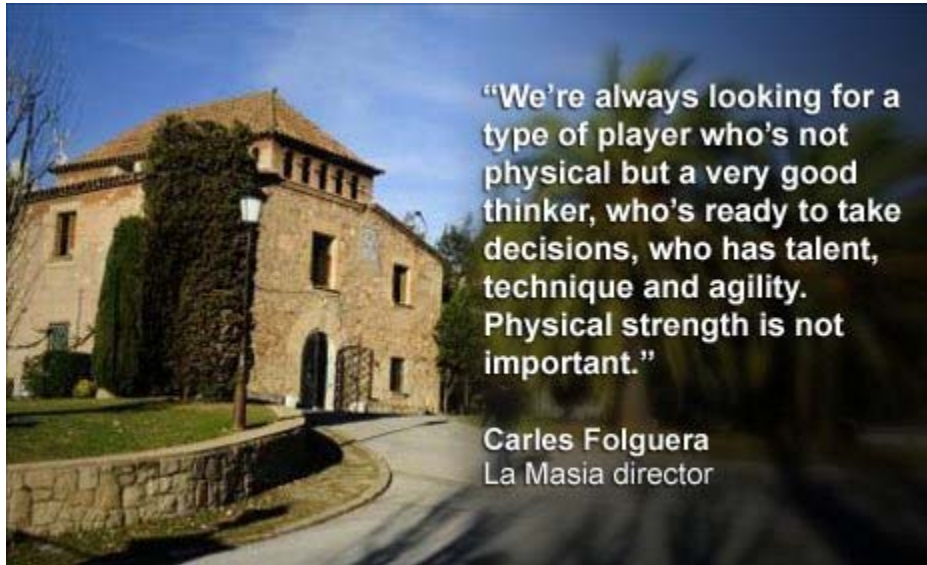


The House that Built Barca

Uefa Champions League

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Pepe Reina, Cesc Fabregas and Carles Puyol are graduates of La Masia

By Matthias Krug

The small, unassuming, brown-brick house built in traditional Catalan style stands almost unnoticed as the great swarm of Barcelona fans head towards the Nou Camp.

This is the house - La Masia - that has been the foundation of Barca's success. It provides the DNA for the club's players, the philosophy for how the game should be played - to pressure, to keep possession, to attack.

The three 2010 Fifa Ballon d'Or finalists Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Xavi Hernandez, and much of Barcelona's first team all learned their trade at La Masia.

Another, of course, is Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas, who is preparing to face his former classmates in the last 16 of the Champions League on Wednesday.

The stellar names to have graduated from La Masia are impressive and the Spanish champions intend to maintain their conveyor belt of talent at a new state-of-the-art facility just south of the city, which will open in September.

But back to La Masia. It is in these homely surroundings, a mere stone's throw from the Nou Camp, that promising young players have matured into world stars. Graduation photographs of current captain Carles Puyol and coach Pep Guardiola hang on the wall of the brown-tiled dining room where Messi would have had lunch. In the small adjacent games room, Xavi would have

played table tennis.

Nearby the kitchen, next to the stairs, a cook greets you with a hearty laugh, while in the upstairs study room, which has a view of the Nou Camp, the likes of Iniesta would have done their homework.

The bedrooms are split up with a few on the top floor and the remainder sprinkled around the Nou Camp.

La Masia has an air of tradition mingled with expectancy and an atmosphere of fun and familiarity.

There is not much more to the place than that, but it is these 600 square metres that make the Barcelona youth system so unique in producing the football equivalent of gold.

"This Barcelona team is made up of a lot of people from La Masia, and that's an important factor in our success, because we know each other for such a long time," Iniesta told BBC Sport.

"We grew up here together with the same idea of football in mind and playing according to the same philosophy."

And, in many ways, it is Iniesta, the midfielder lauded by fans across Spain this season for his 2010 World Cup-winning goal, who personifies La Masia's spirit.

"Andres is one of the players who best represents what we stand for here in La Masia, who most comes here to visit us, and who has the best links with us," said La Masia director Carles Folguera as we settled down for an interview in the conference room next to the small wooden bar area that leads into the residence.

"Andres had a very bad time at the start here in La Masia. He's very family orientated, and with his family far away in Albacete, he took some months to adapt.

"But he did adapt very well in the end, and he's really humble considering all that he's achieved. Here we teach discipline, order, control, and we try to show that a football player can be a star without being a 'show-off', just by making your teammates better."

The key to Barca's current success is a philosophy of play which emerged as a direct descendant of Holland's Total Football of the 70's, and is implemented throughout the club's teams - from seven-year-olds right up to the first team.

"Everyone says our philosophy started with the 'Dream Team' of Cryuff," Folguera stated.

"I think it was born out of the attempt to dominate play by keeping possession of the ball. We're always looking for a type of player who's not physical but a very good thinker, who's ready to take decisions, who has talent, technique and agility. Physical strength is not important."

Scouted from across Spain, the 60 young players who live at La Masia play surprisingly little

Daily schedule of La Masia student

06:45 Get up and make bed
07:00 Breakfast at La Masia
07:30 School bus pick-up
08:00-14:00 School
14:15 Lunch
15:00 Free hour
16:00-18:00 Added schooling
19:00-20:45 Training
21:00 Shower/Bus back to La Masia
21:30 Dinner
22:00 TV/Internet



Barca's three Fifa Ballon d'Or finalists

football - just over one and a half hours per day.

Instead, there is a heightened emphasis on school work, with players expected to attend extra classes with tutors at La Masia once they return to the centre after a day at school.

This way, the students who do not make it into professional football can opt for university or find employment.

"Here is where the stars all started," added Folguera, throwing a proud glance at photographs of some of the most illustrious years to have graduated from La Masia: one includes Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina with Xavi and Puyol.

"So the current players think: 'I'm in a good place'. But that's also a danger. We have to let them see that the dream is a long journey. We tell them to have patience, and that not all of them will make it.

"Pep Guardiola likes to help, but not all 48 players who are currently here can make it. Despite this, La Masia is of course the ideal place for a young player to come."

The less-is-more approach of Barcelona's training regime is designed to make each training session of the highest possible quality.

"It is all about bringing high intensity into those sessions," the club's football youth academy co-ordinator Albert Puig explained.

"Up to the age of 16 we don't do any fitness training with the boys, just practice with the ball. Then we add the fitness training, but always incorporated into exercises with the ball."



Folguera has seen many current stars blossom at La Masia

Little wonder, then, that players like Pedro, who hails from the Canary Islands, and local players such as Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique seemingly run with the ball stuck to their boots.

Of course, there have been mistakes - and costly ones at that - with Fabregas allowed to leave for the English Premier League and Arsenal and Pique spending four years under Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson at Old Trafford.

Pique came home at a cost of £9.7m, but Fabregas is still in north London.

Watching the La Masia graduates in the Barcelona first team the game seems easy. They exhibit a sureness bordering on laziness, zip the ball back and forth in triangles and play double-one-two's that leave the opposition - and the crowd - awestruck.

"It doesn't just look easy. It is easy to play with the La Masia players," Brazilian right-back Dani Alves told the BBC. "They have unbelievable qualities on the ball and you have to be happy about playing in a team like this."

And still La Masia keeps churning them out.

Andreu Fontas, Thiago Alcantara, Marc Bartra, Jonathan dos Santos and Victor Vazquez offered a glimpse of the next Barca generation in December 2010 in Barcelona's final Champions League group match against Russian champions Rubin Kazan.

Qualification for the knockout stages of European club football's most prestigious competition was already in the bag but the largely second-string side were comfortable winners, with Fontas and Vazquez scoring in a 2-0 win.



It costs £8 million a year to run La Masia

Why do other top clubs around Europe not replicate the La Masia model, which is estimated to cost about a fifth of the £50m fee Chelsea spent on signing Fernando Torres from Liverpool in January?

"Other clubs like Real Madrid have a good youth system too, the difference is just that they don't use theirs," Puig added. "So the work is left unfinished. We on the other hand incorporate our talents into the first team on a regular basis. It's a little bit like producing a Ferrari but then not using it."

It comes with a touch of melancholy, then, that this iconic building on the road leading to the Nou Camp will soon no longer be used to nurture the club's young players.

La Masia is closing down at the end of the 2010-11 season and is to be replaced by new facilities - for 70-80 residents - in the Ciudad Deportiva in Sant Joan Despi.

"It is a necessary move. The new facilities are more modern. These are new times, but we do not want to lose the familiar essence of this building," Folguera reflected.

Barcelona's school of excellence will expand from 600 square metres to 5,000; from two floors to five; from ageing to entirely modern facilities. But memories and a sense of pride will remain in this old brick house which has seen the stars of world football come and go.



Ballon d'Or trio light up World Cup