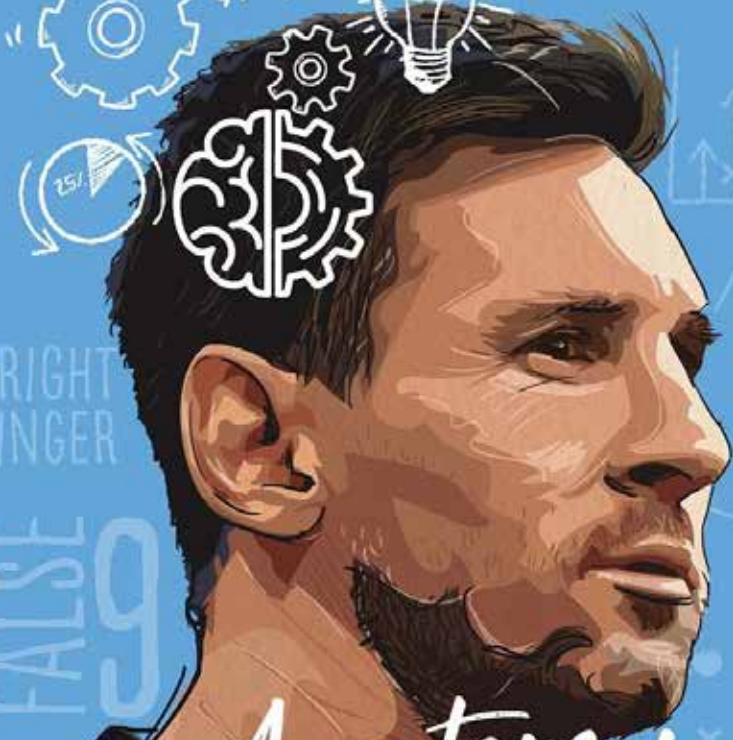


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Anatomy
of a
Genius

Leo Messi's

Tactical Evolution at
FC Barcelona

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Chapter 1

La Masia's Finest

IT'S NO secret that Lionel Messi's first steps at Barcelona were rather difficult. Of course, signing for a club thousands of miles away from his home and having to leave his family behind was always going to impact the adaptation period. Despite his glaringly obvious talent, there's no denying that the club was taking a big risk by investing so much in a boy that was an unknown quantity back then. His medical condition aside, Messi was a frail and timid child arriving at a club that had global aspirations.

Times were still far from ideal in Catalonia and it would take them some years to get back to the top with Frank Rijkaard and Ronaldinho leading the modern revolution of the *Azulgranas*. Messi, of course, would be a huge part of that rallying charge too, but not many would have predicted that when he first joined the academy. I asked Graham Hunter, journalist, author, analyst and LaLiga expert, whether there was an indication of greatness about Leo in the early stages of his Barcelona career. He explained:

Greatness is too strong of a word because what it definitely was right from the first instant was a real

clarity that he was extraordinary. When he first arrived [at Barcelona], he was timid and silent to the extent that people worried about his personality. And remember, he was tiny. While Messi always did things that showed he had more skill, more technique than any of the other players and always did things that stunned people, the entire collection of things that would make him truly great didn't really become very clear until 2004 or 2005.

His road from being a talented individual to La Masia's finest was rocky and long. Of course, as time went on, it became increasingly more difficult to ignore his potential. As Hunter points out, he always had more skill and more technique than anyone else. Sometimes, however, that isn't enough.

La Masia's success became evident during Pep Guardiola's tenure at the club but their principles were well defined by that point already. When scouting for players, Barcelona look at several key aspects that a young player must show, including how good their technique is and how well they understand and see the game. There are more, of course, but generally speaking, these two are traits you'll find in almost every academy graduate at the club. But this also doesn't mean it's all they're good at. Every player is unique so inevitably some will come with a lot of speed, strength or with an incredible eye for a pass or goal. Those traits are immediately identified and then groomed.

However, young players are never finished products and every single one comes with strengths and weaknesses together. This is very important to understand because no one could have predicted Messi's unbelievable development into a total player. Granted, a lot of it was innate talent and love for the game but a lot also comes from proper development and

coaching in the early years of his career. ‘The way that we like to develop them [young players at La Masia] is helping them to grow the bottom level,’ said Albert Capellas, ex-coordinator of Barcelona’s Academy, in an interview for *Inside the Academy*. The bottom level here means traits they’re not necessarily that good at. Often, physical traits aside, La Masia graduates are very well-rounded players; they’re players of great technique, vision, reading and understanding of the game and positional play. This is no coincidence either as the club works hard to create such profiles in the first place. Barcelona scouts recognise great talent and extraordinary skill in players but then coaches at the club refine their basic skills, skills that ultimately help them play simply. ‘Doing exceptional things is talent – that’s scouting. But helping them to play simple – that’s coaching,’ explained Capellas in the same interview.

Barcelona never taught Messi to be extraordinary in that sense. But they did help him harness the innate talent and transform it into something more palpable and suitable to both his personal player profile and also to serve the collective at a higher level. La Masia does very well to improve on players’ flaws, or just tries to mould them into positions and roles that cater to their strengths. Everything starts from there. Instead of looking for players who immediately fit the philosophy, it’s about identifying young and talented players and then coaching them to maximise that.

We can apply the same process to Messi himself. When Barcelona first scouted him, he was this scrawny kid who could dribble past the entire opposition team without batting an eyelid and then score. Clearly, the extraordinary talent was already visible. But he was very raw, running at players with his head down and beating them through sheer skill and difference in individual quality. ‘Gradually he got taught the ways of Barcelona in terms of completely understanding the

positional play, the triangles, pressing and moving,' Hunter explained. Coaching for young Messi wasn't necessarily extremely important. He didn't watch a lot of football in the early years of his career and didn't really care for analysis. His talent was so big that for the majority of his youth days it was enough to make the difference. 'While he was younger, people were trying to coach him and change him and he just ignored them,' continued Hunter.

But *that* Messi is miles behind the one we would eventually enjoy watching on the big screen or at the grandest of stages. The difference, once again, is in doing the simple things well. Of course, nothing Messi does is ever that simple. But his basics are on an extremely high level: controlling the ball, passing, vision and even shooting. All of those things are traits every footballer should work on, regardless of their position or style of play of the team. And they're also traits that are developed at La Masia. I was lucky enough to speak to Taher Mortezaie, the current technical and project director at Barça Academy Brisbane, who's been working for the club for years, even spending three years as a coach in their academy. While he's never trained Messi directly, he helped me understand some key elements of coaching within Barcelona's academy and La Masia as well.

That's actually the first big point we need to understand. Barcelona's academy and La Masia are not the same thing. People often get it wrong and confuse one with the other. However, while both can include players of similar age, the main difference is in the level of competitiveness. Mortezaie explained during our chat:

The main difference is that La Masia is 100 per cent competitive from six or seven years old onward. Of course, the academy is competitive as well, but this

period is more about education and trials because it's very difficult to get in [La Masia]. So the two will regularly swap players between six and 12 years old.

In a way, the academy is La Masia for La Masia. Therefore, in an ideal world, a player's usual path of development will then be the academy – La Masia – first team.

Interestingly, so much of what Mortezaie has told me echoes Capellas's words too. La Masia tries to mould players in a certain way, prioritising some key traits of their player profiles. But at the same time, as Mortezaie explains, two other aspects are absolutely fundamental in their approach – freedom and personal development:

In the beginning, we taught children different aspects of the game in different blocks, each very deep and detailed for a thing X, Y or Z. But this is not always so. Barcelona are not very linear in their approach to training because how can you specifically prepare for scenarios A, B or C when football, just like life, is such chaos most of the time? So we would still go through blocks of training but give players more freedom of how and when we want to implement it into the training sessions.

It's more about the freedom of choice here. Players are put in different scenarios that are likely to occur on the pitch and then observed as they take action in certain ways to find the best possible solution to a given problem. That's what develops their understanding of the game while also building up their agency. It's not so much about telling them what's the right or wrong way to play, but rather helping them understand what benefits them and the collective in specific scenarios, according to Mortezaie:

Instead of telling them what way is best, we tell them to assess what options they have in any given scenario. And that's what we do – we create options for them for every situation and foster awareness – not, you did something wrong, but rather, understanding why you did something and have you thought about whether it helps you and your team-mates.

Of course, while he can't tell me that was exactly what Barcelona did with Messi, it's fair to assume it did play a part in fostering Leo's development towards a more complete profile that not only highlights his incredible talent, but also aims to maximise it for the benefit of the collective.

The freedom of expression helps coaches understand what the player is like and what their main traits are. With Messi, it was quite clear he was a dribbler of exceptional technical quality. But it came with a lot of caveats too, one of which is being very individualistic in his approach. Morteza actually indirectly talks about handling that very aspect in young players:

To outsiders, it might seem very rigid – pass the ball, one-touch football and such – but it's more about creating sessions where children can express themselves. Rather than tell them 'pass, dribble or do that', you create an environment where different players can express themselves in different ways. So if a player takes a lot of risk during sessions, instead of calling him out for doing that, we try to see why he does it and what benefits or attitudes it can give the team. Also, is it something we have to work on or is it a trait that can develop in the future so you'd want him to feel that freedom and take the risk?

There's absolutely no doubt that Barcelona recognised Leo's strengths very early on, and then it was all about building on them, for both parties' sake. But academy graduates are people first, and children at that, players second, so how you approach their development matters a lot. La Masia builds the player by building the person behind that player first. We all know how Messi, in particular, is an introvert, which was even more obvious when he was a kid. External circumstances such as leaving home at an early age and being far away from his family definitely played a part in moulding his personality too, but there's no escaping the fact that he was genuinely a silent and shy boy.

At the beginning, he didn't even live in La Masia along with the other children but instead in a nearby flat with his father. When he was around other people from the club, he was a mostly quiet and unassuming soul. However, in time, he came out of his shell to eventually become one of the popular ones. Hunter recalls:

As he slowly got accustomed to life in Barcelona, he became a really well-liked kid. People in school would do some of his homework for him or would just give him answers for stuff. He was definitely popular for his character more than just because he was a great footballer at that age. He was very brave.

This is also something La Masia puts a lot of emphasis on – developing the character, the person behind the scenes.

Needless to say, Messi needed a lot of that upon first arriving at the club. The key is to help the children feel safe and comfortable. So many of them come with all sorts of different baggage or issues they're trying to repress, sweep under the rug or somehow overcome. The sooner the club realises that

and tends to the person first rather than the player, the better for all of them.

Developing Messi's character and personality, especially in the early stages of his career, was as important as harnessing his godly potential. Mortezaie explains:

Football can be played in many different ways, but it's not just about the football that's played at a club, it's about seeing players as human beings with different personalities and needs. Once you understand that person, their dreams and fears, then you have a big chance to both influence the player and the person.

This is the fundamental thing across all levels of football, from grassroots all the way to an elite 'farmhouse' like La Masia. The main idea is to let them express themselves in ways in which they're most comfortable and then the coaches will do their best to nourish their strengths, improve on their weaknesses and, above all, let them play – something important that Mortezaie has been very vocal about in our discussion. Yes, Barcelona have different training blocks and sessions that focus on developing all sorts of different profile traits, but the key is to 'let them play'. They're children, after all.

But there's one more aspect we have to touch upon here that's unique to Lionel Messi the player and Lionel Messi the person, and that's special talent. Even though development isn't linear, the truth is that some children are inevitably more talented than others. So how does one approach bigger talents? Many young players with huge potential end up having average careers and many are late bloomers, achieving their very peak at later stages of their career. In that sense, it's difficult to successfully predict any youngster's development line.

Mortezaie ponders:

If you tell a big talent they're a very big talent and you approach them differently, how much have you actually helped them? There are so many things that need to go right at the same time, so maybe by approaching a big talent differently you're not helping them because you're giving them special attention they think they will get their whole life. And then when they are 15, 16, 17 or 18, they go to a club where everybody is like that. And all of a sudden they don't get that special attention anymore. So instead of telling them they're a big talent, rather focus on how they can use that exceptional skill to get better and ensure their team is better. It's about creating mini challenges for them all the time.

I absolutely love the last part regarding 'mini challenges'. How can you take your god-given talent and put it to even better use to help the team? You're obviously incredibly good at X so why don't you try to complement it with Y or Z? Remember Messi's challenge to score more headed goals when he was really young?

Back in Argentina, his youth coach Carlos Marconi from Rosario, knowing Leo's love for chocolate cookies called *alfajores*, struck a deal with the kid, saying that he would get a cookie for every goal he scored. But since it wasn't unusual for Messi to score four or five goals per match, Marconi quickly realised he was running out of cookies. So in a cheeky attempt to turn the tide back in his favour, he altered the rules of the game, saying Messi would now get two cookies per goal but the trick was that only headers counted. Messi was obviously never tall and powerful so scoring headers was very difficult. But he was incredibly creative and used other skills in his arsenal to beat the challenge. He would dribble to the goalkeeper, getting

past all the defenders on his way, beat the goalie too and then juggle the ball in the air right in front of the goal before scoring with his head. Along the way throughout his career, his talent would be posed with different challenges all the time, the first of which was the positional change.

Andy West recalled during our discussion on Leo:

When he was a kid – and obviously children's football is less rigorously organised tactically, so [he] will have had the freedom then to do what he wanted – he played as the *enganche*, the traditional No.10. That was his role within the structure – to play the way he wanted. But he was also very small and very slender in his early Barcelona days.

No.10s are players that are granted positional freedom and often decreased defensive responsibility – a perfect combination for someone of Messi's traits. But as he rose through the ranks, football became more complex but also more structured and rigid. One player deviating from the plan was putting the whole collective at risk but, luckily, such is the extent of Leo's talent that it mattered very little.

The academy Messi is very similar to the one we saw in the early stages of his first-team journey at Barcelona but he was also very raw. Watching him play, even if only through clips and limited footage, is dazzling. That version of Messi was just unrestrained talent and raw skill. The way he changed directions at full speed or swapped between controlling the ball with his right or his left foot was simply outrageous. The young Messi would break defenders' ankles if they tried to mimic his movement but he also over-relied on it, sometimes dribbling when he should have passed and vice versa.

West explains:

By watching his early youth games, you can see it's Messi, but he doesn't have the awareness he now has. He runs with his head down, he runs into dead ends, doesn't have that pause to take a step, look up and take a look at the game around him. That was the thing that had to improve. And obviously it did, to a ridiculous degree.

This is certainly true. Messi's signature runs and control have become a staple over the years but while they were always present, they weren't exactly refined. He would often play either through the middle or, interestingly, down the left flank. So to suddenly change to the right wing to accommodate Ronaldinho, the star of Rijkaard's Barça, wasn't an easy task. This would ultimately mould Messi's profile even more.

As talented as he was, he still wasn't familiar with all the concepts that were key at Barcelona. As Samuel Marsden puts it: 'Messi was a mix of this Argentine street player who was able to mould and grasp the style and demands of Barcelona, also fairly early in his career.' It wasn't an instantaneous change, far from it. But from the very start he was learning, taking it all in and, most importantly, evolving.

From his very first game for the U14B team back in 2001, climbing the ladder through Barça's C and B teams, to his debut in the first team under Rijkaard, Messi was constantly improving and moulding his profile, both for his and the club's sake. Eventually, he became far too big to stay at the lower levels, even becoming 'a bit bored playing for the B team', as Sid Lowe told me. Everyone knew the time had come for him to step up.

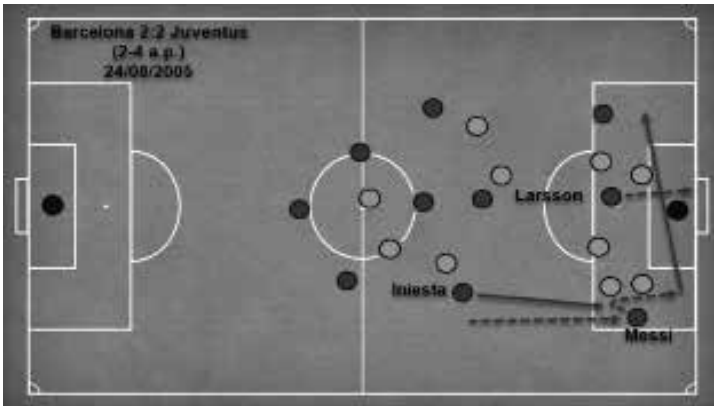
So step up he did. This is his story.

ANATOMY OF A GENIUS



with an eye for goal who, at that time, was a safer and more common option for Rijkaard's Barcelona. When Messi did play, however, he was often seen far on the right wing, initially

‘They [Juventus players] were aggressive. And to see Messi put [Patrick] Vieira and [Pavel] Nedvěd on their ar**s and selling them dummies, it was hilarious and the crowd loved it. And that was the day Rijkaard knew he couldn’t let Messi go on loan, he had to start using him,’ Hunter told me, explaining what had happened that summer at the Camp Nou. Barcelona would end up losing the match after a penalty shoot-out went the *Bianconeri*’s way, but Leo himself would show everyone his worth and then some. The next graphic depicts one of his many great moments from the match, while also highlighting what he was all about back then.



It’s actually Iniesta who starts the attack as Barcelona are ripping Juventus apart in an attacking transition. The first thing to note here is the sheer pace young Messi possessed. He may not have been the fastest around but at that time he had more than just decent top speed at his disposal. The young Argentine starts his run from around the halfway line and receives a lovely pass from Iniesta just inside the opposition’s box. It’s there that he sends both Fabio Cannavaro and Gianluca Pessotto back to Italy with a cheeky feint before deploying a good, if slightly mishit, pass towards a marauding Henrik Larsson inside the six-yard box. The Swede sadly