



MESSI?

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es to Arsenal this week,
ola and the rest of the
ver lure their biggest
e Nou Camp

27
GOALS
IN 31
GAMES



THE THREE AMIGOS: (l-r) Suarez, Neymar and Messi are the pride and joy of Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu (above)

League in Paris [in 2006]. If you look at coaches which are a reference for this club, they are the ones that win.

'Cruyff won a lot, Rijkaard won, Pep won a lot. And when I say Pep I always say Pep and Tito because Tito was very important for Pep. They were a fantastic team. Pep brought knowledge and was very successful. This club will always be in gratitude to him. And now there's Luis Enrique.'

'But in the end, a team is not only a coach. A team is players, organisation, fans, medical staff, directors; it's everything.'

Intriguingly, Bartomeu does perceive a threat emanating from our shores, though not in the form of an individual club.

'When people ask me who is our rival, I always say: "It's the Premier League". The TV deal, the organisation of the competition, the fact they have interesting matches permanently, that the league is very equal. Everything. The TV rights is a consequence of doing things correctly in past years.'

In a league dominated by Barca and Real Madrid, it seems impossible to emulate the Premier League. But La Liga has now embraced a collective deal rather than allowing the big two to hive off almost all the TV money.

'We will try,' he insists. 'Finally in La Liga we are selling the rights in a more equal way. It's worse for Barcelona, worse for Madrid, worse probably for some of the teams, but we have to think of the long term. We would like to get some TV rights like the Premier League and the competition in La Liga should be (more) interesting.'

Yesterday's 2-1 win at Las Palmas, with goals from Suarez and Neymar, put Barca nine points clear and Bartomeu acknowledges that the Barca-Real Madrid show, compelling as it has become, is damaging for Spanish football. Belatedly, La Liga is now receiving the sort of overseas investment that the Premier League has had for 10 years or more.

Espanyol, the other team in Barcelona, were bought by Chinese billionaire Chen Yansheng; Valencia are owned by Singaporean billionaire Peter Lim; Atletico Madrid have a Chinese stakeholder in Wang Jianlin.

'If people come to Spain and invest in football, that's good for football,' says Bartomeu. 'It gives us more of a challenge to have better teams and try to win every year. I am concerned about my team, Barcelona, but also about football itself.'

Right now, though, he appears to have little to worry about. Not on the pitch, at least.

Ferran and everyone helped to change it. So they (City) are not copying what we are doing. They are doing a different project with an owner, not like here where we have 140,000 owners, a different city, with different fans. So you cannot copy. But, of course, they bring to City the experience that they had in Barcelona.'

Although during Guardiola's glorious four years in charge, Barcelona closely reflected his personality, they never went down the route of being a

one-man club, as Manchester United did with Sir Alex Ferguson, or Arsenal with Arsene Wenger. It has served them well, not being dominated by one strong personality.

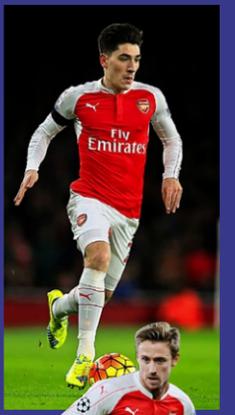
'The modern sports way of organising our team was brought in by Johan Cruyff when he was head coach,' says Bartomeu. 'Then there was Louis van Gaal, who gave a lot of confidence to youth players, to Victor Valdes, Xavi, Iniesta, Carles Puyol. There was Rijkaard, and we won the Champions

Pictures: REUTERS & EXCLUSIVEPIX MEDIA

KEY BATTLES By Pete Jenson

Bellerin v Neymar

THE Arsenal full-back (right) will want to remind Barcelona what they missed out on by letting a home-grown talent leave with a couple of those bursting runs from deep. But he can't afford to leave space open for Neymar, who will look to expose it and get a free run at the centre of Arsenal's defence.



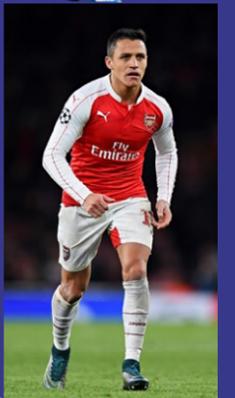
Monreal v Messi

WITH licence to go where he wants, Lionel Messi will not just be a problem for Nacho Monreal (right) but he does like to make the Barca right his starting point these days. Barca's game-plan will be for Luis Suarez to bully the centre-backs and Neymar and Messi to get in behind them on both sides.



Sanchez v Alves

AS with Neymar and Messi, Alexis Sanchez (right) will not stay in wide areas but he will look to have some joy up against his old team-mate Dani Alves. The Brazilian is a far better defender than his attacking tendencies have sometimes led us to believe but he will be tested by a pumped-up Alexis out to prove a point.



The key to beating Barca ... press high on their defence

HOW to tame Barca — yes, it is possible.

The last team to take points from Barcelona at the Nou Camp were Deportivo de la Coruña, who drew 2-2, after approaching the game in a way that few teams dare.

Barcelona are used to sides defending deep and only leaving one or two players high up the pitch.

That enables Gerard Pique, Javier Mascherano and Sergio Busquets to bring the ball out comfortably from the back.

But Deportivo left three players high up the pitch in central positions. Strikers Jonathan Rodriguez and Lucas Perez and midfielder Faycal Fajr effectively blocked Barca from playing out from the back.

Fajr is usually Deportivo's

playmaker but he spent his time shadowing Busquets at every turn.

Pique said: 'It was impossible to play out through the middle and we had to start moves in wider areas.'

Arsenal could employ the same tactic with Olivier Giroud and Alexis Sanchez sitting on Pique and Mascherano and Mesut Ozil dealing with Busquets.

