly attack, attack, and attack. However, the reality is, with the possession-based system and style of defending that comes along with it, Pep puts more focus on his backline than people give him credit for. Last year, the system worked so well that defending was bound to improve — there was a better system in place and the personnel was working now.

Pep's tightening up of the backline this year shows. City have conceded the fewest goals in the league, they've kept the most cleansheets, and on top of all that, as expected, they've scored the most and lead the table. It's incredible to see that a seemingly perfect team still has room to improve and this can be seen from the fact that John Stones and Laporte have only conceded one goal when playing together this season.

You'd think that there'd be a compromise in attacking prowess to tidy up the defence but, as is typical of Pep, there hasn't been one. From the same 13 opponents this season, City have already claimed 6 more points, scored 5 more, and have, incredibly, conceded 8 less.

Somehow, City are playing better than they were last year and they're even better at keeping the ball and not letting opponents score. The new methods going on at the back have been elaborated on by Stones, who *"told reporters how Guardiola trains his defenders to work in different back-four combinations so they are prepared for any teamsheet he chooses"*. Even the captain, Vincent Kompany, has stated the team has been working on *"winning the ball back higher up the field to restrict chances conceded on Ederson's goal"*.

Pragmatism isn't a word you associate with Pep and his teams but for him, it's not all about attacking the opposition blindly all the time. Pep will do what is necessary to win when the time comes. City players aren't angels all

the time in every game. They have a reputation for being smart in making tactical fouls and then getting away with them, they'll waste the last few minutes of a close/tight game to see it through, and where a result is more beneficial than risking a potential loss and losing out on their lead at the top, they'll be practical.

This was evident in City's game versus Liverpool. It was time to open up "the Bible" again. Last year, at this stage of the league, Pep went all out and it worked. City thrashed Liverpool 5-0 but not without consequences. Their gameplan would leave them exposed, especially to the way Liverpool counterpress, and they would end up getting thrashed in the next 3 games against the Merseyside outfit.

This year, during preparations for the clash, Pep must've asked himself what was the most important thing for him in the game: going for the kill and losing the lead in the table or micromanaging the game and not risk losing out to his direct competitor? The answer was clear in the way City played. They were extremely passive, Bernardo was deeper than usual and helping out in defence, and the plan wasn't to win the game but rather, to contain the very team that they had conceded 14 goals to in their 4 previous meetings. Liverpool wasn't risking much as well. They weren't pressing with the same intensity, they weren't creating as much — they were being held back at an arm's length.

And it worked. Pep didn't lose anything, retained his side's advantage and had moved on to preparations for the next game. It sent a message to everyone:

“Last season, the only way to beat City was to out-score them. This season, they have made sure that isn't an option.”

The most frightening thing about this team is that they're doing all this without a Kevin De Bruyne in their lineup. Who knows what could happen when he does come back and who knows whether or not City can keep up their performances and reach their projected finish? One thing is certain, however. They're showing no signs of slowing down and for the foreseeable future right now, that spells out trouble for everyone they are yet to face.

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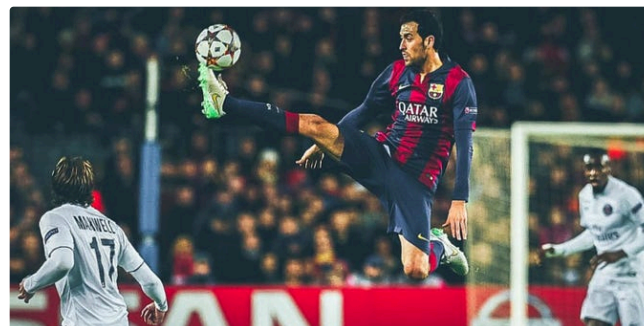


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