FC BARCELONA
STYLE AND DOMINATION
A TACTICAL ANALYSIS OF FC BARCELONA
BY TONY ENGLUND

WORLD CLASS COACHING
FC Barcelona
Style and Domination

A Tactical Analysis of FC Barcelona

by
Tony Englund

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For Beth
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With each project and day, I develop a greater sense of debt to my parents, Tony and Carole Englund, for their investment in me and their continued support in coaching and in life in general.

Finally, special thanks to Beth, Jake and Tess for their interest in and support of all of my coaching endeavors, and for helping make my life so much more.

Tony Englund
St. Paul, MN
February, 2012
Foreword by Jeff Tipping

Following their defeat in the 2011 UEFA Champions League Final to Barcelona, Manchester United’s manager Sir Alex Ferguson, referred to the Barcelona style of football as “mesmerizing” - quite a statement coming from one of the world’s tactical soccer geniuses and a longtime Jedi manager. Those who witnessed the game were captivated by the spectacle of the great Manchester team, frustratingly and uselessly, chasing the ball and the Barcelona players as if they were chasing phantoms.

In FC Barcelona: Style and Domination. A Tactical Analysis of FC Barcelona, Tony Englund has done a masterful job of introducing the American soccer coaching community to the “Barcelona Way”. He shows us how they play, he provides us with training exercises to help us play the “Barcelona Way” and, amazingly, shows us some solid strategies to beat them! The book is a unique and welcome analysis of the best sports club in the world and provides us with scores of thought provoking technical and tactical insights along with world class “World Class Coaching” diagrams.

Those of us who have dedicated our lives to improving American soccer will not simply read this book, we shall voraciously consume it – and not just once but we shall return to it over and over again. Thanks to Tony Englund’s efforts our coaching community now has access to the philosophy and methods of the world’s number one soccer club. As the sport of soccer continues to progress in our country this book will inspire all of us to reach for the standards of excellence set by the Catalonian giants and shall provide us with a template for playing the “Beautiful Game.”

Jeff Tipping
NSCAA Director of Education and Coaching Development Emeritus
UEFA A License Assessor – Irish FA
Palm Beach Soccer Academy Technical Director
FIFA Futuro Coaching Education Award
Author “Drills and Exercises for Developing the Elite American Player.”
Introduction: An Overview of FC Barcelona

Watching FC Barcelona play is both very exciting and also a bit of an acquired taste. I have to confess that before beginning this project I was a luke-warm Barca fan (I now have jerseys, posters, and a dog named Barca and rarely miss an opportunity to watch them run over opponents), as their style is both very impressive and somewhat dull to the casual observer. To wit, one can watch long stretches of a Barcelona game and witness a possession clinic that is mind-bendingly simple and appears to have no purpose other than to either wear down an opponent or put them to sleep. While both of the bi-products of the possession game are likely part of the design, there is, on careful examination, so much more to appreciate in watching Blaugrana play.

FC Barcelona, in all of its various projects (the club fields basketball, hockey and many other teams and, famously, also runs a stunningly successful internal academic and housing arm (La Masia)), is a highly successful, classy organization. The ongoing string of La Liga, European and FIFA championships, as well as Barca’s domination of the World Cup Champion Spanish National Team are evidence enough of the team’s on-field success. Watching Barcelona, one is also impressed with the refusal of the likes of Lionel Messi to dive, the consistent emphasis on avoiding unnecessary fouls and bookings and also the self-effacing approach of manager Josep ‘Pep’ Guardiola, who consistently places credit for the club’s success with the players and exudes an intelligent, confidence-inspiring presence on the touch-line and a humble, steady and determined voice in the press. Though the club remains a narrow second in domestic popularity to fellow Spanish club Real Madrid, it is commonly referred to as the second favorite team (to their first choice in their respective domestic leagues) for soccer fans throughout Europe and beyond, a fact that is a reflection of both the success and respect for the brand.

So what is it that sets Barcelona apart? It is interesting that to casual fans of the game and even the team, the symbol of FC Barcelona’s play is a brilliant run to goal by Lionel Messi. To be sure, the racy, nimble striker’s slicing runs are an important part of what makes Barca such a force in La Liga and Europe, but the real center of the team, its style, philosophy and success requires a much more broad canvas. Other individual players, including Andres Iniesta, Xavi Hernandez, Sergio Busquets, Danni Alves, Carles Puyol, Gerard Pique, Victor Valdes and 2011 arrival Cesc Fabregas, contribute in critical fashion to the team’s overall performance. The relentless rhythm of the team’s possession is perhaps the true center of Barcelona’s philosophy and identity, and the fact that it is built around circulating the ball through the entire team is emblematic of the unselfish, team-oriented outlook. Similarly, the team’s spirited defending, though often chaotic, is clearly also understood as a collective responsibility.

This book attempts to capture the essence of Barcelona. To do so, all of the following elements must be treated: History; accomplishments; leadership; philosophy; personnel; system; tactics. The tactical elements will be treated in some detail to help emphasize the on-field designs of the team, but the tactics alone would not explain why the team has been so successful. The book
also includes more than fifty training exercises inspired by the ‘Barcelona Way’ for those wanting to train their teams to emulate the side’s tactical approach.
Style and Domination: FC Barcelona in La Liga, Europe and World Club Competition

FC Barcelona: Overview
Formed: 1899
Stadium: Camp Nou (capacity: 99,000); (built: 1957).
President: Sandro Rosell i Feliu (2010-)
Coach: Josep ‘Pep’ Guardiola (2008-)
Slogan: ‘More than a club.’

Championships
Inter-Cities Fairs Cup (Europa): 1955-58, 1958-60, 1965-66
La Liga: 21 (including 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011)
Copa Del Rey: 25
Copa de La Liga: 2
Supercopa de Espana: 9

Club Records
World
- Year with most official titles: 2009, with 6: Copa del Rey, Liga, Champions League, Spanish Supercup, European Supercup and Clubs World Cup.

European
- Only team to have played in every season of European competitions since they started in 1955.
- Team with most European trophies: 15 (4 Champions, League, 4 European Cup-Winners Cup, 3 Fairs Cup and 4 European Supercup)
- Team that have played most European finals: 17 (7 in European Cup / Champions League, 6 in Cup Winners Cup and 4 in Fairs Cup).
- Team with most points in the history of major European leagues: 99 points in La Liga 2009/10.

Spanish
- Only team, along with Real Madrid and Athletic Bilbao, to have always played in the First Division.
- Only team to have won all the official competitions it has played in at least once: since the Copa Macaya (1902) to the Clubs World Cup (2009).
- Team with most official Spanish titles: 111.
- Season with most titles: 1951/52, with 5: Liga, Copa, Copa Latina, Trofeo Eva Duarte and Copa Martini-Rossi.
- Only Spanish team to win the treble: Won the Copa del Rey, La Liga and the Champions League in the 2008/09 season.
• Team with most Spanish Cups: 25.
• Longest winning period in La Liga: 16 games from game 7 to 22 in La Liga 2010/11. Team with most points and goals after the first half of La Liga: 52 points and 61 goals (17 wins, one draw and one defeat) by game 19 of La Liga 2010-11.
• Team with most away points in a Liga season: 46 points (14 wins, 4 draws and one defeat in La Liga 2010/11).
• Team with most goals scored in official competitions in a season: 2008/09, with 158 goals in 62 games.
• Most wins in a Liga season: 31 wins in La Liga 2009/10, along with Real Madrid in the same season.
Leadership: A Profile of FC Barcelona Manager Josep ‘Pep’ Guardiola

FC Barcelona manager Josep ‘Pep’ Guardiola starred at the club as a player and has continued his winning ways as a coach. Born on 18 January, 1971 in Santpedor, Guardiola arrived at La Masia, Barcelona’s famous school and dormitory at age 13. A standout both in the classroom (where his affinity for Catalan poetry became apparent) and on the field, Pep earned promotion to the ‘B’ team by 1987. Legend has it that first team coach Johan Cruyff observed Guardiola playing with the second squad and, at half time, directed the team’s coach to move the lanky midfielder to the central midfield to act as the ‘pivot’ or ‘fulcrum’. Guardiola promptly took control of the game and played in the center from that day forward.

Guardiola debuted for FC Barcelona in 1990 vs. Cadiz. A highly talented holding midfielder, Guardiola became one of the key players in Barca’s ‘Dream Team’, winning numerous titles over the ensuing decade. Guardiola also had the opportunity to learn the game from playing and coaching legends Johan Cruyff, Sir Bobby Robson and Louis van Gaal. All told, Guardiola played nearly 500 games for FC Barcelona, winning sixteen trophies while wearing the captain’s band for much of his career with the first team. Guardiola was regarded as a talented, if not overwhelming, athlete and an extremely steady, intelligent organizer of his team on both sides of the ball. Pep left Barcelona as the club settled into mediocrity at the turn of the century, gaining valuable experience in both the Mexican and Italian leagues before his retirement in 2006.

In 2007, Guardiola returned home to Barcelona to coach the ‘B’ team, which subsequently earned promotion in his first season. It was widely thought that Jose Mourinho would be the next coach at Barcelona when Frank Rijkaard was let go later that year (in fact, Mourinho recently said he would have hired Guardiola as an assistant…), but to the surprise of most outsiders, Guardiola was put in charge of the first team.

It was clear that the FC Barcelona leadership wanted to send a message in their hiring of Guardiola. Rijkaard, his predecessor, was a tremendous player but has been, over the course of his coaching career, a moody, improvisational leader. In hiring Guardiola, the FC Barcelona leadership, and president Joan LaPorta in particular, were turning inward, away from big-name international coaches (i.e. Mourinho) and toward a home-grown, stable and visionary coach who would understand the culture of the club.

Guardiola’s impact, both on the field and off, was immediate and indicative of his quality. First, the new coach distributed a three-page ‘Code of Good Conduct’ to the players. Barcelona players had been labeled ‘hedonistic’ and ‘selfish’ in recent years, and Pep’s immediate and enduring message was that the team would be the focus and that to return to national and international domination each team member would need to maximize their focus and contributions. To emphatically illustrate his commitment to finding players focused on the team concept, productive but headstrong players including Samuel Eto’o were shipped off. The result has been a clear understanding that Guardiola has the support of the management and can enforce the mandate that team members behave and conform. Barcelona’s roster is remarkably stable and the players appear to not only respect, but even embrace the message of their coach. Even Lionel Messi, who as a relative newcomer to the first team apparently flirted with the
temptations of stardom, responded immediately to Guardiola’s urging that he focus on the team and his game.

On the field, Guardiola took the framework laid by Johan Cruyff during Guardiola’s playing days and enhanced it. Barcelona plays a fluid, suffocating possession game that Italian coaching legend Arrigo Sacchi has called, ‘The most beautiful soccer cause of recent years.’ The tactical simplicity of the Barcelona game centers around cycling the ball up and down and back and forth across the pitch, wearing down an opponent and creating horizontal and vertical seams that are then exploited to create scoring opportunities. Interestingly, Guardiola deploys midfielders all over the field, a reflection of his belief that these players are the most complete players and those that can play the game at the pace and with the understanding and emphasis on possession necessary to Barca’s style.

The results for Guardiola’s Barcelona have been impressive. In his first year at the helm, the Blaugrana won La Liga (and have won three consecutive years running), the Copa del Rey and the UEFA Champions League. The honors continue to pile up, and despite a flurry of injuries in the 2011-2012 season, Pep has his team in position to compete for the Spanish and European titles (having already earned their second FIFA Club World Cup). The FC Barcelona coach has fashioned a Spanish and European dynasty, and his leadership and tactical vision are critical to the team’s identity and success.
Barcelona 2011-2012: The First Team.

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<th>Jersey</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Victor Valdes</td>
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<td>Daniel Alves da Silva</td>
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<td>Gerard Pique</td>
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<td>Andres Iniesta</td>
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<td>Alexis Sanchez</td>
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<td>Lionel Messi</td>
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<td>Thiago Alcantara</td>
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<td>Adriano Correia</td>
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<td>Eric Abidal</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Andreu Fontas</td>
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Head Coach: Josep Guardiola
The Barcelona 4-3-3: Creative, Suffocating Attack and Desperate Defense.

Rarely seen in 2011-2012: A common look for the Barcelona 4-3-3 in 2011-2012, though a series of injuries meant that this particular group was rarely on the field together.

Overview:
The Barcelona 4-3-3 features a goalkeeper who is very good at controlling the space behind the defense and also at distributing with his feet; two stay-at-home center backs and two flank defenders who frequently venture forward into vacant flank space. The midfield is best described as an upside-down triangle with a single holding midfielder (pivot or fulcrum) and two very creative attacking midfielders who push hard to get into the attack. The flank strikers typically sit high and wide and try to get isolated and penetrate. The right side striker often tucks in, allowing space for the right back to overlap and serve. This happens less frequently on the left. Finally, the center striker is very non-traditional for a 4-3-3 in that for Barcelona, this player typically is not a big, hammering player, but rather a finesse-oriented player who likes to check back into the midfield.
**Style of Play**
Barcelona, by their own admission, are obsessed with possessing the ball. Both in *La Liga* and in the Champions’ League, it’s typical for Barcelona to carry 80% of the possession in a game. When coach Pep Guardiola is asked about his and his team’s tactical flexibility, he is adamant that, “This is what we do (knock the ball around).” The answer is both prideful and a bit defensive in nature, as for Guardiola and Barcelona the *quality* of their play is nearly as important as the result, and both the staff and team believe that their relentless possession will lead to wins, and their results over the past several years support this assertion. The nature of the possession is sometimes a bit dull, as two or three players will knock the ball back and forth in a small space, compelling their opponents to chase, and then suddenly brilliant as a third man running blazes into space and is found with a timely pass. Of course the knocking of the ball in small space creates the space and time for the dangerous run, but one gets the feeling that Barcelona simply revel in the small area passing anyway. One commentator observed this season that for many watching Barcelona, it’s the science of their game that we try to dissect, whereas for the team and coaching staff, the art of the game is their focus.

**Speed of Play**
The style of play is admirably and stubbornly focused on possession and the speed of play within that framework is a critical component to the success of the Barcelona style. The team are very conscious of the speed at which they play and they occasionally slow play, but generally speaking they seem to revel in a speed of play that is right at the edge of their collective ability to hang onto the ball and Guardiola understands that this is critical to the team’s ability to wear down and stretch opponents. Often it appears that their possession will be broken because they are willing to play in such tight space and their opponents squeeze them into confined space, but the general rule is that the Barca players respond with more quick passing to wear down defenders and break pressure. The vision is clearly that the game is a series of small-sided (i.e. 2 vs. 2 or 3 vs. 3) encounters and that superior technical speed, tactical speed, superior physical speed and early running off of the ball will allow the team to dictate play.

**Central Possession, Attack Exposed Flanks**
The engine, so to speak, of a 4-3-3, is the midfield triangle and the Barcelona trio of Busquets, Xavi and Iniesta. Busquets is an intelligent, mobile and tough player who acts as the pivot at the base of the triangle. He does a nice job of sitting underneath the other players to relieve pressure and/or change fields. Iniesta and Xavi are energetic, sharp, creative and intelligent players who seem to live to pass and receive the ball. They confound marking with their ability to dart in and out of space and they are able to find one-another seemingly without looking. Add to this dynamic mix the fact that Messi often ghosts back into the area to help organize and run the opposing midfielders (and the Barcelona outside backs sometimes join in as well), and it’s easier to understand how Barcelona dominate the center of the field.

Often, teams thrust a center back into the midfield space (usually in pursuit of a checking forward) or condense centrally their four-man midfield to try to disrupt Barcelona’s possession.
The result is that the wing forwards (Villa, Pedro, etc.), can become isolated against a single defender and the midfield group for Barcelona are very adept at playing these players into dangerous space. Barcelona also like to pull a wing forward inside and/or into midfield space to join the possession game and then overlap the outside back (Alves or Abidal) into this same space. Alves often looks more like an outside midfielder or wing forward than he does an outside back. If teams are able to maintain enough defensive support on the flank to avoid these dangers, then the central group typically finds interior seams in which to penetrate the defense.

**A Team of Midfielders**
Interestingly, Guardiola has filled his roster with players who are midfielders or who possess many of the qualities of midfielders. Xavi Hernandez (6), Andres Iniesta (8), Cesc Fabregas (4), and Sergio Busquets (16), all mainstays in the midfield triangle, crave possession of the ball and, like Guardiola in his playing days, can act as quarterbacks, organizing the team to dominate the pitch. Many of the other regulars who play on the front and back line in Barca’s lineup are extraordinarily comfortable on the ball and often cycle through the midfield while the team is in possession. Lionel Messi (10) confounds opponents by ghosting back into the midfield, creating an overload in that area and also freeing flank space for Danny Alves (2) to fly up the flank. Alves and Abidal (22) frequently look like outside midfielders when the team is in possession, pushed up high and sometimes even central in the midfield as the team swarm around, paralyzing teams’ efforts to press the ball. Both are very comfortable on the ball and see the field very well. Even Victor Valdes in goal seems bent on building possession through short passes in front of his goal. Such stubbornness led to Valdes conceding an early goal against Real Madrid in the first edition of the Classico in 2011-2012, but Valdes went right back to playing short out of his area under pressure and contributed to wearing down Real Madrid to the point that the game seemed well out of hand (3-1) with nearly twenty minutes remaining. Thus, Barcelona’s 4-3-3 is a midfield possession dominated system made great by a group of players (at every position) who think and play the game like midfielders.

**Depth**
Another remarkable characteristic of Guardiola’s Barcelona is the depth that the team exhibits. This is a compliment both to the management and also to the coach, who clearly understand the need to be able to rest and replace players in the lineup and maintain the rhythm and performance of the team. Barcelona plays an extremely ambitious club schedule, ranging from La Liga to the FIFA Club World Cup (requiring travel to Japan in the midst of the league schedule), and this year’s squad has endured lengthy absences to injury and illness, particularly Pique and Villa, but also Pedro, Abidal, Busquets and others. To the immense credit of both the players and management, players like Alves, Mascherano, and Thiago have filled in admirably, often while playing out of position, and the team plays and performs at the same level. This is particularly noteworthy and important given the rhythmic passing style and high-pressure defending the team features. Guardiola has also intelligently rested his top players on occasion to help them endure the lengthy season, and the confidence he has shown in his reserves has paid dividends on the field and, surely, helps team morale as well.
**Set Up and Find the Third Man**
Barcelona is perhaps the best current example of a team that possesses to set up and find the so-called ‘third man’. Tactically speaking, a third man is a player making a run off of the ball. Often this player is the beneficiary of several short passes between other players that condense the defense so that his/her run off of the ball puts the player in space when the ball is played to the third man. What separates Barcelona from other clubs is that the runners and passers seem to have uncanny timing (particularly given the club’s speed of play) and the fact that in such a free-flowing style of play there is still considerable discipline in the sense that runners are finding the critical space and the right moment.

**Barcelona’s ‘False 9’ - #10 Lionel Messi**

**Utilizing the ‘False 9’**
Perhaps the compelling tactical variation utilized by Guardiola’s Barcelona is the deployment of a ‘false 9’ at the striker position. In the 2011-2012 season, Lionel Messi (#10, above) played the lion’s share of minutes at the center striker position in the 4-3-3, but Cesc Fabregas also saw time at the point as well. The term ‘false 9’ refers to the use of player at the point who does not fit the
traditional center striker role either in characteristics or particularly in the role the player assumes within the formation. Traditional center strikers, particularly in the 4-3-3, tend to be big, hammering, holding players who can win balls and distribute in transition and then wreak havoc in the opposing box, getting on the end of crosses and muscling defenders to finish rebounds. The USA’s Abby Wambach and Uruguay’s Umberto Suazo are current examples of attackers who fit this description. Messi and Fabregas, on the contrary, are players who would likely be more comfortable attacking in space on a flank and/or receiving facing the goal. They are more midfielder than forward.

For Barcelona, both Messi and Fabregas are textbook examples of a ‘false 9’, as Messi in particular frequently drops deep into the midfield before making slicing runs into the opposing backline. This withdrawn, unpredictable positioning offers several advantages to Barcelona’s attacking:

- The center forward is difficult to mark. Does the opposition release a center back to chase the false 9? Do they pull their holding midfielder deeper to screen passes into the false 9? Either way, the collective defending block of the opposing team is altered and weakened.
- As the center forward withdraws, he or she creates an overload in the midfield. Messi’s ability to check sharply back and organize with Busquets, Xavi and Iniesta, often makes it look like they are playing 4 vs. 2 in the middle of the field. Opposing central midfield tandems are run ragged by the speed and rhythm of this possession.
- Often the center forward’s deep check into the midfield facilitates breaking pressure on one side in the midfield through a pass to his feet to change fields. Messi in particular has a very good sense of when his help is needed to defeat opponents’ pressing in the middle third.
- A smaller center forward such as Messi, on withdrawing, can find room in which to turn and face the defense, which is often difficult for smaller forwards to do when receiving in the heart of the defense.
- Relatedly, once faced up in possession, the false 9 has excellent angles for playing in his or her wing forwards. This is particularly true if an opposing center back tracks the false 9 into the midfield but is unable to prevent him or her from turning, as the opposing back line is weakened and seams become more pronounced.
- When Messi checks down into the midfield, one of the attacking midfielders (or a wing forward) often make deep runs in behind the defense in the space he vacated, particularly if his run has pulled apart the defending block.

**Barcelona Defending: Mentality**

Guardiola is often quoted as saying, “We are a terrible team without the ball. We have to have the ball.” This is quite a statement from the coach of what is arguably the best club team in the world over the past three years. The best way to characterize Barcelona’s team defending is a desperate hunt for the ball. Because the team is so spread out (particularly on the back line) in possession, Barcelona are vulnerable to counterattack and the team look disorganized sometimes without the ball. It is evident that they are aware of and sensitive to the danger, and it is remarkable to watch them swarm the ball in the first few seconds after possession is lost.
is that Guardiola uses a stopwatch in training and allows six seconds for the team losing the ball to win it back, and this sense of urgency is very apparent on game day as well. One of the advantages of the 4-3-3 system is that when possession is lost, there is typically a player or several in the area to apply immediate pressure.
Domination: The Team on the Attack - Patterns, Tendencies and Highlights.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate Barcelona’s attacking is to look at the common patterns of play and also diagram some of the highlights of the 2011-2012 season.

Playing Out of the Back

Victor Valdes (1) is in possession and despite the opponent applying pressure with five players forward, he refuses to serve the ball up and risk possession on a clearance. The center backs (Pique (3) and Puyol (5)) are in position to either open up or defend if possession is lost. The left back (Abidal (22)) offers a wide outlet, but the right back (Alves (2)) stays high up the pitch, anticipating a breakout. Valdes is comfortable and confident with the ball at his feet and he often looks to Busquets (16) checking in the middle as an outlet. This pass, incidentally, led to an early goal vs. Real Madrid in the first edition of the Classico in 2011-2012, as a turnover caught
the Barcelona squad too spread out to be able to defend. Not surprisingly, Valdes et al were not deterred, though and continued to knock the ball around in their back third, wearing out Real’s front line and creating space behind them for the Barcelona midfield to exploit. In essence, playing into the midfield triangle immediately allows the team to get the ball onto the feet of the players the team wants to run the game. If Busquets is unable to turn, he typically plays one of the back line players (often Abidal) to open up space and stretch the defense.

Playing out of the back (2) vs. high pressure

Another, more extreme example is shown above. The opponent pushes six players forward, pressing Valdes (1). Logic would certainly dictate playing a ball over the top of the pressing group. However, in a sequence repeated often in La Liga and in Europe, Valdes swings the ball out to Puyol (5). Still, the danger is considerable, as a turnover would find Barca in poor defending shape and Puyol, for all his combative qualities, is not the most gifted passer of the ball. However, the perspective of the Barca players is that a new small-sided game has commenced in the back third and that they need to send help, rather than clear the ball. Thus,
Xavi (6) checks sharply toward Puyol and then plays Alves (2) first-time, and the opponents’ pressure is broken.

Playing out of the back (3) vs. opponent in a block playing delayed high pressure and a high back restraining line.

Many teams try to concede Barcelona’s back third and push their own back line up high, thus condensing play and pressing in the hope of creating turnovers. Here is a typical Barcelona response: Pique (3) plays to Abidal (22) on the flank and the left back dribbles to take available space. Iniesta (8) checks to the ball and Busquets (16) works to get ball-side and underneath in support. Villa (7) also checks into the space in front of the opponents’ back line to be available and free space up the flank if Abidal can get loose or combine to get into space. On the back side of play, Alves (2) often releases very early, and Pedro (17) moves across the formation, dragging and condensing the opponents’ back line and creating a big seam where Alves can work. The general idea against an opponent playing in a block and with a high restraining line is to continue to cycle players to the ball while preparing to quickly exploit the spaces that
inevitably open as the opposition condense around the ball. Surprisingly, Barca do not often put the ball in behind in this situation, as it would seem likely that Pedro and Messi (and Villa before his injury) would win foot races and score, but it seems to be part of their DNA that Barcelona feel that they can possess and wear down an opponent regardless of that opponents’ ability or tactics.

Running the Middle Third: Barcelona in Possession

The engine: The midfield triangle

Busquets (16), Xavi (6) and Iniesta (8) are, arguably the best midfield triangle in professional soccer (and Cesc Fabregas as an alternate at either of the front points is a remarkable statement of depth).

Xavi Hernandez: The story is that when Guardiola first saw Xavi play, he approached him and told him, ‘You’re going to push me out the door.’ It took a couple years, but as one author
summarized, ‘Xavi incarnates Barcelona soccer.’ He is certainly one of the smoothest, most intelligent midfielders playing the game. When Xavi has the ball, the team appears calm and there is the general consensus that he is nearly perfect in choosing the best pass…and delivering it. He clearly sees the game just as Guardiola wants it played, and he is a stellar, if quiet, leader who sets a terrific example both on the field and off.

**Andres Iniesta:** When Pep Guardiola first noticed Iniesta, he walked over to Xavi and told him, ‘That guy will send both of us into retirement.’ Both Xavi and Iniesta are Barcelona youth products, raised and socialized at *La Masia* and like Xavi, the younger Iniesta is, by all accounts, a premier talent.

- Wayne Rooney: ‘(Iniesta is) The best player in the world at the moment.’
- Frank Rijkaard: ‘(He is) A wonderful soccer talent.’

Iniesta often appears to have some sort of other-worldly connection to Xavi, as the two of them are masterful in finding one-another and they seem to live to pass the ball to one-another and their teammates. Both players have tremendous vision, impeccable technical skills and work rates that, together, make them a nightmare to close down.

**Sergio Busquets:** Certainly the least marquee of the triangle members, Busquets perhaps best incarnates his coach on the field. Though less a leader than Guardiola, Busquets is the right blend of steady and intelligent support player for the creative Xavi and Iniesta and also a bit of a bull when necessary in support of Barcelona’s often widely scattered back line. Busquets is sometimes maligned as soft or being fortunate to play with the two superstars in front of him, but his poise is critical to Barcelona’s possession. His ability to read play and release pressure through being available to change fields leads directly to many of the team’s scoring opportunities. He also has an uncanny knack for cutting out service to opposing strikers and he does a lot of good work filling in on the back line when the team needs an extra player to snuff out counters.

Arrigo Sacchi, the Italian coaching legend, commented that ‘tactics are used to multiply the abilities of the players.’ In the case of the Barcelona triangle, this is a stunning prospect. Tactically, the triangle provides direction and rhythm for the team. Xavi and Iniesta are tireless organizing possession and working back and forth across the field underneath the strikers. Both have the freedom to work into space and create, all the while wearing down their opponents. Busquets, meanwhile, is the pivot player, sitting deep and just above the Barcelona center backs, helping release pressure and change fields.
A common site in the run of play for Barcelona is a quick combination between Iniesta (8) and Xavi (6). Here, against a standard midfield zone, Iniesta faces up and plays into Xavi’s feet before splitting two defenders and receiving the return pass from Xavi. The difficulty from a defensive perspective is that if one does not condense the midfield arrangement, Xavi, Iniesta and Busquets (16) will run the game against two central midfielders, and one of them (Iniesta here) will exploit the horizontal seam between the back line and the midfield. Logically, when one back steps to confront Iniesta, he will put in one of the three forwards and the defense is left with, at best, a 1 vs. 1 against quick, talented attackers who revel in such opportunities.

Conversely, if the midfield zone is condensed, Abidal (22) and Alves (2) will be free to operate on the flank.
Busquets as the pivot; Xavi and Iniesta stretch the opposing midfield

As talented as the Barcelona triangle are, it is critical to emphasize that their abilities are multiplied by the team’s tactics. Because Guardiola has built a team of ‘midfielders’ and wants the team to consistently play through and in the triangle, Xavi, Iniesta and Busquets get lots of touches and time on the ball. The system is also designed to accentuate the midfielders’ talent in that the team is organized and populated to allow virtually all of the other field players to cycle through the midfield. Messi, Alves, Pedro, Villa, Abidal, and even Piquet and Puyol ghost into the midfield over the course of a game. As they do, they provide options for the midfield triangle to stretch and wear down their opponents, and they make marking the midfield triangle much more difficult.
Busquets as the pivot; Messi (‘false 9’) checks into midfield to break pressure

Here, Xavi (6) is being pressed and opposition have done a good job of compressing space in the midfield. To break the pressure, Busquets (16) steps forward to receive Xavi’s pass. Meanwhile, Messi (10) checks sharply into back-side space in the midfield, creating an overload situation (Alves (2), Busquets (16), Xavi (6), Iniesta (8) and Messi(10) vs. four defender)s. This move creates further dilemmas for the opposition in that if defender A follows Messi into the midfield, the back line is stretched and Villa (7) and Pedro (17) have large spaces into which they can run. Abidal (22) is also a threat to get loose on the flank in this situation, or to join the midfield possession phase if he wishes, further confounding the opponents’ midfield marking.
Flank Transition in the Middle Third

**Flank transition: Overlapping the outside back**

This move is a staple in most 4-3-3 formations given the open space on the flanks in the midfield. Alves (2) plays in the feet of Xavi (6) and then gets wide and behind the opposing midfield player as Xavi returns the pass, completing the 1-2. Abidal (22) frequently completes the same sequence on the other side of the field. When the outside back gets loose on the flank, the situation becomes very difficult for the opposing back line. Pedro (17) tends to push inside, either dragging the opposing outside back with him or bending his run back to the flank and in behind if the back does not chase him. Messi (10), meanwhile, often makes an angled run balls-side that is very difficult for the near-side center back to pick up and track because it happens in his blind spot if he’s watching the ball.
Flank transition: 1-2 with the forward to get the outside back in.

This sequence could happen immediately following the previous move or build out of a change of fields. Alves (2) is in space on the flank and running at the outside back. Pedro (17) has run inside to expand the space for Alves to work in. He then shows to the ball and completes a 1-2, freeing Alves to penetrate on the dribble. Xavi (6) is in good position to get underneath Alves’ run in support and Messi (10) and Villa (7) prepare to get in behind as well. As dominant as Barcelona are in the central areas of the field, much of the possession there, by drawing in defenders and wearing down the defense, sets up runs similar to this one on the flank.
Change of field; outside back played into space

This move is a staple of Barcelona’s transition and attacking. Iniesta (8), seeing a condensed opposing midfield, plays Busquets (16), who plays an early ball into space for Alves (2) to run onto. Note that Pedro (17) has tucked in to condense the opposing back line as well.
The Front Third: Barcelona Highlights 2011-2012

Barcelona scored a plethora of impressive goals from a wide variety of moves in the 2011-2012 season. The following highlights are presented as a sampling of those tallies, emphasizing the variety and also the common threads in their scoring. The goals (and a few near-misses) are presented in two broad categories: Goals from flank service and goals from central service.

Goals From Flank Service

Villa Goal vs. Villarreal (3-1) (La Liga)

Goals from flank service for Barcelona are a direct result of their obsession with central possession. As opponents pile numbers into the center to disrupt Barca’s possession, wing players find more room to serve from the flanks. Here, David Villa (7) worked hard to check back into the midfield and win the ball. He passed into Xavi’s (6) feet and began a long overlapping run. Xavi found his attacking midfield partner Iniesta (8) in front of the defense.
Iniesta placed a perfectly-paced pass behind the defense for an onrushing Villa, whose deft chip beat the goalkeeper for Barcelona’s first goal.

Xavi Goal vs. Santos (4-0) (FIFA Club World Cup Final)

Alves penetrated deep on the flank and Messi(10) makes an early run to the near post, drawing the Santos defense. Xavi (6) arrives late and is unmarked for an easy finish of Alves’ cross. This slide shows the focus that teams have to pay to Messi’s attacking runs, leaving lots of room for other players to attack and finish.
Fabregas Goal vs. Real Madrid (3-1) (La Liga)

Iniesta (8) passed to Messi (10) who ran at and condensed the Real back line. Alves (2) sprinted up the flank into exposed space, where Messi found him with a through pass. Alves continued end line before crossing to Fabregas (4) whose glancing header found the net for Barcelona’s third goal of the night.
Pedro Goal vs. BATE (4-0)(UEFA Champions League)

This goal is a reflection of both the depth of the Barcelona team and also the individual flare that, while secondary to team play, is still a prominent and impressive part of enjoying watching Barcelona play. Seldom-used right back Montoya (35) stretched the defense with an overlapping run. Reserve forward Cuenca (39) made a well-timed run end line and got on the end of the through ball from Montoya. Cuenca’s cross found the feet of Pedro (17), who back-heeled the ball into the net for Barcelona’s third goal on the day.
Messi Goal (1) vs. Osasuna (8-0) (La Liga)

After a series of passes in the middle had pulled in the Osasuna midfield and back lines, Xavi (6) played a driven pass to Alves (2), who had waited on the flank for the moment to get in behind. Alves used a settling header to control Xavi’s pass before dribbling end line. Alves’ cross found and onrushing Messi (10), who tapped in to open the scoring in what would ultimately be an 8-0 Barcelona rout.

Lionel Messi: The 2011 Golden Ball winner (also earned the award in 2009 and 2010) scored 61 goals in 71 matches for FC Barcelona and Argentina. He is the most recognizable face at Barcelona, and his signature dribbling runs through packed defenses are often breathtaking to observe. Messi’s story is even more impressive when one contemplates his road to the top of the soccer world. Born in Argentina, Messi was so small as a boy that the family sought hormone treatments (which it could not afford) to help Lionel reach a healthier height as an adult. Interestingly, no Argentinian soccer club would sponsor the boy, but Barcelona offered to support him so the family moved to Spain and Lionel was schooled and socialized at La Masia,
the famed Barcelona boarding school. Locals note that even today Messi frequents the school, and he is certainly a stunning example of what care and confidence can do for a child. The boy grew a bit and he developed an uncanny ability to dribble in tight space. His low center of gravity, ironically, allows him to change directions on the fly much more quickly than his taller opponents, and he never seems to be out of control on the dribble. He is also one of the most casual, comfortable finishers in the game.

‘He (Messi) feels the ball. That’s what makes him different.’ – Diego Maradona

Today, Messi is not only the most dangerous dribbling threat on the planet, but also a major reason why Barcelona create so many marking problems for opponents. When Messi (in his ‘false nine’ role) checks into the midfield, he often drags a member of the opposing defense with him, and runs by the attacking midfielders into the space vacated by Messi are therefore more effective. Similarly, when Messi makes a run off of the ball into the area, he dominates the opposing center backs’ attention, freeing room for secondary runners to arrive and finish. Finally, when Messi dribbles, the likes of Fabregas, Villa, Iniesta, Xavi, Alves, Pedro and others find more space to play off of him because the defense closes on the dribbler, knowing that he alone may break down the defense. Thus, Messi’s presence and talent have a multiplying effect regarding Barcelona’s tactical efficiency and also improve the odds that his teammates will find more room to play.
Messi Goal vs. Osasuna (2) (8-0) (*La Liga*)

This move started with pressure and a turnover in the midfield, as Xavi (6) won the ball and played sharply into the feet of Fabregas (4) as the latter checked. Cesc’s awareness and sharp footwork allowed him to turn the ball sharply away and play a perfect ball into the area for Messi to run onto and finish.
Alves Near Miss vs. Viktoria Plzen (3-0) (Champions League)

Barcelona have an impressive ability to string together 1 and 2-touch passing under immense pressure in crowded midfield areas. Pedro (17) ran the ball to the touchline before cutting it back to an on-running Alves (2), who had tucked inside. Alves played a pair of 1-2’s with Messi (10), forcing the defense to collapse on the latter’s position. Messi’s final pass put Alves in, where he pushed the ball over the bar. This near miss is a classic example of Barcelona’s design to stretch the width of the opposing back line and then shred that line with quick combination play featuring 1-touch play and hard running off of the ball.
Iniesta Goal vs. Viktoria Pilzen (3-0) Champions League

After a lengthy buildup in the middle third, Iniesta (8) played into the feet of Messi (10) who was checking to the ball near the top of the area. Messi returned the ball in stride to Iniesta. The two then completed a second 1-2 before Iniesta beat the last defender with a deft volley to himself and finished. This goal is indicative of both the rhythm and individual technical flare that are constant features of Barcelona’s attacking.
Abidal Goal vs. Real Madrid (2-2) (Copa Del Rey)

Much of the difficulty in defending against Messi (10) in his “false 9” role is that his dribbling can start anywhere and when he takes off, he tends to draw a crowd of defenders. In the third installment of the Classico in 2011-2012, Messi ran at the Real Madrid back line, causing three defenders to lose track of other runners in their desire to crowd Messi off of the ball. Perhaps one of the most underrated aspects of Messi’s immense talents is his field vision. He did a terrific job of holding the ball as the defense closed on him and then he pushed a perfect ball into the seam open at his left for Abidal (22) to run onto and finish, staking Barca to a 1-0 lead.
Xavi Hernandez’s (6) goal vs. AC Milan was a direct result of Messi’s (10) dribbling threat. Messi ran at a tired AC Milan back line, drawing the attention of the defending block, and Messi then threaded a pass to Xavi, who had made a well-timed run behind the defense. Xavi tucked the ball in the net, assuring FC Barcelona’s place in the next round.
**Attacking Set-Pieces**
Because they lack size as a team, Barcelona rarely just serve balls into the box and throw numbers at the goal. Instead, they rely on quick restarts and getting numbers around the ball to get the ball to goal or resume their possession and wear down their opponents.

*Direct Free Kick – Quick Restart*

![Diagram of a free kick scenario introducing quick restart and 1-2 passes]

**Barcelona vs. Villareal (3-1) (La Liga)**

In the 58’, Villareal conceded a free kick thirty-five yards from goal. Xavi (6) quickly passed the ball to Messi, who turned and passed into the feet of Pedro (17). Pedro completed the 1-2 back to Messi, who again sent the ball back to Pedro who slotted the ball behind Villareal’s back line for an on-running Messi to finish. Thus a quick re-start followed by a pair of short, sharp 1-2’s carved up an unprepared Villareal team to create an open look for Messi.
Maxwell Free Kick Goal vs. Al Sadd (4-0) (FIFA Club World Cup Semi-final)

In the 81st minute of the FIFA Club World Cup Semi-final, Al Sadd conceded a free kick from thirty yards. Substitute left back Maxwell (19) stepped to the ball and quickly played a reverse pass to Thiago (11). The Al Sadd defense reacted sharply, chasing the ball. Meanwhile, Maxwell spun off and snuck in behind the defense where Thiago had deftly placed the ball for him to run onto. Maxwell tucked the ball inside the near post for Barcelona’s fourth goal of the evening. The keys to the success of the play were the quick restart and recognition by both Thiago and Maxwell that the latter was not tracked after his initial touch.
Corner Kick: Short, Quick Restart

Barcelona vs. Osasuna (8-0) (La Liga)

In the 27’, Osasuna conceded a corner kick. Xavi (6) quickly played the ball into Messi’s (10) feet. Messi in turn pinged the ball to Villa (7), who returned the ball first-time. Messi then played a high serve into the back post, where Abidal (22) crushed a header off of the bar. Although this chance did not produce a goal, this is a typical Barca response to their need to compensate for their relatively small physical size. The three passes and concentration of the likes of Messi, Xavi and Villa in the corner space compel an opponent to send numbers to try to contain the threat, whereupon a seam is created at the back post and then the ball is served to a runner arriving from the back line.
Learning ‘The Barcelona Way’: Training Exercises

The following are training exercises culled from hours of observation of Barcelona training and also exercises designed to prepare teams to play the Barcelona style. Specifically, warm-up, intensive technical training, pattern passing, possession, high-pressure defending, attacking choreography, and finishing are treated in some detail. The exercises are presented by theme rather than in complete training sessions so that the trainer can select and combine training elements to design his or her own sessions.

Warm-Up

Barcelona game day warm-up

Barcelona utilize a simple, informal circle warm-up that emphasizes unity and gets each player ready to perform. Team members start in a small circle facing each other and then turn and jog away (about 15 yards) before stopping and jogging back in. The pattern remains the same
throughout, though players work through the following progression as they expand and shrink the circle:

- heels up.
- high knees.
- shuffle.
- karaoke.
- Inside-out knee drives.
- outside-in knee drives.
- ¾ speed runs/back-pedal.
- Repeat/add individual movements (i.e. jumping headers, etc.)

5 vs. 2  10x10 yard areas  This is a Barcelona staple featuring very fast 1-touch passing under pressure. Two defenders are at the center of a circle formed by 5, 6, or 7 attackers. The attackers attempt to keep possession through 1 and 2-touch passing. The defenders attempt to gain possession of the ball or knock the ball out of the circle. The attacker who loses possession for his team changes place with the defender who caused the turnover.

Variations:

- after passing, players must move to a new part of the circle. This requirement both gets players moving after a pass and also compels the attackers to continually reform passing angles by adjusting the circle, as well as adding some traffic and pressure to play.
- require the attackers to shrink the circle as they play. This variation applies added to pressure to the attackers as they attempt to keep possession.
• run two circles and have the defenders cross over to work in the other circle. The attackers count their passes and work to get the highest single score. Rotate the defenders every minute to provide high pressure.
• One-touch only. This restriction, which appears to be the standard with the first team at Barcelona, puts a premium on touch, vision and speed of play.
• Play in the air only. This is an advanced but effective and challenging way of encouraging teams to think about possession while challenging in the air.

**Intensive Technical Training**

![Diagram of Intensive Technical Training](worldclasscoaching.com)

**Three serving one with two balls**

Three servers (two with balls) passing balls in turn to the working player, who plays first time each successive service to the player without a ball (rotates with each serve). This environment compels the receiving player to redirect the ball in the flow of the exercise and with technical speed.

**Progression:**
- serves are tossed underhand for the working player to volley first-time to the open player.
- serves are tossed underhand for the working player to play 2-touch in the air (serves should be chest or thigh height).
- serves are tossed underhand for the working player to head first-time to the open player.
Pairs two-touch passing 10X5 yard area Players work in pairs with two soccer balls. The players work to pass and receive the two balls at the same time. Both players pass with their right foot and receive with their left foot. The change of feet and the common passing lane compel the players to work very hard to sharply change the angle on the ball with their first touch, a mandatory consideration in tight space and to prepare the ball to be released in two touches.

Variations:
- Start with one ball for players who are newer to the game.
- players pass with their left foot and receive with their right foot.
- players track the number of passes they make in one minute. Check scores to see which pair completed the most passes. This competition adds time pressure to the technical demands of the exercise.
- one player passes the ball on the ground while the partner lifts their ball with their laces and flicks the ball to her partner. The player receiving the lifted ball works to receive and settle the ball quickly and the sequence is repeated. Change roles after one minute. Count the number of completed passes and compare scores.
Angled passing in a grid

10x10 yard grids  Build enough grids so players can work in pairs. Demonstrate with one group. Players start at opposite corners of the grid (see diagram). One player has the ball. This player passes at an angle to her partner, who receives with one touch and then plays straight ahead to her partner, who has sprinted over to the opposite corner on her end of the grid. After each pass, the players sprint to the other corner on their end, so that one player always plays straight and one at an angle.

Coaching cues and progression:

- having the players sprint to a pre-determined point compels them to learn to play to a moving target. It’s a bit easier because they are still playing to a fixed point, but there is still timing involved and players should learn to play with a sense of rhythm.
- the pace of the pass is critical. If they play too hard and/or too early, play will break down. If they delay or play with insufficient pace, their partner will be waiting for the ball at the cone, and the coach must encourage players to find the proper pace.
- the preparation touch is also important. Players must prepare the ball in the direction in which they intend to play. The first touch must get the ball out of their feet to allow them to play the proper ball on a consistent basis.
- play for two minutes and then have the players change roles (i.e. so that the player who was playing straight ahead is now playing at an angle and vice versa).
- play a second round, encouraging players to use one touch where possible. They will need to take a bit of pace off of the ball to allow the runner time to get to the cone.
Two-ball circle passing 15X15 yard area Form two groups of seven players. Each group has two soccer balls. Two attackers with balls stand at the center of each group. At a signal from the coach, both players pass their balls to players on the outside of the circle. They then move to receive the other ball from a player on the outside. Outside players do not play to one-another, but do call to the players inside to connect verbally and visually before passing. Players are encouraged to work very quickly (one and two-touch play) and to work on their turning in particular. Perimeter players are required to call ‘turn!’ after each pass to a central player. Rotate the middle players every minute.

Variations:
- after passing to a central player, each outside player must sprint to another position along the perimeter of the circle. This requirement compels players to be active after releasing the ball and to also continue to adjust their shape along the perimeter.
- outside players can call, ‘man on!’ when playing inside. If this call is made, the receiving player receives with the outside of the nearest foot to the server (shielding touch) and returns the ball to the server.
**5’s speed passing**  
12x20 yard grid  
Begin with groups of 5 with one soccer ball in each grid. One player stands at each corner and the ball starts in one corner. This is a pattern passing exercise that also requires sharp movement. Player 1 passes square to player 2. Meanwhile, player three checks away and then toward player 2, who plays the ball into her feet. Player 2 turns and plays into either player (4 or 5) on the far end of the grid and then immediately takes player 1’s or player 2’s spot, with that player showing to the middle. While the change is taking place, 4 has played square to 5 and the sequence repeats in the other direction.
Progression:

- add a second central player. From this addition, the coach can insert several variations in the exercise, each adding to the tactical complexity of the environment.
- passes to the center can go to either player, but the exercise is the same.
- passes to the center must go to the far central target (of the two in the middle), who lays off the ball to the nearer target to be played into the far end line.
Fitness long passing  

10x10 grids (spaced)  

Barcelona use tight possession and sharp changes of field to wear down and stretch their opponents. One of the underrated characteristics of this style is the need to get support to the ball after a long pass. This exercise addresses this need. Players work in groups of four with a ball. Place one player (4) in a 10x10 yard grid, and the other three in a 10x10 yard grid that is set up about twenty-five yards (adjust to fit the abilities of the players) from the other grid (see diagram). Demonstrate with one group. In the grid with three players, identify a single, passive defender (2). This player is to play at walking pace to start. The remaining two players (1,3) are to pass the ball at least three times before one of them plays a long pass to their teammate in the far grid. Once the ball has left the grid, the player making the long pass (1) stays in the grid, while the other attacker (3) and the defender (2) race to the far grid. The last player to arrive in the new grid becomes the defender, while the other two players are attackers. The attackers move around the grid to connect three passes while the defender provides passive resistance. Then the long pass is made and the sequence continues. It is important that players understand the changing roles before commencing the exercise. This exercise provides long passing practice, highlights the importance of providing early support to the ball when the field is changed, and also raises the players’ fitness by requiring frequent, short sprints. Play for five minutes.
Passing Pattern and Rhythm Play

**Diamond passing 1** 6x6 yard areas  Players pass and follow as indicated with an emphasis on quality technique in both passing and receiving. Passes should be to the foot of the target that is on the side where the player will play next and the receiver should prepare early to receive. Encourage players to prepare their bodies early to receive and to be moving in the direction they will play as the ball approaches them. This exercise is terrific for developing rhythm, speed of technical play and a focus on the quality of the pass.

**Progression:**

- 1-touch only.
- Play in the other direction after the first pass (changing the foot with which the pass is played).
- Play in the air. This is very challenging, but also useful for getting players to think about playing directionally and with a possession mindset in the air.
**Diamond passing 2**  
10x15 yard areas  
Player 2 checks away and back to the ball.  
Player 1 passes in to the feet of player 2.  
Player 2 lays the ball off backward and inside for player 1 to run onto and pass into the feet of player 3.  
Player 1 and player two each move up one cone.  
Player 4 checks away and back to the ball and the sequence continues back to the starting position.

**Variation:**

- player 2 checks away and back to the ball.  
  Player 1 passes in to the feet of player 2.  
  Player 2 lays the ball off backward and inside for player 1 to run onto.  
  Player 2, meanwhile, has spun off away from the ball and is running into space behind her starting cone.  
  Player 1 takes a touch and then plays a through ball onto the feet of player 2, who touches the ball on to player 3.  
  Player 1 and player two each move up one cone.  
  Player 4 checks away and back to the ball and the sequence continues back to the starting position.
‘Y’ passing movement  10x20 yard areas  This exercise presents classic Barcelona passing and movement, with check runs, penetrating passes, and combination play in the variations. Player 2 checks away from the ball and then back toward player 1. Player 1 passes to player 2, who lays the ball off at an angle to player 1. Player 1 then passes in to the feet of player 3. Player 3 dribbles at speed back to the start point and leaves the ball for player 5 to commence the next sequence (to player 4’s side of the grid). As the players develop rhythm in the passing, encourage them to play 1-touch as much as possible. Players move up one cone with each sequence.

Variations:

- when the ball is played to the top of the ‘Y’, the receiving player plays first-time back to the start point.

- player 2 checks away and then checks back to the ball. Player 1 passes to player 2, who returns the ball first time. Player 1 then passes into the feet of player 3 and follows his pass. Player 3 plays a 1-2 with player 2 around player 1’s run. The players each move up one cone as the ball is passed by player 3 to player 5 at the start point of the exercise. Play continues and the sequence is run to player 4’s side of the grid.

- Player 2 checks away from the ball and to his right (toward 4). Player 1 passes into the feet of player 2, who passes first-time to player 3. 3 dribbles at speed back to the start point and the exercise repeats in the other direction. Players move up one position with each repetition. This is a challenging passing sequence for many players, as the runner (2) needs to open up and let the ball run across his body and play a touch pass into the run of 3.
Pattern passing 1/3 field  This series is set similar to the ‘Y’ sequence above, but it serves more players more efficiently and adds an overlapping option in the final progression. The 4-3-3 and its variations are designed to favor playing the ball forward and for combination play as well. The base pattern below and the two subsequent variations are useful for developing direction and rhythm. Player 2 checks away and then back toward player 1, who passes into the feet of player 2. Player 2 lays off the ball to player 1, who passes into the feet of player 3. Player 3 dribbles at speed back to the start point. Players move up one position with each sequence.

Coach:
- each forward pass is preceded by a check run away from the ball by the target.
- play one touch as much as possible.
- emphasize speed and quality technique.
- the player receiving the long pass dribbles at speed back to the start point and each player moves up one position with each repetition.

Variation:
- the final pass must be made in the air and settled cleanly.
Progression:
- add a 1-2 after the long pass (as diagrammed above).
• add an overlap at the end of the exercise. Note that this variation changes the rotation (from the first to the third and on to the second position).
**Triangle passing** 15x15 yard area

One in a series of Dutch-inspired passing movements that are reflected in Barcelona’s midfield possession game in particular. Player 1 checks away and then back to the ball. Player 1 passes to player 2. Player 2 lays the ball off for player 1 to run onto and then spins off to the outside. Player 1 plays into the feet of player 3 and then moves ahead one cone. Player 3 lays the ball off for player 2 to run onto and then spins off and player 2 plays into his path before moving ahead one cone. Player three dribbles the ball to the start point for player 4 and the sequence repeats. This exercise builds speed, running off of the ball, communication and sharp one-touch play into a team. It also helps players become accustomed to playing together in a fast-paced pattern play environment.
**Rectangle pattern passing**  15x25 yard area  

This exercise features check runs, penetration and lay-off and also long passing repetition, elements reflected in Barcelona’s short possession in the midfield before a precision penetrating pass. The variations also add some combination play after the long pass, requiring running off of and in support of the ball. Player 2 checks away and then back to the ball. Player 1 passes to player 2, who lays the ball off toward the inside of the grid for player 1. Player 1 then passes into the feet of player 3. Players 1 and 2 move up one cone in the sequence while player 3 dribbles the ball at speed back to the starting point. Meanwhile, the exercise is repeated on the other side of the grid. As the players become more comfortable, encourage them to play one-touch where possible and at speed throughout.

**Variation:**

- player 2 checks away and then back to the ball. Player 1 passes to player 2, who lays the ball off toward the inside of the grid for player 1. Player 1 then passes into the feet of player 3. Player 2 shows to the inside of player 3, who plays a 1-2 with player 2 before continuing back to the starting point. As with the base exercise, players move up one cone with each sequence, and they should play at speed and with minimal touches as they become more accustomed to the pattern. Finally, advanced teams can use the check run by the initiating player on one side as the passive defender for the 1-2 from the other side of the grid.
Possession

2v2+4 12x12 yard grids This is a dynamic possession game that includes opportunities for players to sharpen speed of play, combination play, vision, fitness and more. Play 2v2+4, with each team having a pair of diagonally-placed corner targets to play to. Players who pass into a target take that player’s spot, while the target quickly dribbles into the grid and works with the remaining teammate to try to get the ball to the other target. This is an outstanding environment for training on 1-2 combinations, as the numbers, speed and space all force players to step, think and play quickly.
3 vs. 3 functioning as 3 vs. 1 back-to-back 15x15 yard grids

Play 3 vs. 3 functioning as 3 vs. 1. Build two grids back-to-back and place teams of three in each grid (one team in vests). Demonstrate with one set of teams. Put a ball in one grid and explain that the team in the grid needs to try to keep the ball in possession as long as possible through dribbling and passing. The other team (in the adjacent grid) sends in one player to try to win the ball (if she wins it, she passes it back to her team in the other grid and the teams switch roles. The coach should keep a supply of balls outside the perimeter where the two grids join and every time the ball leaves the area, the coach plays a new ball into either grid to restart play.

Coach/observe:

- the teams will tend to stand close together in possession. Through a demonstration, show that players who are more spread out in the grid can make longer passes and more easily maintain possession.
- encourage players to work hard off of the ball to create angles where they can receive the ball.
- players should learn to anticipate the angle they will use to pass the ball and then use their first touch to prepare the ball in that direction.
- if one player is unable to win the ball as the defender, release a second player to enter the grid to help win the ball.
2v2 with end line bumpers  20x25 yard grids with cone or PUGG goals  This environment is terrific for developing the role of support play and transition, both key elements in Barcelona’s possession. Play 2v2 games with a support player (‘bumper’) on each end for each team. The bumpers are limited to one-touch play and should be used to release pressure (on the defensive end line) and open up the game and create opportunities to goal (on the attacking end line). Bumpers can move back and forth along the end line but cannot be tackled and cannot enter the field of play. Bumpers restart play as well, and should have a ball supply ready. No throw-ins, corners, or goal kicks are played in this game, with the emphasis being on fast break attacking and transitional play on both sides of the ball. Play for 5 minutes and then rotate the bumpers.

Coach:
- encourage players to speed up their thinking and footwork when a bumper is about to be played. Given that the bumpers are limited to a single touch, it is mandatory that the team in possession (and the defenders, too) are active and reading and running off of the pass.
- as always, communication is critical. The active players will change roles, check in and out and generally have to read and interact with one-another to be successful.

Variation:
- bumpers are located at the sides of the grid.
Transition strike

Barcelona are clinical about pushing extra players into the attack. This setting, also used to teach counter-attacking, is ideal for teaching backs and midfielders the moment to join in the attack (both as second and third attackers), and for teaching strikers hold-up play as well.

Players are organized in groups of three. Play on fields divided into two 12X15 yard grids. Each team plays two defenders and one forward. The forward cannot leave the front grid and the backs can only go into the front grid if they play into the striker. No one is allowed to play goalkeeper in this exercise. Play for 10 minutes, rotating the attacking player in each grid. Then, institute a rule that the striker is limited to one touch and when one defender plays into the striker, the other must go forward in support of the attack (the player passing forward cannot go forward). This requirement gets all 3 players to think ahead and look for a third attacker in possession.
**3v3+1 to corner goals**  

20x30 yard area  

This is an outstanding example of how to train possession in an overload environment. The extra player, a theme of Barcelona’s possession tactics all over the field, allows the team in possession to focus on controlling play, wearing out and stretching their opponents, all the while searching for a look at either attacking goal. Play 3v3+1 in a 20x30 yard area to corner cone goals. Because the numbers are small and the goals are in the corners on a wide field, this is a good environment in which to train on overlapping combinations, another favored Barcelona movement. Encourage teams to be patient and possess the ball in the middle of the field to set up flank overlapping. Also, if the overlap is not on (i.e. the defenders arrive in numbers or the attackers run out of space), emphasize that possession should be maintained and the direction of the attack changed.
Ellipse possession 

10x20 yard ellipse This environment is specifically designed to train a midfield triangle (and supporting players) to run a game under pressure. Create two equal teams. One team begins in the ellipse as shown. The other team provides three defenders and the remainder of the players serve as ball retrievers (rotate defenders every two minutes to get high pressure). The attackers are evenly distribute around the ellipse, with two or three central players (usually central midfielders) in the middle. A resting player from the defending team serves balls to the attackers for re-starts. The attackers attempt to keep the ball in the ellipse and in their possession. When the defenders win the ball, they kick it out of the ellipse.

Progression and coaching points:

- insist that players move toward the ball as they play, particularly if there is pressure. At first blush, this seems counter-intuitive because we always encourage players to create space and a release, but there are times when we do need to play in very tight space and more players create more options as long as the speed of play is such that the defense cannot get set and contain the ball.
- attackers count passes and the two teams compare scores after each team works in possession for 5 minutes.
6 vs. 6 vs. 3  

40x40 yard grid  
Create two teams of 6 and a third team of central midfielders (3). This is a pure possession exercise wherein the entire group works on possessing the ball numbers-down, and the central midfielders in particular have to find each other under tremendous pressure. The two teams of 6 earn a point for every 4 passes connected and the group of three get a point for each pass they connect. This exercise is useful for the triangle members in that they must constantly coordinate against heavy odds to both win the ball and also to keep the ball once it’s won. Interestingly, the frequent result of this game is that the triangle members outwork everyone else and win the game going away, giving the coach the opportunity to reinforce the value and necessity of high work rates all over the field and particularly in the triangle midfield.

Coach:
- triangle members must have tremendous awareness and be able to think ahead. Attacking or defending on an individual basis is futile in this setting and triangle members must constantly have their heads ‘on a swivel’ to detect pressure, find support and cordon the ball defensively.
- communication. Relatedly, the triangle members must provide constant feedback to one-another as an additional means of controlling and directing the game.
- triangle members should think about how to be successful on both sides of the ball. They will not be able to win much of the ball against such odds by simply running around, but two (or three) of them may find opportunities to isolate and win the ball through coordination.
- transition. The triangle is the engine of the team and it is frequently the scene of transition one way and then the other in the game. Triangle members must learn to maintain a jogging pace with play and then be able to ramp up for frequent, short sprints in transition, and they must constantly remain mentally in tune with the game. There are very few breaks for the triangle members.
• movement off of the ball. The triangle members must learn to read that when one of their teammates wins the ball and is under pressure, another player must move to the ball immediately in support. If at any time they find space, dribbling the ball and/or wider spacing and or longer passes are desirable to imbalance the opposing teams.

Variations:

• all play is with the off foot.
• no verbal communication. This may seem counter-intuitive, but in short stints it is a useful means of both making players appreciate the importance of verbal communication and also forcing them to do more assessing with their eyes.
• award points for combination play. Give the triangle members extra points for combinations (i.e. 3 per combination).

• attackers are encouraged to play through their central players. Award an extra pass for each touch by a central player.
• to encourage central players to find one-another under pressure, reward an extra pass point when one central player plays another.

End line targets 30x30 yard area Create two equal teams. Each team places two targets on their opponents’ end line. The coach has a ball supply for re-starts. Teams attempt to play in to either of their targets. The player playing in to the target sprints to take their place and the target receiving the ball plays to a back from the opposing team and play continues. Explain to players that this game will only be played for a few minutes (recommend 8-10), so the pace must be very high throughout.
This is an exercise that has a Barcelona feel to it in that the area is relatively tight and quick, thoughtful transition is rewarded, as is finding the target player.

**Two-team unopposed possession** ½ field  
So much of Barcelona’s domination is based on their obsession with knocking the ball around. This environment offers no pressure and is very useful for training teams to focus on details and consistency in possession. Create two equal teams. Explain that each team will have two soccer balls to begin and that the two teams cannot interfere with the other team’s balls, though the players must intermingle throughout the exercise. Explain also that the goal here session is to increase individual and team speed of play. That speed of play encompasses technical speed, tactical speed and physical speed and the players must work throughout to increase their ability to play the game quickly with and without pressure.

**Progression:**
- both teams knock their two balls around without restrictions.
- after passing, players must move to another ¼ of the field.
- after passing, the players must sprint to another ¼ of the field.
- players must check away before checking to the ball to receive (to create space).
- players must call the name of the player they will pass to before they pass the ball.
- players must call the name of the player they will pass to before they receive the ball.
- 2-touch limitation
- 1-touch limitation
- After every pass, the player passing must show as a target for a 1-2 pass, though the option should only be used on occasion.
- After every pass, the player passing the ball must make an overlapping run, though the option should only be used on occasion.

Note: Except where the new restriction cancels the previous requirement, the previous requirements remain in place as play continues.
Sequenced passing  

½ field  

Divide the group into two teams (in different color vests). Give each team a ball. Every player on each team should have a number as well. Explain that the purpose of the exercise is to work through the following passing and possession variations. In every case, players need to continue to move (the teams can and should intermingle), and they should move to a different part of the grid after they pass the ball. In addition, communication and checking to the ball should be emphasized as well.

- each team passes the ball to players in their group (color).
- each team passes the ball to players in their group using only the right foot to pass and receive.
- each team passes the ball to players in their group using only the left foot to pass and receive.
- each team passes the ball to players in their group using one touch passing where possible.
- each team passes the ball in sequenced order within their team.
- teams pass the balls, alternating the color they pass to.

100 passes  

½ field  

Given the passion for possession of the ball at Barcelona, this game is a fun, challenging environment to emphasize ball control. Form two even teams.
The coach serves balls into play for restarts. Each team counts their passes. The first team to reach 100 passes wins.

**Cone drop** 
½ field 
Play on ½ field with 3 equal teams. One team serve as targets. Each of these players holds 3 yellow cones and 3 red cones. Assign each of the active teams either red or yellow (match vests to cone colors if possible). Each time a target is played, she drops a cone of the color corresponding to the team that played her. In essence, the targets play with the team in possession. The targets are limited to one touch and cannot be tackled. The team first to get all cones of their color dropped wins. This game is a fun and challenging possession-building environment. As the cones fall, the teams must work to organize to attack and defend around a few targets.

Progression and variations:
- the targets cannot move.
- the targets can walk about.
- the targets are active.
- targets out of cones can continue to ask for the ball and, if played, pick up all of the cones of that color. This rule keeps targets without cones involved and also compels the working teams to be more thoughtful in possession.
4-lane soccer

A very efficient exercise for developing Barcelona-type ‘360-degree players’, this game compels players to organize to possess and play forward under considerable pressure. Divide the team into two equal teams (16 players are ideal). Each team places 4 players in one of the end zones and the other four in the opposite side center lane. This is a possession game wherein each team tries to keep the ball and play it as often as possible to their teammates in the other grid. When the opposition has the ball, a team can send two players (one from each neighboring zone into a center grid or two from the neighboring zone into the end grid) in to defend. Players on defense in their own zone should look to block passing lanes. This exercise is a very good environment for learning to read pressure (especially in the central zones, where defenders come from both directions) and also for training to play a sharp pass through a defended area. The coach should have a ball supply for restarts ready at the edge of the grid. Teams earn a point for each successful change in the point of attack.

Coach:
- the group in each grid in possession needs to learn to organize quickly to create an angle to play into the team’s targets in the other grid. Players must communicate; move quickly off of the ball; space themselves well and, when opponents’ pressure is broken or too slow in arriving, they need to also find a window through which they can change the point of attack. Then, they must be able to execute a variety of through passes, including a chipped, driven or lofted pass with
either foot, and the receiving of these passes must also be trained to be crisp and intelligent to avoid pressure from on-rushing opponents.

Variation:
- add a goalkeeper who can wander around the area. If she is played in the air and succeeds in catching the ball (she can be challenged), the team playing her earns a point (she must be in an opponent’s grid). She must then distribute the ball to another member of the team which played her and play continues.

Gates

30x30 yard grid

Create two equal teams (one in vests). The coach will need to have a supply of balls near the perimeter of the grid for restarting play when the ball leaves the grid. The two teams play a possession game inside the grid with the goal of passing the ball through any of the “gates” (pairs of cones one yard apart scattered throughout the grid as shown in the diagram).

Rules and coaching points:
- to score, a pass must travel through a gate and be received by a teammate on the other side.
- explain to the players before beginning that it is very easy to defend a single gate as a defender can simply stand between the cones. Therefore, the teams need to look to possess the ball with an eye toward working to find an open gate. If a gate draws a defender, the attackers must look elsewhere.

The most common breakdown in this game is a tendency to crowd the ball. The coach should stop the action if need be a couple of times early on to demonstrate the need to spread out the game. Longer passes typically create open gates and relieve pressure for the attackers.

Play for seven minutes, using the game to assess the team’s ability to possess the ball under pressure.
**11 vs. 6 possession** ¼ field  This environment adds a functional setting to the patterns and characteristics developed in previous exercises. Deploy one team in the 1-4-3-3 shape (the field can be lengthened to incorporate the goalkeeper into the team) and the other in a 2-2-2 grouping. The defenders attempt to pressure the ball and if they win it, they step on the ball and pass to any player on the full side and play continues. Rotate players onto the defensive team to sustain the pressure on the ball and give all players a chance to participate in the 4-3-3 shape. The basic concern for the full side is learning to move the ball together and release pressure.

Coach:

- the full side’s shape and playing relationships should be established through the possession the team develops.
- encourage the full side to experiment with the patterns practiced in the previous exercises.
- coaches can use this practice to choreograph attacking patterns and group play.
8v8 plus goalkeepers: Release an outside back ½ field

A constant feature of Barcelona in possession is the tucked up (or, indeed, charging forward) outside back. This functional environment allows teams to train to get their backs into the attack. Play 8v8 plus goalkeepers. Each team plays four defenders, two central midfielders and two forwards. During the first phase of play, divide the field into horizontal thirds. The two wing defenders on each team can move forward into the midfield zone when their team is in possession (they can carry the ball forward as well), but must return to their defensive zone when the ball is lost. Emphasize possession of the ball on the back line. After fifteen minutes, remove the zone restrictions, but encourage the teams to continue to build possession along their back lines.
**Zone game for combination play**  
2/3 field  

Similar to the previous exercise, this practice encourages players to push players from the back to the middle and beyond, but the focus here is combination play, a staple of Barcelona’s possession and attack-building. Play an 8 vs 8 (plus goalkeepers) game with the field divided into horizontal thirds. Each team plays 1-3-3-2. For the backs or midfielders to advance into the next zone, they must be involved in a combination with a player in that zone (i.e. an overlap or 1-2). This game not only encourages players to look to combine, but also forces combinations forward, developing momentum in the attack. After twenty minutes, remove the restriction, but require a combination before a shot at goal for the team in possession.

**Coach:**

- teach players to think about what conditions are required for a successful combination (i.e. an unsupported first defender; space on the flank for an overlap; communication and early movement off of the ball).
- introduce other combinations if desired (heel pass; take-over; double pass).
4 goal soccer 2/3 field This exercise helps develop the ability to change fields and to find flank space in the defense, both key facets of Barcelona's attacking. Divide the group into two teams and play on 2/3 field. Each team defends two small (4 yard) goals placed 5 yards inside of either touchline. Each team should play in a 3-3-2 formation. This game forces the teams to change fields frequently, reinforcing the key elements outlined above. Utilize throw-ins and goal kicks for restarts (no corners).

Coach:

- team organization. The midfielders in particular need to be vocal and working together to probe the opponents' defense and then be willing to cycle the ball back and forth across the field, looking for an opening and taking care of the ball.
- technical precision. Can players deliver a ball over distance when necessary to create an advantage? Do they play the proper foot on their target? Is the receiving touch productive?
High Pressure Defending

Defending footwork  10x25 yard area  It is the defender’s footwork that contains the attacker’s run, allows the defender to apply pressure, creates the right moment to tackle and also allows one to recover. This warm-up serves to prepare players to focus on the quality and speed of their footwork. Players begin in pairs (2 lines) at one end of the 8x20 yard chute. The second pair begins when the first pair has reached the midpoint of the chute.

Progression:
- jog through in pairs.
- high knees in pairs.
- high heels in pairs.
- shuffle through in pairs (reverse footwork at midpoint).
- backpedal through in pairs.
- 3/4 speed runs through in pairs.
Progression:

Player 1 gets in a defending position in front of player 2 (no ball). Player 2 jogs forward, changing speed and direction (zig-zag), but allowing the defender to remain in front of her throughout. When the players reach the end of the chute, they step to the outside and jog back to their respective lines.

Coach:

- Jockeying position. The defender should ‘open’ (turn) her toes, hips and shoulders toward the nearest side of the grid to channel the ball to the tightest area and limit the attackers’ options. This closed position also allows the defender to avoid having the ball played between her feet in live play. The defender should also assure that her weight does not shift to her heels, as it becomes very easy for the attacker to make a quick change of pace or direction and lose the defender if her weight is not on the front of her feet (lean slightly forward, legs bent). Similarly, the defender’s focus must be the ball. Top defenders are not affected by attackers’ body feints because their main focus in a dueling situation is the ball. It is useful to encourage defenders to get their eyes closer to the ball to emphasize this point. It is important not to get too carried away with this point, as a defender too low and leaning too far forward is also easily beaten with a quick touch away. Hand/arm position is also a consideration. Flailing arms can be a source of imbalance and fouls. Top defenders keep their arms and hands comfortably at their sides (some
coaches like the defender to hold the bottom of her shorts with the hand nearest the ball to avoid handball calls… while jockeying. Finally, mentality is critical to quality defending. Passive performance in jockeying exercises often means poor performance in dueling situations. Someone once said that any player transitioning to defense has to, ‘Hunt the ball.’ One of the easiest ways to separate players at tryouts is to watch them defend as individuals. Top players will want to win the ball and will not be satisfied with going through the motions of jockeying and seizing control of a dueling situation.

- Jockeying Footwork: The defender should use a ‘chop step’, keeping the feet underneath her (short steps). This shorter step both increases balance and also allows the defender to make quick adjustments to the ball as the attacker begins her run. Finally, the defender’s feet should never come entirely together because at that moment she is vulnerable both of balance and also because she likely has weight on both feet, meaning she will not be able to be powerful in adjusting to the attacker’s movement of the ball.

- Recover and Jockey: Player 1 passes to Player 2 and then makes a recovery sprint to get into good defending position. Player 2 allows the defender to get placed and then dribbles in a zig-zag
pattern, not attempting to get behind the defender, but forcing her to constantly deal with changes in direction and speed, as well as fakes. When the players reach the end of the chute, player 2 dribbles the ball back to her starting point and the players change roles the second time through the chute.

Coach:
- after passing the ball, the defender must accelerate to get into a good defending position. The first steps need to be powerful and short, allowing the defender to close quickly and also adjust to any movement of the ball.
- focus on the ball. Now that there is a ball in play (no tackling!), the defender can be coached to focus on the ball throughout the exercise.

- jockey and sprint. Player 1 passes to player 2 and then makes a recovery sprint to get into good defending position. Player 2 allows the defender to get placed and then dribbles in a zig-zag pattern, not attempting to get behind the defender, but forcing her to constantly deal with changes in direction and speed, as well as fakes. When the attacker reaches the end of the chute, she
makes an explosive run (leave the ball at the end of the chute) through one of the two gate goals. The defender must attempt to be the first player through the chosen gate. When the players reach the end of the chute, player 2 dribbles the ball back to her starting point and the players change roles the second time through the chute.

Coach:

- **awareness.** The defender must be aware of the space and options available to the attacker as the pair near the end of the chute. The defender should attempt to pin the attacker to one side of the chute, forcing her through the near-side gate.
- **physical aggressiveness.** At the moment the attacker tries to get in behind the defender, the latter must move to cut off the former’s run. If necessary, she should also ‘swim’ (use her arms to get shoulder-ahead to the goal) to assure that she gets primary position. Encourage players to be very aggressive in asserting themselves in this situation.
- **explosive running.** One of the most challenging aspects of marking is to deal with a sudden run at speed off of the ball by an attacker. In this exercise, the defender has to recognize the moment to sprint through the gate. She is already at a disadvantage in that she does not know which route the attacker will choose (similar to patterns in the game) and because she is facing away from the goal while the attacker is faced up with her destination.
4 vs 4 functioning as 4 vs 2

(2) 15x20 yard grids  Each team of four begins inside one of the neighboring grids as shown. Restarts come from the ball supply shown at the side of the grid. The goal of the exercise is to win possession in the opponent’s grid, return the ball to one’s own team grid and keep possession. In the first phase, two players from the defending team can cross into their opponents’ grid to try to win back the ball. The reasons for starting with two defending players are to impress upon the players the importance of applying pressure when outnumbered and also to get them to think in terms of small group tactics (i.e. first and second defender roles).

Coach:
- high pressure defending. This game is played in a relatively small space and offers the defenders the opportunity to quickly cordon off and pressure the ball. The defending should be in relatively short stints (as in the real game) and furious in intensity.

3 vs. 3 +4

20x25 yard grid  Two midfield triangles (1, 2, 3 and A, B, C) play against one-another in a directional small-sided game. For the sake of simplicity and consistency,
both are shown here with a single holding midfielder and two attacking midfielders, though a reverse set-up could also be utilized. 1, 2, and 3 try to gain possession and play into the feet of 4 and 5. Similarly, A, B and C try to play into the feet of D and E. The perimeter players cannot play to each other, cannot be tackled and cannot enter play. When 1, 2 and 3 are in possession, they can use D and E for support. To speed up the game, limit the touches or time on the ball for the perimeter players. Also, encourage the attacking team to be creative and not feel constrained to stick to a certain shape.

Coach:

- communication and awareness. Because their roles are so fluid and the space they work in so large, and because the game comes at them from every direction, the midfield triangle need to be constantly sneaking glances at the developing tactical picture (i.e. the positions of their teammates and opponents, etc.) and also verbally identifying their intentions and imperative information (i.e. first and second defender roles, the runs of opponents, etc.).

- the shape of the defending triangle. Because the ultimate goal of the team defending will be to funnel balls into the triangle from the front line, the attacking midfielders must be encouraged to get into passing lanes and also mark open players in their midst. Note that in the diagram above, 2 and 3 get on the outside shoulders of their marks (A, B). This posture is intended to channel passes and runners in the direction of the defensive support of player 1, who both covers the attacking midfielders and also marks or cuts out passes to advanced runners.

- intelligent decision-making and high pressure. The defenders’ priorities are:
  1. Deny ball.
  2. Deny turn.
  3. Deny penetrating pass.

- preventing combination play. The defenders need to anticipate the likelihood of their opponents attempting to play 1-2’s and make overlapping runs to try to carve up or imbalance the defending block. Once again, good communication and tight shape will prevent most combination play from succeeding in this space.
4 vs 4 functioning as 4 vs 3  

(2) 15x20 yard grids  
Now a third forward can join in the defending in the opponents’ grid. Because the area is limited, the defenders will be rewarded for applying high pressure as quickly as possible.

Coach:
- defensive coordination. In addition to rapid transition with the loss of the ball, the forwards must also attempt to work together to isolate, pressure and win the ball and also to understand and coordinate their shifting defensive tactical roles. Young players often need considerable repetition to grasp the importance of visual and verbal communication in channeling and closing down the attacker in possession, particularly when they are the second defender.
- cutting out passing lanes. One of the most important points of awareness to impress upon players is their need to cut out available passing lanes off of the ball. In the example above, player 1 closes down attacker A, while player 2 gets into covering position, taking away the short pass to player B. Player 3 recognizes that the only option available to A is to play a longer pass to C and 3 moves to cut out the pass.

Variation:
- two defenders are allowed into the attackers’ grid at each restart. Restarts are random balls played on the ground or in the air. This variation encourages the forwards to focus on winning balls at restarts, on balls that pop loose in their area of play and also on challenging to win the ball in the area. Point out that high effort and efficiency in these situations can eliminate considerable defending work that is necessary if the opponent is allowed to settle into possession.
8v8 to corner targets

Each team puts 6 players in the area and one in each of two opposite corners of the grid as shown. Restarts come from the coach at the side of the grid area. This is a possession game in which the teams attempt to play into their target players. Teams must play to alternating corners and after a ball is played in to a corner player, the player passing in takes the position of the target and that player dribbles into the grid, initiating an attack in the other direction. The focus of this exercise, however, is the ability of the defending group to organize to defend. With six players spread over ½ field, the team must apply early and constant pressure to the player in possession from the moment a new attack begins and also provide close support and balance as well. As teams tire, this becomes a difficult task and the coach has the opportunity to reinforce the importance of collective effort and focus in defending.

Coach:

- the first defender. This player must quickly close down the dribbler coming out of the corner after a point is scored. If she does this well, she can take away a long outlet pass and also channel the ball into organizing support underneath the ball.
- condensing space behind the ball. When the first attacker is being closed down, other defenders must quickly take away short passing options and also clog passing lanes to the longer options.
This movement will condense space and give the defenders a better chance of winning back the ball. One or more players behind the ball also balance the defense by guarding against a long ball that would play out the remainder of the team.

- transition. This game typically presents lots of transition moments (shrink the area to emphasize this facet of play) where the team has just won or lost the ball. For the purposes of this game, that moment is key to the defenders applying pressure all over the field and trying to contain and win back the ball immediately.

**8 vs. 7+goalkeeper**  
½ field  
All restarts in this game are from the attacking center backs (A, B) from a ball supply at midfield. The attackers field two center backs (who can move side-to-side but not forward at this stage), a full midfield with two central midfielders and two flank midfielders, and two strikers. The defenders field a goalkeeper, four backs and a defending triangle. This setting is ideal for teaching defensive cooperation between the back line and the midfield triangle.
**8 vs 6 possession and gates**

30x 50 yard area

This is a possession exercise designed to set the stage for midfield and front line collaboration in defending in the 4-3-3. The numbers team (6-11) have three central midfielders and three front line players. The letters (A-H) have four back-line players and four midfielders (two central midfielders and two flank midfielders). Encourage both teams to maintain their tactical shape. Though there are no goals to play to in this exercise per se, the letters can earn points by playing through either of the flank gates (pass or dribble), while the numbers earn points by tackling the ball (or intercepting a pass to) the opposing center backs or central midfielders.)
**11v11 game with high pressure scoring incentives**

Both teams play 1-4-3-3 (or put the non-target team in a different formation to prepare for a particular style of play or opponent). This is a standard scrimmage with the field divided into thirds with cones as shown. If the defending team wins the ball in the front third of the field, they earn 3 points. If they win it in the middle third, they earn 2 points. Finally, if they win the ball in their back third of the field or if they score a goal, they earn a point. This incentive encourages the teams to be very aggressive in pressing and trying to dispossess their opponents through high pressure as far up the field as possible.
Attack Pattern Choreography

Movements to overlap an outside back

The following examples provide a functional setting in which the team can practice movements to overlap an outside back. The sequences should be trained in a shadow mode (without opposition) first, with careful attention to detail. The right back (5) passes into the feet of the checking right forward (9). The right forward faces up to the defender as the right back makes an overlapping run. The right forward can play the right back directly in if the opposing left back does not move to cut out the passing lane. If the back cuts the immediate passing lane (instruct the defender to vary her reaction), the right forward can touch the ball inside of the defender and then play the ball in behind for the overlapper to run onto.

Additional options:

Movement to overlap an outside back

The right forward (9) immediately dribbles inside and square and then turns upfield to pass into space for the oncoming right back (5).
Movement to overlap an outside back
The right forward (9) turns inside and plays the center forward (10), who is checking to the ball in front of the back line. The center forward plays the ball into the corner for the overlapping right back (5).
Movement to overlap an outside back
The right forward (9) turns inside and plays the attacking midfielder (8), who touches the ball forward and plays the ball in behind the defense for the right back (5) to run onto.

Rehearse each of the movements to both sides of the field and rotating through all relevant players.

The coach can add and/or enliven defenders after the various options have been rehearsed. Then, focus on the decision-making by the attackers, encouraging them to react to the movements of the defenders.
Movement to overlap attacking midfielder ½ field Any movement to overlap an attacking midfielder on the flank requires that the forward on that side either be pinched in or run inside. To begin, the right back (5) plays the right forward (9), who dribbles away from the flank and the attacking midfielder (8) moves to overlap into and beyond the space vacated by the right forward. The right forward plays into the feet of the center striker (10), who checks toward the ball. The right forward passes to the center forward, who plays the ball in behind the opponents’ left back for the attacking midfielder to run onto.
**Flank penetrating movement: Center striker** ½ field  

The right back (5) plays the ball into the feet of the right striker (9), who touches the ball back and plays back to the feet of the oncoming right back. The right striker then runs inside. Meanwhile, the center striker (10) makes a run across the front of the opposing back line, crossing paths with the right striker and then runs onto the ball played deep on the flank by the right back. The lateral run by the center striker could also be made across the backs of the defenders, in an offside position, particularly if there is no pressure on the ball and the center striker can check back on-side before the ball is played.
**Flank penetrating movement: Wing Striker** ½ field This is one of the most common sequences in the system because it is relatively easy to isolate the wing forward against a single outside defender and then exploit the space behind that player. The right back (5) plays the ball into the feet of a checking wing forward (9), who lays the ball off to the attacking midfielder (8) and then spins off to the outside to run onto the return pass in behind the opposing left back. As with all patterns set for the flank, be sure to rehearse the sequence on both sides and with all relevant players.

Coach:

- **timing.** The attacking midfielder must learn to show underneath the ball at the moment the right striker is receiving the ball. If she is too early, she is often marked at the moment the ball is to be laid off to her. If she is too late or not close enough, she may strand the right forward with a defender on her back and limited support options.

- **change of speed.** When the ball is laid off, the striker must learn to turn outside and sharply change speeds. At that moment, the defender must decide whether to watch the ball or track the runner and for a split-second, the attacker has the opportunity to shed the defender and exploit the space in behind.
**Movement to release the center striker**  
½ field  
The holding midfielder (6) passes into the feet of the checking attacking midfielder (8), who returns the ball first time and spins off away from the ball. Meanwhile, the center striker (10) checks in front of the opposing left center back and then back in front of the right center back, attempting to draw both players out of position. The holding midfielder passes into the feet of the center striker, who lays the ball off first time to the oncoming attacking midfielder (she could play either attacking midfielder). The center striker then makes a curling run away from the ball and into the seam between the right center back and outside back, where the attacking midfielder sends the through pass. This movement lends a functional setting to the combination passing rehearsed in the warm-up exercise.
Movement to release the center striker

½ field  The holding midfielder (6) plays into the feet of the checking center striker (10), who turns and runs at the opposing left center back. The right forward (9) runs inside and into the seam between the opposing left center back and outside back. The center striker plays the front foot of the right striker and then makes a run in between and behind the two center backs to complete the 1-2 combination. This movement requires early recognition from the right forward that the opposing back line is loosely arrayed and also that the center striker will be able to face up to and run at the defense. The right striker must also decide whether the center striker’s run will be successful (both in beating both center backs and remaining on-side) before playing the return pass.
**Central attack movement: Wing forward penetration 2/3 field**

The left back (2) plays the ball into the feet of the left striker (10). The left striker lays the ball off to the attacking midfielder (7), who continues the change of field by playing her partner (8). The right forward (9), who has worked to keep her width to create a channel between her immediate opponent and the near-side center back, now makes a run across the front of her opponent and indicates that she wants the ball played through into the seam. The attacking midfielder delivers a long pass into the gap for the right forward to run onto.

Coach:
- **timing.** If the striker floats inside too early, the angle and seam will be depleted before the play can develop. If she starts too late, the opposing center back may read the play and arrive to the ball first. Similarly, the attacking midfielder must work to release the ball before the advantage is lost and yet not so early that there is no chance of the striker winning the race to the ball.
- **communication.** Both the player delivering the through ball and the runner must consistently get in early and demonstrative communication with one-another to help refine the timing.
- **deceptive runs.** The striker should vary her runs (i.e. sometimes making her run outside and behind the left back to get out of her vision as the ball is released) or fake to check for the ball to hold the defender before spinning off and getting in.
- **proper through pass.** The type and texture of the pass have a dramatic impact on the amount of success achieved by these movements. Often, this movement will require a lofted ball to eliminate the opposing left center back.
Central attack movement: Wing forward penetration 2/3 field

The left back plays into the feet of the holding midfielder (6), who turns and plays the feet of the checking center striker. The center striker (10) lays the ball off first time for the left-side attacking midfielder, who takes a touch to her right and plays a lofted ball into the same seam for the right forward (9) to run onto.
Central attacking movement: Release attacking midfielder  2/3 field  The right back (5) passes into the feet of the checking right forward (9), who touches the ball inside and begins running across the front of the opposing back line. The center striker (10) checks back into the midfield (trying to pull the opposing right center back out of position) and the left forward (11) maintains her width. The left attacking midfielder (7) sprints into the seam between the opposing right back and opposing right center back and the right forward slots the ball into space for the midfielder to run onto.
Barcelona Finishing  1/3 field  

Observed at Barcelona first team training, this exercise trains sharp passing and receiving, movement of the ball and combination play to goal. Player 1 passes to player 2, who returns the ball first-time. Player 1 then plays into the feet of player 3, who then completes a 1-2 with player 1 before finishing.
Pressure shooting

1/3 field

Barcelona create frequent situations where one player is in but under pressure from a recovering defender. This efficient, realistic finishing exercise recreates that situation. Two lines form at the cones 30 yards from goal as indicated in the diagram. Note that the cones are staggered to give the attackers an advantage. The first player in the defending line passes to the front foot (or into space in front of her) and then the defender pressures and attempts to win the ball from the attacker, who sprints to finish. If the defender wins the ball, he tries to score. After the shot is taken, the attacker retrieves the ball and jogs back to and joins the defender’s line. The defender joins the attackers line. Encourage the attacker in this exercise to take a straight angle with speed to the goal (there is a tendency for the attackers to veer to their right to avoid pressure) and adopt a good shooting angle. The attacker should also get a good look at the goalkeeper’s position after his set up touch and see if he can finish (low, back post is often best) while the goalkeeper is trying to close him down (catch the goalkeeper moving forward).
**Lay-off and penetrate**  

Player 1 makes a hard run into the gate (representing the opposing back line) and then checks back toward the ball. Player 2 passes in to the feet of player 1, who lays the ball off to one side for player 2 and then makes a curved run in the opposite direction. Player 2 plays the ball in behind the opposing back line for player 1 to run onto and dribble to finish. Player 2 then makes a check run through the gate and the sequence repeats.

**Coach:**

- **proper pace and location in passing.** There should be rhythm in the passing to provide some realism in both the speed of play and also the timing of the runs. The lay-off pass in particular must be played at an angle that allows the receiving player to easily control the ball and develop a good passing window for the through pass.
- **quality runs.** The check run must be made with conviction in both directions if it is to freeze and pull apart the opposing back line in a game situation. Similarly, the curved run prior to penetration must be made at speed and also with an eye toward being able to look over the inside shoulder to time the run to stay on-side and choose the proper point to get in behind the defense.
- **communication.** The supporting player should demand the back-pass and also urge the runner to get in behind the defense. Similarly, the runner should demand the ball be played to her feet to initiate the sequence and then demand the ball be played in behind to complete the combination.
Through-ball finishing  
2/3 field  
This exercise combines a simple passing sequence with an angled, long through ball and a finishing opportunity. Player 1 passes into player 2’s feet as the latter checks back to the ball. Player 2 lays the ball off first time for player 1 to run onto. Player 1 takes a long, preparatory touch and looks up to assess the possibility of playing a long, angled through ball to player 3. Player 3 works to time her run to split the flags (defenders), remaining on-side, and run on to the through ball and close on the goal to finish. Player 1 moves to player 3’s position and player 2 takes player 1’s position in the next sequence.

Coach:
- the quality of the through pass. The ball can be a lofted, chipped or driven ball, depending on the distance, conditions and in a game setting, the posture of the defense. The coach can require a particular type of pass, and the angle and distance of the set up for the passing sequence and the through ball should be frequently changed throughout the exercise.
- the timing of the run. The attacker’s run must be timed to stay on-side and also get in behind the flags as early as possible, and the run must also create a good angle for the through ball and the subsequent run to goal.
- game speed. This pattern, including the run to goal, must be trained at speed so that the practice simulates game situations.
**Rapid fire** 1/3 field  
Given that many of Barcelona’s goals come out of running on the ball into the area, this is a relevant and efficient means of simulating those moments and it also adds an element of added difficulty with the help for the goalkeepers. Divide the group into two teams. One team, each with soccer balls, dribble in a grid 30 yards from goal. One attacker is posted 20 yards from goal and serves as a wall-passer. This attacker calls out the names of teammates who pass into her feet, receive the return pass and try to finish before crossing the penalty spot. The defending team post two supplemental goalkeepers on the posts of the goal. These players must keep one hand on the back of the post and cannot use their hands to save the ball. The remaining defenders are arrayed well behind the goal. They can earn a point by receiving in the air errant shots over the goal by the attackers and the completing three juggles before the ball hits the ground. Play for two minutes and then rotate the supplemental goalkeepers. After three rotations, the two teams change roles.

**Variations:**

- when a goal is scored, one or both supplemental goalkeepers must run out and touch the line on their near side of the six-yard box (meanwhile, the attackers continue to try to finish).
- defenders behind the goal get a point for heading any errant shot.
- vary the service (i.e. toss balls to be volleyed) and distance (or striking foot) for the shooters.
2v1 reaction to goal  1/3 field  Speed of play to goal is a critical component of Barcelona’s success and they are very skilled at recognizing when an overload situation exists and attacking the goal. Two players in different color vests wait in the “D.” There are also lines to either side of the center service area (one in each color). The coach initiates play by passing to the first player in either line. The player in the “D” with the corresponding color becomes the attacker and the other player is the defender as the players play 2v1 to goal. The attacker receiving the pass from the coach then takes the place of her teammate in the “D” as play continues to goal.
2v1 +1 recovering to goal 1/3 field  Continuing the themes of recognizing the moment to play and creativity in the attack, this exercise puts a premium on speed in the attack. A defender serves to either of the attackers and then sprints to recover. An additional defender waits in the “D.” The attackers have a 2v1 to goal if they play quickly. If the defenders win the ball, the duel ends.
3v2 to goal

1/3 field  Play 3v2 to goal. Require an overlapping movement before a shot at goal. This overload environment should create ample opportunities for overlapping, as there is plenty of width and only two defenders. Note the restart positions, with two attackers forward as targets and another player in a supporting position with the ball.

Coach:

- setting up the combination. The initiating player can either play in to a target and overlap or dribble at a defender, in which case either of the forward players need to overlap into space on the flank. The key is to be decisive in choosing the roles of the attackers, and the most withdrawn player (the player starting with the ball in this case) sets the roles by passing or running at a defender.
- timing. Enforce the offside rule to compel the attackers to focus on timing runs and passes.
- playing at speed. If this becomes a concern, add a recovering defender to limit the time the attackers have to execute.
**5 vs. 3 to goal** ½ field  This practice continues expanding the finishing group and adds a functional element, allowing the attacking midfielders to work with the front line players. Organize the attackers as two attacking midfielders (one starts with the ball) and three forwards. The defenders play a flat three. If the defenders win possession, the ball is dead and play restarts with the midfielders. The attackers must work to overlap one of the attacking midfielders before shooting at the goal. This environment is a useful setting for either letting the players figure out how to create the overlap for the midfielders or for testing the patterns outlined below.

**3 teams to goal inside the area**  Because Barcelona are built to avoid playing in the air in the box, many of their goals result from quick, thoughtful play in possession inside the area. Create 3 equal teams. Two teams play to goal (against the goalkeeper) inside the 18-yard box, while the third team serves restarts (from the edge of the area and the ‘D’) and also plays first time any ball popping out of the box. The resting team earns points for goals scored off of serves. The other two teams earn points for goals. The goalkeeper earns a point for every difficult save. Play three five minute games (each team plays twice).
Team trains ‘keeper goal box area

Similar to the exercise above but with two teams and the added element of finishing crosses. Create two equal teams. Each team places three players in the goal box area and one crosser in one of the corner areas. The remaining players get a ball supply and spread out across the top of the 18-yard box. The goalkeeper calls out names of servers (players on the top of the 18 can shoot or pass and players at the corners serve crosses) for each restart. When a player at the top of the 18-yard box opts to shoot, the players inside the box must clear the area of the 6 yard box for the goalkeeper. The ball is live as long as it remains inside the 18-yard box. Play for five minutes and then rotate servers and active players.

Variation:

- Add a Barcelona-inspired short corner (one player checks to the server) to the restart possibilities.
**Beating Barcelona**

Given the team’s impressive run since 2008, debate rages as what sort of team and tactics will be required to defeat Barcelona. This is an especially interesting debate given that Guardiola and his team are so adamant that playing ‘their football’ is as important to them as their results. Thus, in scheming against Barcelona, it’s not just a team that one confronts, but a stubborn tactical belief and one that has, to this point, proven remarkably successful.

Tactically, there are some precepts that would suit a team well in trying to defeat Barcelona.

*Counter Attack*

Because Barcelona are so intent on possessing the ball and because they spread people (particularly their back line) all over the field, they are definitively vulnerable to quick, intelligent counter-attacks. It’s clear that many Barcelona opponents think in these terms and it’s also evident Barcelona are aware of the danger, as they put such a premium on smothering the ball immediately after it’s lost. The successful counterattack moves the ball quickly and over distance after the ball is won, thus defeating Barcelona’s attempts to run as many players as possible at the ball after a turnover.

It would seem that the best place to build counter-attacks against a typical Barcelona lineup would be on the flanks and deep. Alves, who played so many games as a right back, is there in tactical description only for the most part and Abidal, who is typically the left back, is less venturesome overall, but still pushes forward and leaves an interior seam that can be exploited (as Madrid did in the third edition of the Classico in January, 2012, when Cristiano Ronaldo snuck inside and scored). Probing in the middle of the field usually draws holding midfielder Busquets’ attention and counters here are tough to establish or sustain in momentum because Piquet and Puyol are very good at closing space together.
In an instructive example of how and where to counterattack Barcelona, AC Milan’s Clarence Seedorf dribbles at speed into space, isolating himself vs. Puyol (5). Former Barcelona star Zlatan Ibrahimovic (B) makes a late run inside of Puyol and Seedorf makes a nice touch pass into space for Ibrahimovic to run onto and finish. Barcelona were caught way out of defensive balance in this situation and Puyol (slow to pressure and completely ignorant of Ibrahimovic’s run), Busquets (16) (slow to recover and failed to track Ibrahimovic’s late run) and Javier Mascherano (4) (failed to fill in behind Puyol or pick up Ibrahimovic’s run), who was playing as a center back on this day, were equally culpable for the breakdown.
The above slide shows another danger inherent in Barcelona’s ball-chasing defensive mentality. Although Barcelona’s dismantling of South American Champion Santos was comprehensive, there were several moments, particularly in the first half, when the European champions looked vulnerable. Santos player A, above, has gotten into space on the dribble on the edge of Barcelona’s back line. Puyol (5) steps to the ball. Pique (3), the center back, slides in to support and Abidal (22), the left back, also pulls across the formation to keep tight with Pique. Busquets (16) tracks back ball-side in support. The area at the back side of the defense, where player B is running, is extremely vulnerable at this moment. Santos seemed to understand this opportunity, and they did earn a couple shots from that area by attacking to their left and then quickly switching the ball. Indeed, it’s not immediately evident in the Barcelona system who would be responsible for this space if Abidal either overplays the danger to his right or if he is compelled to tighten up on Pique by another runner. Busquets could be called into this space, but he tends to recover ball side and threaten support areas for the opponent in possession. The next best option here would be one of the attacking midfielders, and both Xavi and Iniesta make important
defensive runs in every game, but often both are pushed up very high and this back-side space is thus an area of weakness for Barcelona in defensive transition.

**Earn Set Pieces**

The Barcelona approach to attacking corners, which is to play short most of the time, is an indication (because of their relative lack of size) of their feeling that they will not likely win many balls in a crowded goal area. Thus, it would behoove teams to run the ball to the endline (i.e. in counter-attacking situations, where it’s easiest to find flank space and work deep into Barcelona’s back third) and try to force crosses and corners. After Puyol, Pique and Busquets, Barcelona’s typical starting lineup lacks height and is not as comfortable playing in the air. Similarly, goalkeeper Valdes, while an accomplished shot-stopper and very good in possession, appears to be prone to the occasional gaffe (and less than dominant physically) when compelled to handle service in the air under pressure. The same considerations would apply, naturally, regarding free kicks into the area, though Barcelona are more disciplined than most regarding avoiding fouls and particularly in their back third.

**Batter Them at Every Opportunity**

Though a very cynical approach, this appears to be Jose Mourinho and Real Madrid’s approach to playing Barcelona in 2011-2012. In the second and especially the third version of the Classico, games played as part of the Copa Del Rey competition (which Barcelona won on aggregate 4-3 after a 2-1 win at the Bernebeu and a 2-2 draw at Camp Nou), Real committed numerous blatant fouls all over the field and seemed intent on intimidating and even hurting Barcelona stars Messi, Xavi and Iniesta, among others. The approach appeared to finally pay dividends in the final twenty-two minutes of the latter match, when both Cristiano Ronaldo and Kareem Benzema netted goals off of Barcelona mistakes in their back third and Barcelona’s ability to control the middle of the field waned under the strain.

**Do not Play from Behind**

Given the possession-obsessed approach that Barcelona bring, it is critical that opponents not fall behind, as then their ability to drain minutes from the game, as well as the energy of opponents who are obliged to press them, comes into play. This concern was very evident in 2011-2012’s first edition of the Classico, when Barcelona earned a 3-1 lead mid-way through the second half. Real Madrid looked tired and dispirited and basically chased the game all of the way up until the final whistle.

**Play with a Lead**

Contrarily, staking one’s team to a lead can be very advantageous against Barcelona. Although they typically and stubbornly cling to knocking the ball around regardless of the score, the weight of expectation does sometimes wear on Barcelona. A prime example was the shocking 0-1 loss to Getafe in the first round of the 2011-2012 season. Barcelona blew a number of early opportunities and once they fell behind, looked out of sorts both in their possession and also in their recognition of the need to force an equalizer. Certainly any team able to earn and hold a
lead against Barcelona would enjoy the evolution of a tactical dilemma for the Catalans as they try to be patient and also watch the time slip away.

*Low Pressure in the Front Third and Hold a High Line*

Real Madrid and others have tried this approach and it makes sense. By conceding their back third to Barcelona and holding a high line, opponents compress the game and give themselves a better chance of disrupting Barcelona’s possession. Lending further weight to this proposition is the fact that Barcelona seem to see this as a bit of a challenge and don’t generally just play in behind to stretch and wear the opposing defense (a little surprising given that the team sometimes field front lines featuring Messi, Villa and Pedro). It appears, given Guardiola’s comments on the subject, that Barcelona are determined to play their way, and if the opponents want to compress and flood midfield space, Barcelona will demonstrate that it won’t matter. To be fair, there are instances where such tactics actually play into the hands of Barcelona, as a high tight team is often very vulnerable to the angled, high passes to the backside space (i.e. for an overlapping Alves) outlined earlier, and Barcelona do occasionally punch the ball through centrally and let Messi or Fabregas run, which is a frightening prospect for the opposing coach in planning.
Conclusion

Barcelona under Pep Guardiola brought about a tactical revolution wherein the ‘team’ concept of football was raised to a new and very appealing level. Through superior technical, tactical and physical speed, a selfless philosophy and superior management, a fluid possession-obsessed team ran off a series of impressive domestic and international results that continues through the completion of this book. Though FC Barcelona have until recently relished the role of upstart in Spain and Europe, they will likely be the gold standard for the game for years to come.

Best wishes in your coaching.
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