

# Not So Tiki-Taka

Posted on @August 11, 2017 8:30 AM by Yazdan Basir

Josep Guardiola is a man who needs no introduction. Being one of the most loved and most hated men in world football relieves you from that. The man who gets criticized for winning because he always seems to have a “world-class squad” is the very same man who gets criticized for not winning because “he has no brains and can’t build a team”.

No matter what you think (you’re obviously wrong if you think the latter), the man is a genius and one of modern football’s revolutionaries. His teams have changed modern football for the better and it’s clear to see how.

This is my attempt to clear up one of football’s biggest misconceptions: tiki-taka.

“I hate Tiki-taka. Tiki-taka means passing the ball for the sake of it, with no clear intention. And it’s pointless.”

These are the words of Guardiola. When you read “tiki-taka” somewhere you probably think of Barcelona and/or Spain and their players consistently passing the ball to each other over short distances. You might think that this style of football is slow and pointless and you might think this style of football is ‘dead’ (especially after watching Spain’s demolition at the 2014 World Cup).

It’s sad to see how the media uses the term “tiki-taka” so commonly and never the actual term. Here are some examples of mainstream media and famous pages such as ESPN, Bleacher Report and even the official La Liga page using this term:



## The Death of Tiki-Taka Football

ESPN UK 5.7K views • 3 years ago

Sid Lowe exclusive. After Pep Guardiola's Bayern Munich side were humiliated by Real Madrid, his **Tiki-Taka** style of



But when you think of tiki-taka you're not actually thinking about "tiki-taka" as you know it. What the Barcelona team of 2008-2012 (and even to a certain extent now), the Bayern team of 2013-2016 and now, Manchester City of 2016 onwards, played is a footballing philosophy called "Juego de posicion". Doesn't sound like tiki-taka does it?

That's because it's a **COMPLETELY** different concept.

And when the media uses the term "tiki-taka" so frequently, it's not a surprise regular football fans will too. Take a look at this one fan in the comments section

of a YouTube video (put your focus on the last line of the comment):



Rob Datta 7 months ago

To overcome Conte's 3-4-3, a team needs to do the following:

1. Match Chelsea's front three man-for-man with a three-man defence
2. Overload the wings by using actual wingers instead of wingbacks
3. Target the weaker Alonso-Matic-Cahill side for chance creation
4. Nick a goal or two and then park the bus to avoid speedy counters

Pep did all of the above except for 4. He played three at the back to match Chelsea's front three man-for-man, and played wingers as wingbacks to overload the wings, especially the left. He had Navas, Silva, and even De Bruyne and Aguero drift out to the Alonso-Matic-Cahill flank and cause problems with the overload. They forced the Cahill own goal, then De Bruyne should've made it 2-0 at the start of the second half, and it would've been game over. However, De Bruyne missed and we all know what happened next. If Pep wasn't a [REDACTED], then he could've parked the bus after 1-0 (or 2-0 had De Bruyne not missed a sitter), and won. But he's wants to be a hipster and play his tiki taka instead of adapting.

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Pep Guardiola's philosophy that he introduced at Barcelona, "juego de posicion", involves a very committed approach to staying in your position. It would be appropriate here to add that "juego de posicion" means Positional Play in English – hence, the emphasis on positioning. This system requires unbelievable (and often deceptive) work ethic and reading of the game. Something that players like Xavi, Iniesta, Thiago, Vidal, Silva, Kevin De Bruyne – just to name a few – do extraordinarily well.

Here's an excellent video of Thierry Henry, who played under Pep for two seasons, on Monday Night Football explaining very simply how Guardiola's teams play with this system:

From the video you can note Henry's emphasis on words like "stay in your position" and "freedom" and "trust your teammate". That's what the system was about.

But there was one thing that the system strives for above all else. Superiority.

The system's focus on sticking to a position and creating passing lanes using triangles is an effort to create superiority within the lines – "overload" as Rob Datta from the YouTube comment above correctly says. That helps significantly with pressing the opponent (and recovering possession if you don't have the ball). The passing that you used to see between Xavi-Iniesta and see in the current Manchester City is not done because a one teammate is open and you can roll the

ball to him. It's all about creating superiority and putting the opposition under more pressure. That's why passing isn't done just because it can be done.

"I loathe all that passing for the sake of it, all that tiki-taka. It's so much rubbish and has no purpose. You have to pass the ball with a clear intention, with the aim of making it into the opposition's goal. It's not about passing for the sake of it."

It's actually about the type of passing. The system focuses on vertical passing – get the ball between the lines and beyond them. These incisive passes are meant to find someone in the lines, an essential 'freeman' who then uses his decision-making to find out the next step. But the goal here is the same. Superiority.

When your midfielders push down the middle, wingers push down the side and fullbacks overlap, there's a lot of pressure on the opposition. The wingers are occupying the two opposition fullbacks, so the 2 CMs aren't marked by them. The striker keeps the CB engaged and that leaves the CMs free to create. When they are under pressure they have the option of passing to fullback (a wide man at that point) and relieve some of the pressure. Always having passing options helped the system – you could start plays over and over again without losing possession and tire out the opposition. That's why Johan Cruyff loved his diamond formation and the creation of triangles; there were always 2 players to pass the ball to and move ahead. About triangles he used to say:

"Constantly creating triangles means that the ball circulation isn't interrupted"

This brings me to my next point about possession.

It's important to note that teams like Barcelona, Bayern, and City obviously have a lot of possession in their games – but that's never the aim. The aim is to keep penetrating the opposition structure (whether that's with positional superiority or numerical superiority) in the lines and possession is simply a result of it. Due to this structure-oriented system the focus is on keeping the ball – that really annoys the opposition. And while these teams are comfortable on the ball, in possession, the search for creating lanes and spaces and exploiting them is what they are

focused on. You keep bombarding opposition defences with vertical passing until a space shows up for you to play the ball towards a winger or striker to score. If that space doesn't show up then you recycle/recirculate possession and keep the ball and start the process again. That's also why Cruyff said:

“If I have the ball, my opponent doesn't.”

That may seem a bit obvious but if you actually think about it, it couldn't have been said any simpler. When done correctly and smartly, constant passing between players of one team means the opponent cannot get near them – they're always a second late in the tackle. When you have a midfield with players that Guardiola chooses then passing is always top-notch. An example would be 2011. Barcelona had turned Wembley stadium into a huge *rondo* and the victim in the middle was Manchester United. The Manchester United players present in that final weren't able to tackle Xavi or Iniesta that night. Their passing was too precise – Ferdinand and Vidic were always too late in their tackle and this excerpt from Iniesta's book sums this up:

“United players never really got the chance to kick Iniesta, or Xavi or Messi. The ball moved too quickly for that; they were overwhelmed by the team in red and blue. No one controls space and time like they do, Iniesta especially. United only committed 16 fouls in 90 mins; they weren't able to commit more even if they wanted to. Ferguson's players had been chasing shadows, always arriving too late, never quite getting there. They didn't so much play, as follow the play. They were at the mercy of a Barcelona side that committed just five fouls, took 16 shots, 12 of them on target, and scored three times. And that in a Champions League final.”

For comparison, United had 3 shots that night and only one was on target. There was nothing Sir Alex Ferguson, one of the greatest managers of all time, could do that night and nothing his players could do. He sat there in the stands, his fists

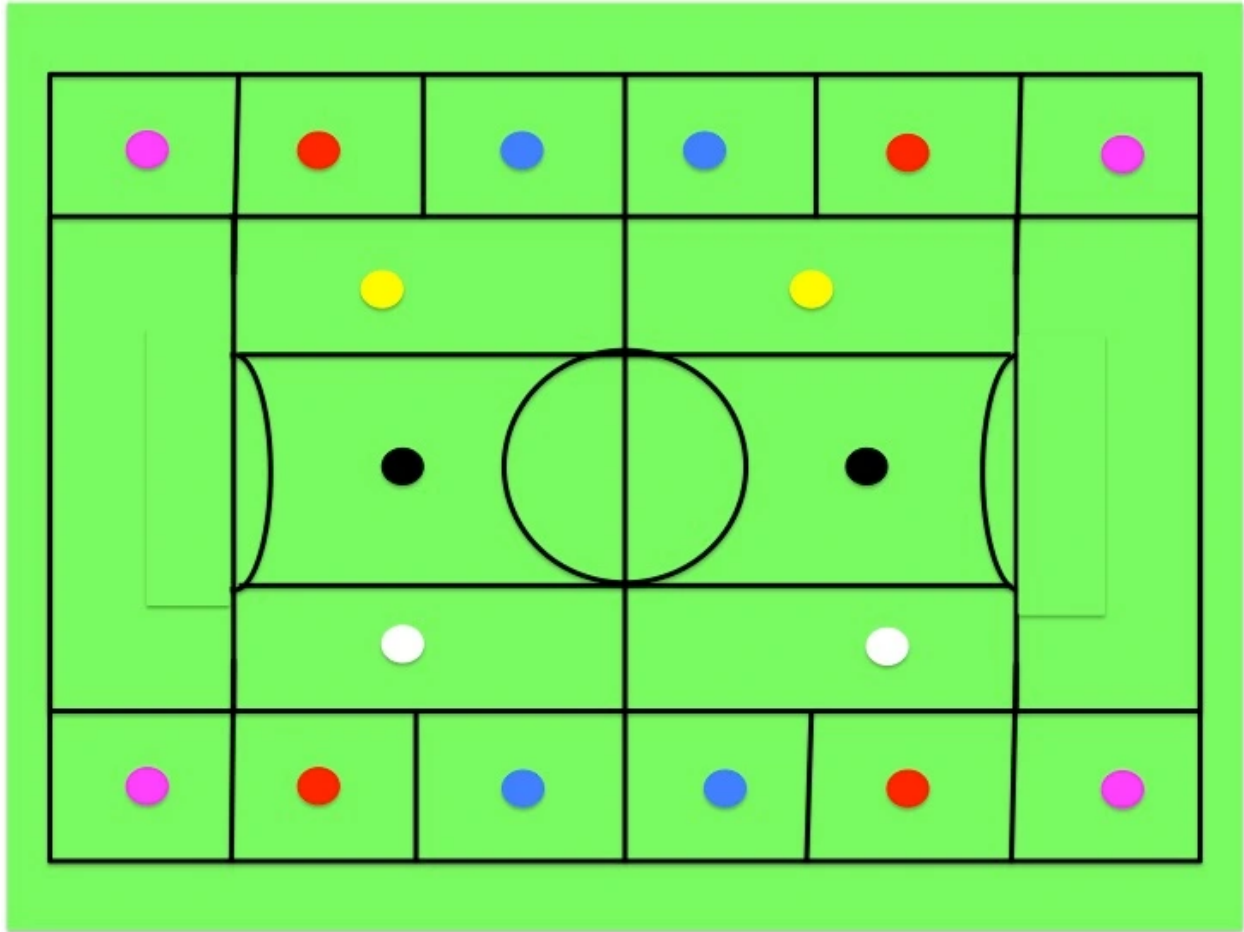
clenched, as his players were helplessly stuck in Barcelona's loop. They simply couldn't get the ball. And that is essentially what Johan Cruyff's philosophy is all about. That is what "juego de posicion" helps you achieve – superiority in every aspect of the game.

Possession and dominance of play in this game was the result – not the aim, however. The aim was to create and exploit space and penetrate the opposition backline. That's why Pep said:

“The objective is to move the opponent, not the ball”

Even in training he even teaches his team how to move using structure when a certain teammate, for instance, cuts in and dribbles or takes on the fullback. There are specifics for every single situation and you yourself can now realize how intricate all this is. Everything is done to impeccable precision which is why this system demands a lot and most players aren't capable of executing these complex plans. Nothing is done just because it can be done – there is always a target in mind. Evidence of this is the special training ground Guardiola uses to teach his players about positioning and movement:





You now realize that these teams played on a level completely different from just passing the ball to someone open. That's completely pointless and gets you nowhere. These intricacies required unbelievable effort and vision from Guardiola's players – whom he had to groom (after leaving Barcelona) to get the 'tiki-taka' mindset out of their heads. Passing needed to be efficient, constructive and incisive. You always had to be on top of your opponent in any given line of the pitch.

And even after reading all this, just so no one is confused, here's a concluding reminder:

“Don't believe what people say. Barça didn't do tiki-taka! It's completely made up! Don't believe a word of it!”

Image source: <http://s017.radikal.ru/i436/1207/a7/1ee6b0b9c7c4.jpg>