

# Spain Soccer Playing Style and culture

by Stewart Flaherty  
**Share**

Spain dominated the sport internationally for a while around 2010. They have beaten teams who try to play technical possession soccer against them, they have beaten teams who tried to beat them with a long ball physical style, and in the World Cup final they beat a team that set out to defend and foul them.

The renowned 'tikka takka' possession play of the Spaniards is allied with an uncommon, and an underestimated mental strength. Rather than attempt to show strength with screaming, shouting and gesticulating Spain simply show the ability to produce quality play over and over again relentlessly throughout a 90 minute game. This speaks highly not only of the coaching quality provided, but of the discipline and culture that young players are developed in.

As much as Brazil have glamour and history on their side, it is currently Spain who are the prototype of how to play the game. Players like Cesc Fabregas and Mikel Arteta, who are among the most gifted in the English Premier League, find themselves unable to crack the Spanish starting lineup, now that is producing depth of talent.

## **STRENGTHS**

Results do not lie, the focus and coaching of technical ability in Spanish youth football is among the world's best. The slight frames of David Villa, Xavi and Andres Iniesta show that Spain, unlike other countries truly put value in ability with the ball over size, speed and strength. The culture of valuing possession and having the ability to keep and use the ball is a common throughout the Spanish national team age groups.

Spain also has a youth soccer culture that is unison and harmony. This is not the case in a country such as the United States as we will discuss later in the series. In the USA, a talented soccer player may face pressure from a number of angles as to where he plays his soccer. A club coach, town coach and high school coach are known to fight for the time of a player meaning a player has to choose. This creates bad feeling, and a culture of coaches looking out for their programs rather than the true interests of a player. How many times does a coach encourage a player to play on a different team to the one he coaches?

The culture in Spain is quite different to this as Phil Ball described in FourFourTwo magazine. "The Spanish system is pretty comprehensive" describes Ball. "They combine schools football



and club football, so that one weekend the kids will play with the school and a week later they will play for the local clubs. The coaching is more specialized at the clubs and the best players at the local clubs then get invited to train with the professional club, but the school and club teams are being monitored all the time so nobody can slip through the net." This means Spain truly has a design to bring the best players through.

Ball also explains that elite players in Spain are not allowed to officially play for professional clubs until the age of 14. This means players stay with their local youth teams and schools, as opposed to the major coaching resources being focused on a smaller percentage of players.

When elite players make it into a professional youth academy, they will be exposed to a thorough immersion in the game. Practice, rest, diet and sleep are all monitored in a bid to show young players what it is like to play at the professional level.

The philosophy of youth soccer coaching in Spain is outlined well by Gines Melendez, coach of the Spanish Under 17 World Cup team in 2009;

"We are providing them with the resources so that they can go as far as possible," said the Spanish coach. "The important thing is that the team keeps playing well and stays faithful to its style by keeping possession for long periods and playing the ball out from defence. It's a good squad of players and after playing together virtually non-stop for two years they know each other very well and are all good friends."

## **WEAKNESSES**

Spain has very few weaknesses currently as a soccer nation. The results of their national team are second to no team in the world, and they have won a number of age group European Championship titles.

The one argument could be that Spain produce players who are physically inferior athletically. However, their strength comes from this. A lightweight players such as Iniesta would likely have been moved to a different position that central midfield in another culture. A nation like England who

place high stock in physical play and athleticism would likely move Iniesta wide or as a floating forward. Joe Cole is a similar player to Iniesta, can you imagine England playing him central midfield in a 4-4-2?

While they will lose games, it is difficult to argue their method of developing players is outstanding.

## **ELITE LEVEL**

On the elite level, World Cup winners Spain have a unique and largely unplanned advantage. More than half of their starting lineup in international games developed through the youth academy of F.C. Barcelona. This is advantageous on a number of levels.

The technical coaching, and tactical instruction they have received is consistent increasing team synergy when they play together as senior internationals. The players also have strong off the field bonds forged by years of living and developing together through their formative years.

The Barcelona youth academy is committed to providing the ultimate learning experience to all players who pass through its doors, and is a landmark on the map of Spanish youth development. Great players to pass through its doors include current Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola, Lionel Messi and the latest batch of Spanish World Cup winners. Gerard Pique, Xavi, Andres Iniesta and a host of other Spanish squad members have developed in the same system.