

ABDULLAH ABDULLAH



Rise of a  
New  
Dynasty

FC BARCELONA  
FEMENI'S  
EMERGING LEGACY

Foreword by Sophie Lawson

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## The Dawn of a New European Power (2017–2019)

*It's been the years of dedication of  
piecing together the small components  
slowly but surely, to finish with an  
absolute masterpiece.'*

– Freelance journalist Alex Ibaceta

THE CURRENT iteration of Barcelona Femení is the latest chapter of a story that's been brewing for decades.

The success we've grown accustomed to seeing in continental cups and domestic leagues is the culmination of many years of hard work, both on and off the pitch, before finally having a proper structure and team in place to compete against the very best, but it wasn't always this way.

Barça Femení's history began in the early 1970s when they were founded by a young lady by the name of Immaculada 'Imma' Cabecerán. Imma met with Agustí Montal Costa, then the president of FC Barcelona, to ask for support in organising a match and permission to use club resources, to which Montal conversely said that if she was able to form a team, they would have the club's backing. She then placed an ad in the city of Barcelona, asking for more members to form a women's football team for a charity match organised by Ràdio Nacional (one of Spain's prominent national radio stations at the time) to raise funds for local children's hospitals. Playing charity games around Christmas was a regular occurrence in the '70s in the United Kingdom, and FC Barcelona traditionally hosted these events in Spain. After the success of the ad in bringing in a brand new team of amateurs, Barcelona fulfilled their promise and sent club legends Antoni Ramallets and César Rodríguez to coach the team, with Ramallets even staying on as their full-time head coach until 1972. The game was played at the historic Camp Nou against a backdrop of 60,000 people. Though they were initially named 'Barcelona City Team', they weren't officially part of the club until 2002. This match was played on 25

December 1970 against Unió Esportiva Centelles, another women's club in Spain that actually had two girls' teams.

It was in the 1980s that the team was renamed Club Femení Barcelona. They also reached an informal agreement with the main club where they were allowed to use the colours, badges, and facilities, but the crest was used only a few years later. Club Femení Barcelona won their first competition on 29 June 1985, the Generalitat Cup.

In 1988, Club Femení Barcelona became a founding member of the Liga Nacional (now known as the Primera División), which was the first women's league recognised by the Royal Spanish Football Federation. Here, they had a successful three-year run in the early '90s, winning the 1994 Copa de la Reina and being the championship runners-up in 1992 and 1994, but they subsequently declined to bottom-half positions that instigated the start of some poor runs of results.

Having been officially incorporated into the main club's hierarchy in 2002, Club Femení Barcelona's first league title came about in 2012 after a period of relegation and promotion on a couple of occasions. In 2001, the Spanish league was renamed to the Superliga

Femenina, but due to Barcelona's poor results from their previous season, they were not accepted into the top division. It was a struggle for several years, with the club yo-yoing between the divisions, until they finally made their way back to the top flight in 2008 and re-established themselves as mainstays in the league as a non-professional team. It was only in 2015 that Barcelona Femení finally decided to become professional.

That was the start of Barça's new journey towards complete transformation after decades of battling for visibility, professionalism, and sporting excellence, all the while striving for the ultimate goal of establishing themselves as the world's best club side. The success they achieved must be seen in the context of it having come about from years of trials and struggles before finally making their way towards a consistent presence for top honours. From 2008 onwards, after they had returned once again to the top division, Barcelona went on to navigate through many struggles, successes, and defeats. After winning four straight national championships (the first Spanish team in the women's league to do so), with their first one occurring in 2012, Barça subsequently struggled to reclaim their title for another four years, finishing runners-up behind

Atlético Madrid Femenino in three of them. They forged a rivalry with Atlético during this time, which gave the Superliga a competitiveness where two teams were actively challenging for the title.

Throughout this period, Barcelona's focus wasn't just on gunning for titles but also on expanding and developing their playing squad, and a big part of that was using their academy players from the famed La Masia.

Through all of the changes, the club wanted to stick to their DNA and identity of promoting and developing in-house talent combined with experienced big signings. Speaking to *The Guardian* in March 2022, the former sporting director Markel Zubizarreta said, 'Our philosophy is special: when I talk to players about coming here, I speak in a way they have never heard before.' He also added that in seven years the club had 'changed everything' internally to ensure they matched the levels required to compete with other clubs in Spain and across Europe in signing the top players and attracting the best talent. At the time, Zubizarreta mentioned that nine girls were living at La Masia, eight of whom were Catalan and one from Mallorca, which showed that despite these ambitious changes in the market, they



were still sticking to their commitment to fostering and acquiring the best local talent.

The way the squad has developed has seen Barcelona buy incrementally in the transfer windows, with players such as Lieke Martens, Toni Duggan, and Élise Bussaglia all mixed in with younger talents like Aitana Bonmatí, Alexia Putellas, and Clàudia Pina. Martens in particular represented Barça's first high-profile signing in 2017 who added marketing and commercial value as well as stellar footballing quality. The Dutch superstar brought about a type of stardom that attracted more eyes to the women's team – it was one of the first instances of a Barça women's player lining up in ads alongside Lionel Messi. This signing represented a huge step forward for the women's team in progressing their visibility and popularity to the wider world.

After signing for Barcelona in the summer of 2021, Ingrid Engen said the club had in place everything needed for the players. Engen also described Barcelona as a benchmark for the way a top club should aspire to be. It's this kind of testimony that entices other players to join Barcelona and add to their incredible quality. The mix of experience and youth has been integrated well as of the time of writing, with current

coach Jonatan Giráldez and co. identifying the right targets; the 2023 summer window followed on with that trend with the seemingly shrewd signings of Esmee Brugts and Ona Batlle.

Having found stability in the league from 2019 onwards, the next phase of Barcelona's plan was to conquer the UEFA Women's Champions League (UWCL). Having faltered at the Round of 32 stage to Arsenal in 2012/13, they reached the quarter-finals in the following season but lost to Wolfsburg. After seeing the lofty potential the team could achieve in the competition, not unlike their male counterparts who were basking in their glories during this period, the club made the monumental decision to make the women's team professional in 2015 and really started to focus on the UWCL. They went on to reach more knockout stages in the following seasons, with two quarter-finals and one semi-final before eventually arriving at their first final in 2018/19 against Olympique Lyonnais.

Journalist Alex Ibaceta said, 'Barça's history started a long time ago when they created their women's team, but it was the 2019 UWCL final against Lyon that was the turning point. Players realised they were facing against the best at that time, which was

Lyon. All the players agreed that that's where they needed to be, asking staff and surrounding [people] for help to get them to that level. The intensity increased the necessary amount to reach Lyon's level of dominance.

'The movement of the ball became quicker, fitness levels went up, resources became better and more, and staff put in extra hours just as the players did. It was a team effort on everyone's behalf. Now just four years later, Barcelona have won two Champions Leagues and are unstoppable for Spain.'

Attendance has always been a pressing issue in women's football, but Barça's improving popularity over the years meant more and more opportunities were opening up to give them a grander stage. For the past two seasons up to the end of 2023, we've seen attendance records being broken on a regular basis – for example, on 17 March 2019 Barcelona defeated Atlético Madrid at the Wanda Metropolitano in front of the world attendance record for a women's club match, 60,739. After years of seeing attendances of a few thousand across the women's football landscape, Barcelona are now regularly selling out big UWCL knockout games at Camp Nou, including against Real Madrid and Wolfsburg.

Barcelona once again broke the attendance record in April 2022, 91,648 supporters seeing them beat Wolfsburg 5-1 at the Camp Nou in the first leg of their Champions League semi-final. In the previous game against Real Madrid in the quarter-final, they had another high attendance number of 91,553 which was 95 people short of the record set against Wolfsburg in the 2022 semi-final. The way we see the Camp Nou regularly sell out is impressive and it only displays a positive indicator towards the growth of the women's game. It also points towards the effect that Barcelona are having on Spanish and European football as a whole by bringing in more eyeballs to every game they play.

Despite overcoming all these challenges in their early history, this alone didn't define the club as what we regard as a football 'powerhouse' today. We can see similar stories within Europe itself that the likes of Arsenal have cemented in the UWCL, but Barcelona's model team to match is, and always will be, Olympique Lyonnais.

Lyon can be regarded as their biggest rivals in terms of scope within the game; they redefined the UWCL and won it eight times, including five in a row between 2016 and 2020 – equalling Real Madrid's

unbeaten record in the men's game. Lyon's legacy is one that needs no explanation. The titles, the glitz, and the stardust of players that have graced the Groupama Stadium set an example for other clubs to follow. Barça have the blueprint of what long-term success could look like for them and following in the French juggernaut's footsteps contributes to their journey in paving their own legacy.

The club as an institution has always been known for its free-flowing, beautiful football with legendary players showcasing their sublime talents like Lionel Messi and Neymar. In Alexia Putellas, the women's team have their equivalent and while there are parallels between the two teams, the women's side has become synonymous with striving for perfection.

While it's still early days, their legacy is starting to emerge. This book offers an insight into their recent success and tactical complexities from 2019 to 2023, and how it has defined their legacy. We journey through two different eras and see how two managers' ideologies fused with Barcelona's own DNA, highlighting moments from the key games in this time period, and of the vital players who helped put the tactical theory into reality.

The best place to start is their time under Lluís Cortés in 2019 and explain his tactical ideas that started to shape the start of sustained success at Barcelona.