



# Spanish Football Managers and Zonal Marking in the Nineties: from Wise Old Men to Football Engineers

## *Entrenadores de fútbol españoles y marcación zonal en los noventa: de sabios a ingenieros de fútbol*

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### Palabras clave

- Fútbol
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- Táctica

### Abstract

This research aims to improve current knowledge on managers' professional culture and practices through the study of how tactical requirements, and specifically the introduction of zonal marking in the 80's and 90's, transformed professional football managers training methods, their professional competences and requirements. In order to do so, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Spanish first división La Liga professional managers and footballers. Spanish managers in the 80's enjoyed a traditional authority and disregarded formal instruction and knowledge. However, the tactical complexity emerged through the zonal marking system and the training methods evolution from physical to tactically focused generated a new kind of abstract knowledge and new pedagogical and group managing skills mandatory to achieve success and manage the group.

### Resumen

*Esta investigación tiene como objetivo mejorar el conocimiento actual sobre la cultura y las prácticas profesionales de los entrenadores a través del estudio de cómo los requisitos tácticos, y específicamente la introducción de la defensa zonal en los años 80 y 90, transformaron los métodos de entrenamiento de los entrenadores de fútbol profesional, sus competencias y requisitos profesionales. Para ello, se llevaron a cabo 23 entrevistas semiestructuradas con los entrenadores y futbolistas profesionales de la primera división española de La Liga. Los entrenadores españoles de los años 80 mostraron la misma autoridad tradicional y desprecio por la instrucción y el conocimiento formales que se encuentran en la literatura anterior. Sin embargo, la complejidad táctica que surgió a través del sistema de defensa zonal y la evolución de los métodos de entrenamiento generó un nuevo tipo de conocimiento abstracto y nuevas habilidades pedagógicas y de gestión de grupo obligatorias para lograr el éxito y gestionar el grupo.*

## Introduction

Professional football is a massive social and cultural phenomenon that has received wide attention from the academic world in the last decades. However, the working conditions and social relations among professionals have not been approached as thoroughly as other dimensions, but that gap is being tackled by a series of recent studies on managers and footballers' professional culture, identities and social relations. This current trend has additional trouble due to the difficulty in gaining access to a traditionally closed community (Kelly and Waddington 2006) this study focuses on the ways in which managers maintain control over players in professional soccer clubs. More specifically, the article focuses on the ways in which disciplinary codes are established by managers and the sanctions that are imposed on players for breaches of club discipline. The findings highlight the arbitrary character of these codes and the central part played by intimidation and abuse, both verbal and physical, as aspects of managerial control within clubs. We argue that these techniques of managerial control reflect the origins of professional soccer in late Victorian England, when professional players were the equivalent of industrial workers and, like industrial workers, were seen as requiring authoritarian regulation and control. This pattern of management has persisted in professional soccer long after it has been superseded in industrial relations more generally because, while many aspects of the management of soccer clubs have involved increasing professionalization and bureaucratization, the role of the manager has proved remarkably resistant to these processes. The authority of the team manager continues to be based on traditional forms of authoritarianism and this allows managers an unusually high degree of autonomy in defining their own role, while placing relatively few constraints on their authority in relation to players. (PsycINFO Database Record (c.

Therefore, it has been easier for academics to gain access to apprentices in the road to professional status. That is the case for Parker (1996) McGillivray, Fearn and McIntosh (2005), Bertrand (2009) and Brown and Potrac (2009) the analysis focuses upon (a. All of them also identify similar traits, such as an accepted and shared hyper masculine culture, manifested specially through the acceptance of pain as a constituent part of the profession and the subsequent subordination of their own health to the team's needs. Scholars have also found that apprentices develop a profound identification with the footballer's role, which becomes an essential part of their identities, and at the same time acknowledge the profession's insecurity and the

inherent difficulty of achieving a professional status. Both Cushion and Jones (2006) and Llopis (2008) included in their observations the managers' role in these formative ages, only to find that they are the ones responsible for developing and reinforcing this particular work ethic through the socialization process. All these traits are then again identified in Roderick's (2003) research on professional footballers. In addition to the pain and sacrifice culture, Roderick also describes the competitiveness and individual struggle natural to an ever changing and fragile context where individual careers are constantly challenged by biographical and professional changes such as injuries, new managers and transfers.

Also managers have received new attention. For example, Kelly's research is focused on the British manager (2006; 2008) this study focuses on the ways in which managers maintain control over players in professional soccer clubs. More specifically, the article focuses on the ways in which disciplinary codes are established by managers and the sanctions that are imposed on players for breaches of club discipline. The findings highlight the arbitrary character of these codes and the central part played by intimidation and abuse, both verbal and physical, as aspects of managerial control within clubs. We argue that these techniques of managerial control reflect the origins of professional soccer in late Victorian England, when professional players were the equivalent of industrial workers and, like industrial workers, were seen as requiring authoritarian regulation and control. This pattern of management has persisted in professional soccer long after it has been superseded in industrial relations more generally because, while many aspects of the management of soccer clubs have involved increasing professionalization and bureaucratization, the role of the manager has proved remarkably resistant to these processes. The authority of the team manager continues to be based on traditional forms of authoritarianism and this allows managers an unusually high degree of autonomy in defining their own role, while placing relatively few constraints on their authority in relation to players. (PsycINFO Database Record (c which according to his findings is characteristic of a Weberian traditional authority. According to this model, the manager excerpts his authority with neither clear limits nor formal rules, which in turn allows him a great share of arbitrariness when giving punishments and rewards. This also implies that rules and behaviors change with every new appointed manager. Through the interviews Kelly also found that the use of verbal abuse and aggressive behaviors were accepted practices as tools for group management. This authoritative derive was even positively judged by some players as an effective

motivation technique, which leads us again to the hyper masculine and aggressive professional culture. At the same time, Kelly identified a series of shared beliefs among managers: that knowledge comes from practice, the subsequent inadequacy of formal training and qualifications and the conviction that former playing experience was therefore the most valuable source of knowledge. This is what Day (2011) and Carter (Carter 2011) label *craft coaching*, the traditional understanding of the role based on craftsmanship and autonomous from science and rationalization. It seems that this craftsmanship approach has been even more accused in football, due to the greater weight of technical and tactical matters, the professional group managing dimension and the closed and secretive professional culture developed.

Research by Potrac and Jones (2009b; 2009a) Wells, Peters, and Johnson (1993, Nelson, Allanson and Potrac (2013) and Potrac, Jones and Cushion (2007) tries to understand the managers' day to day work as a constant negotiation with the other significant players, such as footballers, technical staff and club executives. Their use of the notion of micropolitics indicates that managers must make use of a great variety of techniques in order to gain respect and authority in the club, including manipulating their image to keep up the players' confidence in their training and playing programs. This implies that the manager authority is far from absolute, but on the contrary is faced with resistance by players and officials, and must develop strategies not necessarily disciplinary, but also of convincing through practice and personal relations.

This continuously evolving context of constant struggle is shaped by the greatest of all constraints, which is the competition itself and the team's performance. It is because of the sporting practice that the team itself exists, and it is around the sporting practice that it is organized. Sporting success is the ultimate goal of all professional teams, and this goal determines the required competences, the playing organization and the status of players and their hierarchy. It is therefore safe to assume that tactical matters and coaching practices must have an impact on footballers' and managers' required skills, identities and professional culture.

The idea that tactics are not only a Sports Science subject, but also a sociological one emerged first in the work of Marxists such as Brhöm (1976) and Rigauer (1981), but was also central in the work of the Spanish Verdú (1980) and acknowledged by Giulianotti in recent years, although admitting it was not an usual area for sociological thinking (2000, 127).

This research aims therefore to start closing that gap by studying the consequences for the Spanish

football managers' community of one of the most significant tactical evolution in Spanish football: the transition from a man-to-man defense system to a zonal marking one in the last years of the 80's and the first years of the 90's.

Man-to-man marking was the result of the uprising of a new tactical system in the thirties, the WM created by Arsenal's manager Herbert Graham (Say 1996), and expanded through the world along this new system after World War II. It came to dominate football thinking throughout the world, although the prior zonal marking somehow resisted in some countries, especially in South America (Wilson 2009). In Europe, the abandoning of man-to-man marking started in the seventies in England, while Spain, as many other European countries, had to wait until Arigo Sacchi's A.C. Milan European triumphs – 1987/88 and 1988/89 seasons European Cup champions – for zonal marking to get traction and finally replace man-to-man marking in the 90's.

This replacement implied a deep modification on playing and coaching patterns (Amieiro 2007; Caneda Pérez 1999) that shifted the exigencies made on the professional footballers, but also on the professional managers. As we shall see, they had to adapt their training practices and exercises, their personal skills and their knowledge in order to successfully adapt themselves to the new tactical context.

## Research Methods

Information was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate research technique to reach out people subjective experiences and personal circumstances, and are also a flexible tool to addresses new subjects and approaches throughout the field work. A script was previously developed including the main themes to cover: professional career, Spanish football characteristics, tactical systems, training methodology, defense techniques (man-to-man vs. zonal), footballer/coach relationships, clubs organization, and social, economic and cultural context. The script was used only as a guide, without following any necessary order and respecting the natural development of the conversation. After each interview, the researcher took notes on a field book about the setting, the development of the interview, including non-verbal communication and use of sketches to represent tactical information. Interviews were recorded using a recorder and then transcribed and analyzed using software Atlas.ti. They were analyzed using an inductive-deductive method. The starting point were the

thematic areas identified in the script. The information was also categorized using sociodemographic categories for each respondent (age, team role, footballer/coach, professional career). During the analysis, new categories emerged that were identified and applied in a recursive manner. Main categories were, football tactics changes, training methodology changes, football competencies changes, interpersonal and pedagogical skills changes, team relationship changes, social changes (Edwards 2009; Alonso 1998).

In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were carried out to professional managers and footballers. 13 were face-to-face interviews, while 9 took place through a phone call and another one by videoconference. Interviews had a minimum length of 21 minutes and a maximum of 110, and they were recorded and transcribed. There were 10 interviews to professional managers, all of them having worked in the top level Spanish football league, *La Liga*, the Spanish Second Division or both, and 12 interviews to former professional footballers, all of them also having developed a top-level career in *La Liga*. Finally, a physical trainer was also interviewed, who had also developed his career at *La Liga*. All of them were men. Among the footballers, eight had been in the national team, and all of them were currently retired, their ages ranging from 40 to 56 at the time of the interview. Managers had had a prior career as professional footballers in seven cases, six of them in *La Liga*, their ages ranging from 76 to 66. One of the footballers resumed a managing career short after retirement, and therefore was considered both as footballer and manager. Both managers and footballers were working at the time we are studying, roughly the years 1985-95, and therefore took an active role in the phenomenon studied.

Using as a starting point the research team professional acquaintances, a convenience sample was developed and expanded through a snow ball technique where the interviewees were asked to offer a new possible contact. Throughout the sampling maximum variability was sought, assuring a wide range of biographies, on-field and off-field status, age and positions on the field. In a closed social world as this, only these kinds of research strategies could assure us the necessary sample representativeness.

## Findings

### *Managing in the 80's: Shouting a Lot But Not Saying Anything*

As in many other football traditions around the world, most Spanish managers have had a former career as footballers. Therefore, once they get to man-

age a professional team, they have the previous experience of all their former managers, their practices, codes and behaviors.

As for the managers who started their managing career at some point in the 80's, immediately before the rise of zonal marking, they all agree in picturing two different profiles for their managers in the seventies, when most of them were still footballers. On one side, there were those who almost showed no interest whatsoever in the training practice and had no scientific background of any kind, as depicts a XX year old manager who was a Second Division central back:

Years ago there was almost no work. I was an ordinary, mediocre player and one time in the Second Division I was fed up of running around the field and I said "Mister, we already did 20 laps!" He was reading the newspaper on the seats. There was no physical coach, no goalkeeper coach, no psychologist, there was nothing, just him. "Take it easy, one more lap, come on!" And after that, we got to play, the big guys marking the big guys and the small ones marking the small ones.

On the other side, those centered in the physical training, following the trends and innovations of physical coaching from track and field and other individual sports which started to build the sports science corpus. This implied reducing the ball centered exercises and the exclusive dedication of several week days to hard physical exercises unrelated to the football practice, as this 73 year old former left back and manager remembers:

On Tuesday we went to the hill... with [Manager], don't know if you remember him, this one manager. To the hill, but we had to do...! And he would carry us there, up the hill, and let us there, and then well, we had to come down and he would be taking our times. I mean, it was another concept, another thing. And it was always the same, always. Tuesdays were criminal because, except for the thin ones, who suffer the less, such as [Player] and others, who always arrived first, and then we came the others, more heavy, and we suffered. That was suffering day. And you know why? Because you had to make a physical effort and you didn't even touch de ball.

However, both profiles had something in common, the total absence of a tactical guide by the manager, neither a specific team coordination work nor an individual one on tactical matters, on how to play. Another former player who resumed managing in the

eighties remembered how in the lower divisions the manager's tactical role was almost inexistent:

The truth is... I remember our first managers, at [Third Division team], where I played for 5 years, I don't even remember, we would just get out the field and start playing, and that's all.

Not only they wouldn't talk about collective tactics, they wouldn't talk about anything and only in some occasions yell at players, as the former left back remembers when comparing his cherished Eastern Europe manager with all the others he had had:

Yeah, I guess he was the exception, because other managers wouldn't talk too much. [Manager], for example, almost didn't talk at all. He would yell at you kind of "Hey!" I don't know, some of them, a lot of them... I had seven different managers at [First Division Club] but the one I have learnt most from, honestly, was him.

They also stated that, although there were mandatory managing courses in the seventies and early eighties, these had almost no substance, and managers would be firstly appointed with almost only their former footballer careers as background. This is how the physical trainer who started working on professional football in the mid-eighties puts it:

And even less. Maybe you were a former player, having played until your early thirties, since careers ended sooner in those times, and you resumed managing. When you were 40, or 35, and you had a *La Liga* team or a Second Division or a Third Division one, and you didn't have the education you have these days. Then, what would you do? What you had been doing up until that moment.

At the same time, the same manager who doesn't remember any tactical orders whatsoever coming from his managers remembers how in those last days of Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) and the first years of democracy there was almost no travelling outside Spain and there were no books or dossiers to be able to get familiar with the new methods coming up, and how important the first travelers were:

I remember when the first managers went out of Spain, when they got back we always asked them about their impressions, about how managers worked over there, the main ideas and practices, and some of it was tremendously enlightening. You have to understand we were at zero level then.

It all summed up to this image of managers who, first of all, privileged his footballer experience as the main source of knowledge and at the same time made fun of or was openly suspicious of any theoretical knowledge. It was part of a temperamental and aggressive masculinity best expressed by the then common expression "*I've been in the bench for so long my balls have no longer any hair*".

In this model, managers were, above all, moral references with a disciplinary mission and a main practical goal: keep the team physically in shape. Besides this task, what was the manager's role in the team's tactical performance? One first idea shared by both managers and players at the time was that managers should focus on the defensive side of the game, since attacking depended on individual creativity and improvisation. As a consequence, the manager role was organizing the defense, and it was at this area where we could find this tactical work. That's why the man-to-man marking was so crucial, because it was in its deployment where the manager's role was developed in its more footballing, collective arena.

From a theoretical standpoint, in football man-to-man defense works assigning to each defender one attacking player, who he must follow all through the field and prevent him from touching the ball or at least approaching the goal. In practical terms, Spanish football in the eighties, as in other nations, had come up with a more evolved and complex practice. First of all, there were four players in the defense line, the left and right backs marking the left and right forwards, and the stopper taking charge of the central forward. The fourth one was the sweeper or *libero* — an Italian word — and was responsible for helping his fellow mates if any of them happened to lose track of their man. It was not a straight forward man-to-man defense, since defenders wouldn't follow attackers all over the pitch, but remain in a defined area and change the marking responsibility with other defenders if the attacking player were to decide to change his position in the field, for example from one side to the other. Also, the midfielders would probably excerpt a zonal marking, except for the most talented opponents, who would receive a strict man-to-man marking.

In this context, it was clear what the manager's task was: to assign the marks in each game depending on the characteristics of his players and the rivals. These marks were normally self-evident, since players were specialized in specific positions, but in occasions the manager would make an especial adjustment due to extraordinary circumstances. It was at that moment that he would show the world his inner instinct and especial wisdom, his differential value, as

a former manager from the seventies had to do to deal with Johan Cruyff explained:

I knew what Cruyff used to do at Camp Nou [F.C. Barcelona stadium]. When things were not working for them, he would sit deep and Urruti [F.C. Barcelona goalkeeper at the time] would give him the ball and Migueli and Olmo, the central backs, would go into the opponents area and wait for his long high balls. So I got him one men to mark him in our own half field, and a different one to mark him in their own half field.

These decisions were not just tactical, but also psychological, outcome of the analysis of the players' character, as the same manager reminds us:

It was the same thing with this kid, we were playing Real Madrid next Sunday and he comes to me on Tuesday and says "Mister, I don't know if I'm gonna be in the starting side this Sunday, but if you pick me, let me mark Santillana [the best Spanish striker at the time]. He was a defensive midfielder. And I say, "Well, it's only Tuesday". And he says "I'm just telling you, sir. You don't have to pick me, you are the one in charge, but if you do, give me Santillana". So we practice on Wednesday, we practice Thursday, and Thursday I made him play as stopper a bit in the practice game, and finally I made him mark Santillana in the game. And he stopped him. We won, well, you win once, 1-0, and he was terrific. Terrific. Of course, he is telling me, he has a conviction, you see he has the conditions, he's a defensive midfielder, he can play there, he has played as a stopper and so on. And you say to yourself "the guy is there telling you..." and he was young too. And I made him mark Santillana.

Picking the players and their marks was therefore the manager's main responsibility, the moment where his specifically football knowledge and prestige were at stake. Once the players picked, it is not clear if he complemented that decision with an specific tactical training. Souvenirs are somehow contradictory, as for example these two from a former footballer who debuted in the mid-eighties. First he recalls no instructions from the managers:

In those years there were systems but... but the players positions and their tasks were not of great importance. You just came out with a system, three backs and a sweeper, four midfielders and two strikers, or three midfielders and three strik-

ers, and that was it. Each one would accomplish his function.

And later on he does remember lots of them:

I had managers who would give us a one hour long pre-match chat. They would go one by one telling us what we had to do.

This contradiction gets solved if we remember what tactical advice was considered in those days: since man-to-man marking divided the match in a series of individual confrontations, managers' advices and orders were tailor made for each duel and had to be rendered individually. Some general comments could be made, but not in depth collective analysis was possible when each player performance depended on his assigned opponent and cooperation between two or more players during the game was at most occasional.

Therefore, the manager assigned a player, described his main features and what to expect from him, and ended with some sentence to cheer his player up, probably some highly masculine expression. What the chat didn't cover, and neither did the field practice, were instructions or ideas about how to specifically act during the game. This is crucial, since it allows us to understand the players' autonomy based on his recognized football knowledge, as an eighties sweeper signals:

When I first got to La Liga nobody had to tell me when I had to cover or change marks with a player. I already knew how to do that, that's why they had chosen me. Before you knew almost everything. The manager would point you in the chalkboard, "you go there, you there and you there", and you knew you had to do certain things, and you there other things. But the manager wouldn't tell us. He would say "you're gonna face a player fast and this and that".

There is then a tension between the player's autonomy to take decisions and the manager's authority to motivate and verbally abuse players and give them specific sets of tasks. The manager would require from the player to fill out their tasks with committed enthusiasm, but wouldn't tell them or show them how to accomplish them, which was the players' responsibility. At the same time, the player would never question the tasks assignment, wouldn't employ neither his personal insight on the game nor carry out unauthorized actions, and therefore handed over the strategic vision and the intellectual work to the man-

ager. Managers decided what to do, players how to do it. As long as the player didn't step into the manager's prerogatives, he was fulfilling his duties, despite possible erroneous executions. He could then inhibit from responsibility and implement a bureaucratic, detached approach on the game. As one manager at the time with a critical point of view expressed:

Yes, there was obviously this trend which considered that the player... they wanted submissive players, not thinking ones. Players to whom the manager would say "you go this way, you get to this point and you do this". And the player would follow. And then, bit by bit, the player would lose interest in the game. He would only care about being physically fit and following the manager's orders, and he would consider having fulfilled his job.

Man-to-man defense not only allowed the individualization of responsibilities and orders, but also freed up training time for physical work, since there was no collective tactics to work on. In the eighties, the indifferent to fitness manager type had almost disappeared, and there were the new scientific ones who had taken the lead, together with the newly appointed physical trainers. We therefore can find an enormous homogeneity regarding training practices souvenirs. This description made by one former player who started playing professionally in the early eighties summarizes it for all of them:

We always played on Sundays back then, since there were no TV games. Monday used to be the day off, Tuesday was hard physical work, Wednesday half physical and half technical exercises, Thursday was the practice game, Friday bath and massage, Saturday some football-tennis, and Sunday the game. That was the week. I mean, the weekly program. Each and every week.

Two main features of the training routines appear clear: first, the aforementioned absence of any collective tactical exercises, except for the practice game; and second, the split between physical and technical exercises. This was known at the time as analytical training, and was simply what was considered to be the best practice at the time by the sport science. Besides, since players were already experts on how to play football, technical exercises were mostly about repeating standardized gestures with no or limited opposition, designed only to keep the player in good shape, not to increase his performance or teach him anything new.

Thursday practice game was therefore the only collective practice of the week. But no player has

recalled continuous comments and corrections on behalf of the manager, mostly silence and observation. Probably, it was the moment the manager had to evaluate his players and decide the final starting side, but not the moment for any tactical systematic work.

However, this absence might not be the single responsibility of managers. Although the aforementioned sweeper considered he had nothing to learn, managers at that time considered players to be very limited in the tactical aspects of the game, as one former manager puts it:

They were very limited tactically. I've been in first division teams and I have tried to implement certain things and the players didn't have too much knowledge. They were good at other things. Today they have many more tactical skills. Back in those days you would work one or two things and it was enough.

Players then had an instinctive approach to the game, found in practice, but not the ability to extract general principles from that empirical knowledge. That's why down the road our sweeper acknowledged his lack of understanding of the game itself:

I'm telling you, I played elite, professional football since I was 15 years old and when retired from football, and I knew nothing about it. I'm a manager now [in a youth team] and I still don't know anything about it. And not just because I was tracking down an opponent all through the game, but because I was left with so many doubts and I lack so many principles that, if I were to develop my career now, I could learn so much....

According to the managers, players not only lacked knowledge of the game, they didn't care either and refused to make the effort, as another manager working since the late seventies tells us:

You have to understand that players always look for their own good, and they don't usually notice almost anything of what's going on. I mean, they do notice, but not about the important things, which are always on the details. The one who is always thinking on how to make things work is the manager. The players would practice something one day, and then another, and another, and then they'd start realizing what was going on. But when you changed something, something they are doing without thinking...

These patterns resulted in a patronizing relationship, one in which managers don't think players are

able to understand complex notions, and in turn players become infantilized, delegating all responsibilities on the manager.

### **The Nineties: Times, They Are A Changin'**

This system was then a way of understanding football and practice, but also a distribution of roles and hierarchies which shaped the professional culture at the time. It's going to be transformed by two simultaneous and complimentary forces: the modern zonal marking system and new theories about integrated training. The impact of Arrigo Sacchi's zonal marking in the Spanish football community can hardly be overstated, since it created a feeling among professionals of a paradigm shift, the emergence of a totally new form of understanding and playing football, as one player who played against Milan in those years acknowledges:

Let me be clear, these guys, when I say the changed football I'm saying that they forced their opponents to think differently when having the ball. It's like being in a land where you know what's in it. You know which animals live there, what the dangers are, where you are safe and where you are not. Suddenly, you wake up one morning and the land has changed, and you have to deal with the unknown.

Along with that phenomenon, a group of foreign managers are going to arrive to Spain with a whole new training methodology based on integrating tactical, technical and physical work around the ball, which is going to revolutionize training practices and above all modernizing the authoritarian, traditional culture aforementioned. Their main figure will be Johan Cruyff, who will win four consecutive Spanish championships and one European Cup. For players playing at that time, these foreign managers were responsible for the Spanish football upgrading without a doubt, as the sweeper from the eighties tells us:

When did this country change? I think it was when Europeans managers arrived, foreign managers with new concepts, and then we started applying them. And I do think we've been very good students and we are even better teachers now. But the truth is that we have evolved only when foreign managers came here and brought us their knowledge. Until then, we had a somehow archaic trajectory.

Despite controversies and disputes, both the zonal marking and the integrated training would become hegemonic in a few years, transforming in turn the man-to-man defense in somehow a proof of backward thinking, as one manager remembers:

I mean yes, as years went by, man-to-man marking lost grip, even among the managers. It was even frowned upon, seen as conservative, not progressive.

How this zonal marking worked? Interviewees share with the football literature ()its three main features: a flat back line, pressing and compacting. The flat back line implies that all defenders are in a straight line across the pitch, so every attacker moving deeper than that line gets automatically in offside. In this manner, when this line moves up, the available attacking space is reduced. At the same time, the team as a whole shifts following the position of the ball and therefore abandoning the farthest areas creating, as in basketball, a strong side full of defenders and a weak side, far from the ball, empty of them. This in turn reduces the width of the pitch and the distance between defenders, compacting the team and reducing free spaces. These compactness and lack of spaces allows the team to always pressure the player with the ball and to outnumber attackers in the surrounding area. The idea is not to directly steal the ball, but to divert the attack and never being beaten, forcing them to pass back, sideways or to make a difficult pass forward. The sweeper described this way his experience against A.C. Milan:

They didn't press you directly, their goal was the passing lane. You should never be overtaken, and there will be another teammate profiting from their deficient pass. The opponent is gonna be forced to try something too precise. If he gets it, ok, if he doesn't, we steal the ball.

For this tactical system to work, players must keep the distance between them, move together as a unit according to the movements of the ball, their teammates and the opponents. According to the interviewees, such as this international central back, it's not about being responsible for one particular space, but to adapt our position and our behavior to the unfolding events and the team needs, constantly rebalancing the imbalances created by the opponents' movements:

There are critical places in the pitch where if a striker tries to get away from you, you must follow



him, because in that area you cannot lend him to your teammate. You must go after him, and it is your teammate close to you who, aware of the imbalance, must step into the area you have left. And that's what gives that *accordion* feeling, because the whole team reacts to imbalances and tries to fill up the area emptied by the attacker, who tries precisely to generate free space for one of his teammates to enjoy by pulling you away.

Thus, the main characteristic of zonal marking is its relational nature, the fact that each player's behavior is defined dynamically depending on the correspondent behavior of all the other elements in the game, that is to say the ball, the teammates and the opponents. As a consequence the team needs the players not only to correctly read the game, but to develop a shared reading, a common language, since different reading of the same situation will produce imbalances and inefficiencies, as points out this physical trainer:

I mean, we all have our own way of understanding the game, but when it is about zonal marking, collectively we must try to understand the situations in the same way, because if we don't, we are leaving free space to the opponents where he make some damage.

The creation of this common language is now the managers' responsibility, and to implement it they must develop adapted, customized games and drills. This urge for new methods coincides with the turn from analytical to integrated training, which implies a cognitive stance. Training is no longer about getting players in shape, it's about having them playing fine, as the same physical trainer tells us:

So you had to think: what is the priority here? That they play well on Sunday, that they are able to do what we want them to do. To be able to correctly judge. So what do I have to do? Running, jumping, clashing, pushing sacks, lifting weights or medicine balls... I don't think that's so... I have time for that, but all that is not going on the top drawer. Reading goes into the top drawer. And once this decision is taken, you then design your training. And you do it always incorporating time and space.

Zonal marking is also about complexity, decision-making and cognitive skills, and therefore it doesn't depend either on physical fitness, as one manager who adopted zonal marking in the early nineties points out:

You can be sure; to train zonal marking you don't need no medicine balls.

The idea then is to integrate the physical, the technical and the tactical in the same exercises, which implies reproducing the game context and introducing the ball. Despite some managers and physical trainers skepticism, the integrated training will quickly become the new paradigm, a shift perceived by players such as this centre back as a liberation:

And the drills, also, if there's a ball in them, which is what a footballer likes, having a ball around even if you touch it twice through the whole practice, but having a ball around. And they are high intensity routines, but it was a really important change for us, from not seeing the ball from Monday to Wednesday to seeing it from Monday. And to make exercises that made sense.

As we see, theory was put into practice through new exercises. It started with the reproduction of pre-determined actions, in which the ball had to follow a certain path through the players representing a usual situation. Then, specially through the Dutch managers, arrived the open games, played in different spaces and with variables rules, in which the players had to choose the best possible behavior, designed to prepare them for the decision-making of a real match. The key term was transferring, having the practice prepare the players for what they were going to find in the game, as this physical trainer who worked with one of the Dutch managers explains:

Working with [Dutch manager] for me was buffff...! It meant most of all openness, because you could really see that what was going on during the week was directly transferred to the game. We were practicing exactly how we wanted the team to play. And of course it was zonal marking, rationally filling up spaces both attacking and defending, creating pass lanes, having always different options, never rush...

However, zonal marking was not only about freedom and creativity; it was also about conforming to collective guides and principles. There is a tension between the collective functioning, which is closed, and the individual reading, which is always open. Collective functioning includes moving coordinately as a unit, shifting together following the ball or keeping the distances between players. The improvement of these mechanisms doesn't rely on free games, on the contrary, it is achieved through the relentless repetition of routines and the progressive assimilation of

concepts. That's why along with all the ball-related fun there was also a whole new set of exercises, first line by line, then the whole team together, practicing the collective movements without opposition, stopping constantly to explain and correct. Exercises that are, conversely, every player's nightmare, as even the managers have to admit it:

Look, players cannot stand this, with or without the ball. Because this is how it works: the goalkeeper passes the fullback, he then passes to another, and this one to another one, and each time we make one of these actions, four players touch the ball, and the rest don't, they just move around the pitch. And before doing it with the ball, they have done it without it. This is a moment nobody likes. I think even the managers don't like it. But you know you have to keep doing it because you need to play following some guidelines or you are doomed in these days.

Altogether, both collective behavior and individual decision-making are going to take over practice time. Technical skills will be worked through these open games, and so will also happen with most of the physical training. Only those very specific physical aspects not suited for this integrated approach will continue to be worked on its own, as told by the former player who resumed managing in the early nineties:

I know there are certain specific domains that may be through repetition or through physical training you can improve and may be useful in other areas. But the foundation is the intelligence; the foundation is playing together, coordinated, synchronized.

### Managing the Zone: Engineers and Teachers

As we have seen, the manager duties have shifted from disciplining, motivating and picking to developing cognitive skills and habits in their players and defining guidelines for action and ways to implement them. The more prominent trait in this paradigm shift is the abstract, rational aspect of it and the new responsibility for the manager to develop a complete set of criteria for action and interpretation. This meant to directly intervene in the *how to play* side of the game, the traditional players' domain, and to do it from a theoretical point of view as experts, not anchored to their practical experience. Let's see how these new duties are developed. First of all, the manager must take some decisions about the position of the team in the pitch: the higher they set themselves, the big-

gest the pressure they can excel, but also the greatest space on their backs and therefore the greatest risk they will be assuming. And he also has to define when the team must press, when it must sit deep, when it must step up and how to do each of these things. This makes the manager must more of a key role than before, as one former central defender points out:

And that's why I think is so remarkable what Cholo Simeone is doing, because the team implements its ideas to the limit, and that's the fundamental thing. Because the technical skills come with the player, but how the team works tactically at 300%, how they press, how they know when they have to press and when they don't, when they have to reduce spaces, when not, when they must charge and when not, that is such a huge amount of work and it's only the manager's credit.

The manager must also design how the team is going to react when losing or gaining the ball, how to act in different game situations, and what specific movements and behaviors must carry on the players and the sign they must be aware of. The team as a whole moves, reacts, adapts and generates advantageous situations to take advantage of, and that is far from what managers used to do, reminds us the centre defender who worked under a Dutch manager in the early nineties:

People are best placed, people know how to convert positions, convert systems, from 4-4-2 to 4-3-3 or even 3-5-2... which means there are players who step up into attack, so you outnumber the opponents, but you do this line by line, it's not about someone feeling in shape and running to the front. No, all that goes away. Everything is under control.

It is not only the positions in the field known as systems, but much more than that, since it implies a series of roles and functions associated through a net of shared meanings. For this information and behavior flow to work smoothly, players must be familiar with these roles and must be able to identify the appropriate action according to the needs of the moment, and that falls also under the manager's responsibility. He cannot take decisions during the game on behalf of his players, so he must make sure through the practice what these guidelines are, the relevant stimulus and the correct answers to the different situations. We are not talking about closed orders to be implemented blindly, but open tasks which always include individual interpretation.

The design and implementation of this tactical guideline is the great contribution of the zonal revolution. Managers used to tell players what to do, not how to do it, but from now on, they are going to have a much more active role in the team performance and organization, entering areas which were a prerogative of players in the old professional culture, and to do so he must offer adequate answer and improvements based on his rational and theoretical understanding of the game. The manager is no longer a wise man or a wizard, he is an engineer.

However, once designed the system, the manager must make his players understand it and implement it. Zonal marking requires some rationalization and some abstract thinking, both by the manager and the players. The latter must assimilate a system of theoretical notions and practice their decision-making. In order to succeed, the manager must act as a pedagogical figure unknown before, and at the same time the player must accept to be part of a learning process and even more important, to submit his own judgment to the collective guide. It is all about teaching the player how to act, that is to say, to correctly identify the relevant stimulus and to make the right decisions. The manager is no longer coaching but teaching, as says one manager:

I don't consider myself a coach, I'm a football teacher, if you understand me, the one who coaches is the physical trainer. We are professors of the game. That's why Capello or other managers like Mourinho went to practice on sneakers, they didn't even put on their football boots.

The difference between sneakers and boots is fundamental due to its symbolic content. Managers had been up to that moment former footballer. Their influence and prestige among players came from their knowledge acquired as players as well as their track record. Whenever the group would have doubts about them, they could always show their ability with the ball to reinforce their position. Not wearing boots means that their legitimacy doesn't come from their practical experience as players but from their specific theoretical knowledge as managers. Therefore, their career as footballers or their technical skills are no longer the right criteria to judge them. In fact, they don't pretend to show practically the players how to do things, and they don't even think it is mandatory for them to be able to do it. They lead because they have more knowledge and of a different kind than footballers do, and because they are able to apply it to the team to improve its performance.

However, a learning process requires not only having the knowledge, but also the ability to explain and communicate to persuade the student. The zonal marking provides answers for every game situation based on general principles, but those principles must be understood and mastered. The player must understand why it is correct to press in some contexts and to deep down in others, and to achieve that comprehension, the teacher must engage in a real communication with the student, in which there is a real dialogue and the noise is as limited as possible. The manager does not only give talks, but he must also make sure he has been understood, as this manager points out:

In fact, I always tell my players that if they want any explanation, they can ask for an individual meeting. I try to explain everything during teamwork, but any additional information about why we do things, I'm always willing to give it.

Understanding is not enough, however. There must be also persuasion to achieve commitment, and at that point the theoretical explanations are not enough, players need to be convinced by practice. The manager is being tested every day by players, and it's only through practical evidence that he can build on his leadership, as reminds us one back from the nineties.

Well, you know, when you are on the training pitch maybe sometimes you go 'what the hell is he talking about?' But you know what happens at the end? When you practice something and then you see it working, you realize it really was important.

This explanation through reason and proof differs completely from the old model, where managers combined silence with verbal abusing. For the back under the Dutch manager, the key was that once something was explained through practice, there was no longer need for lengthy verbal explanations:

I'm telling you this because [Dutch manager] didn't tell us what he had to do before the match. It was during training when he had demonstrated, showed to you what we had to do.

The manager must show the player what to do, make him feel comfortable during practice so when the time comes he would have provided the players with the tools to carry out his work without control or patronizing. The player becomes rational, adult and

autonomous. For the manager who criticized the old model for infantilizing players, the manager's role is to simply mediate between the player and the game, to help the player grow:

They must understand the game, get more integrated in it, because at the end of the day the manager can only prepare them to play. The footballer is the one who plays. So, the better he understands the game, the better for him and the manager. It's like was Paulo Freire [Brazilian pedagogue] used to say about good teachers: the good teacher is the one that passes unnoticed and at the end the student doesn't know if he learnt by himself, if the teacher taught him or where it came from. But he got it, and finally the best manager is the one that disappears and the player get to understand the game, and plays perfectly because of that.

Summing up, he is no longer the wizard nor the foreman, but a game engineer and a football teacher.

## Conclusions

The first years of the nineties the Spanish football experienced a revolution both in tactical approaches and training methods. Managers experienced the need for catching up in order to maintain their team's performance and their own careers. This in turn altered the manager's practices and culture and their relationship with the players.

Fundamentally, a new kind of abstract and theoretical football knowledge rose up, one which didn't come directly from practice. As a consequence, the relationship between manager and players was not between an experienced father with a traditional authority over his child, but the one between an expert who must have the ability to communicate, to persuade and to teach his ideas to his subordinates from a technical and rational authority.

These findings must be put into context. We knew that English football had an aggressive masculinity culture, and Kelly (2006; 2008) had found that managers used a traditional authority over their players. We believe that our research shows that this traditional authority was also in place on football matters, moreover, that this football authority based on his former career as a player was at the origin of the manager's legitimacy. When new football ideas replace the practical knowledge for the theoretical ones, the manager relationship to knowledge is transformed, and so is his relationship to players.

His football authority is no longer based on practical and traditional knowledge, but on technical and rational one. However, this doesn't necessary means that footballer/coach relationship have become full of meaningful and supportive communication. Authoritarian practices remain common in professional football (Kelly 2006; Cantarero 2017) and Spanish coaches only embraced this transformation due to competitive pressure and international influence. The full extent of this process and the intermingling influences of different national coaching cultures is still to be fully researched and understood.

Also, the research must reach to two other inter-related areas: the broader social context of professional football, and the dynamics in physical education teaching.

As for the first, this tactical evolution took place during the great transformation of football from a male working-class leisure to a postmodern, professional middle class one (Sandvoss 2004; Redhead 2002). Football became more appealing to the new middle classes through limiting violence inside and outside the pitch (García-Martí, Durán-González, Gómez-López 2017) and multiplied its earnings thank to private television (Williams 1994). Zonal marking was also more rational and intellectual, and therefore more appealing to these professional middle classes than man-to-man, helping make football more attractive and offensive. The final outcome was not the end of the hypermasculine football culture, but a clear bending of it (García-Martí 2018).

On the other hand, this tactical evolution overlaps new theoretical approaches in physical education that mirror some of its characteristics, known as the Game-Based Approaches, including the seminar Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, first developed at the late seventies by Almond, Bunker and Thorpe (Sánchez-Gómez, Devís-Devís and Navarro-Adelantado 2014). There are different models, but according to Kinnerk, Harvey, MacDonncha and Lyons (2018), they all coincide in purposefully design games and activities and fostering athletes questioning, dialogue and a supportive social-moral environment. Dutch methodology was very similar to GBA, while Sacchi zonal training was far more closed and repetitive. Moreover, more research is needed to understand how the dialogue between professional coaching practices and physical education and academic advancements influence each other, since, as Sánchez-Gómez, Devís-Devís and Navarro-Adelantado (2014) have commented, TGfU and GBA are still pretty much overlooked in Spanish coaching formal education, which again connects this debate with coaches traditional reject of theo-

retical knowledge, that may be still in place despite episodes like the irruption of zonal marking.

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