

THE BARCELONA COMPLEX

LIONEL MESSI and the
Making—and Unmaking—
of the World's
Greatest Soccer Club

SIMON KUPER

New York Times bestselling coauthor of *Soccernomics*



ALSO BY SIMON KUPER

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To Pamela, Leila, Joey, and Leo, for letting me write this book in our Paris living room during the months of the lockdown, and for falling in love with Spain and Catalonia with me. It wouldn't have been worth it without you.

Before he came we didn't have a cathedral of football, this beautiful church, at Barcelona. We needed something new. And now it is something that has lasted. It was built by one man, by Johan Cruyff, stone by stone.

—PEP GUARDIOLA

The truth is that there has been no project or anything for a long time. They juggle and cover holes as things go by.

—LIONEL MESSI, SEPTEMBER 2020

I suspect that if journalists really understood football they wouldn't be journalists.

—JOHAN CRUYFF

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Eric Abidal (1979–): Club legend since he lifted the 2011 Champions League months after surviving cancer. Served Barcelona successfully as left-back of Pep Guardiola's great team, and then unsuccessfully as sporting director buying the wrong players from 2018 to 2020.

Jordi Alba (1989–): A Masia boy, who left Barcelona to launch his career and returned in 2012. Left-back. Good friend and holiday companion of Messi's.

Thiago Alcântara (1991–): Midfielder. Son of the Brazilian world champion Mazinho. Came through the Masia but couldn't break into the first team, left for Bayern, and became the hero of their 8–2 thrashing of Barça in 2020. Now at Liverpool.

Josep Maria Bartomeu (1963–): As Barça's president from 2014 until his resignation in 2020, he bought the wrong players for too much money. Runs a family business. Nice chap.

Tonny Bruins Slot (1947–2020): Johan Cruyff's trusted assistant, a working-class Amsterdammer born the same year as Cruyff, and one of the few people he never fell out with. Did the tactical analyses of opponents that Cruyff didn't have the patience for.

Sergio Busquets (1988–): A brilliant *pivote*, as long as he doesn't have to run. A Masia boy, he went from the bench of Barcelona's B team in 2008 to winning all the biggest prizes in football by 2011. Son of Cruyff's not-so-brilliant reserve goalkeeper Carles Busquets.

Albert Capellas (1967–): Former coordinator of the Masia, now coach of Denmark's under-21s. Disseminates Cruyffian ideas at Possessionfootball.com. Example of Barcelona's brain drain, and an essential adviser to the author of this book.

Manus Cruijff (1913–1959): Johan's father. An Ajax fan, and a grocer in the neighborhood opposite the club's old stadium. His early death from a heart attack was the most formative moment of Johan's life. Manus never put a y in his name.

Danny Cruyff (1949–): Johan's widow. Treated Cruyff as just a regular guy from Amsterdam. Doesn't like publicity or football.

Johan Cruyff (1947–2016): Father of the modern club. Born Cruijff, but realized that the y worked better internationally. Most interesting man in modern football history. A brilliant player from 1964 to 1984, then an entirely original coach. As manager of Barcelona from 1988 to 1996, he created the "Dream Team," then let it decay. Invented much of contemporary football, including the Barcelona style (though other clubs now play it better). Quite batty.

Jordi Cruyff (1974–): Johan's son, which can't have been easy. Played (and sat on the bench) for Barcelona, Manchester United, and Holland. At the time of writing, head coach of Shenzhen FC in China. Feels more Catalan than Dutch.

Ousmane Dembélé (1997–): Nippy French winger, but did not have a spartan lifestyle in his first seasons with Barcelona and was often injured. He improved from 2020, but Barça surely regrets paying Borussia Dortmund €140-million-plus for him.

Robert Enke (1977–2009): German goalkeeper. During his disastrous spell at Barcelona from 2002 to 2004, he was scapegoated for a Cup defeat to a third-division side. After this, he fell into a depression, which may have been a step on the path to his suicide in 2009.

Samuel Eto'o (1981–): A difficult man and a brilliant striker. Guardiola will have been relieved that he decided not to sell him after all in 2008. Cameroonian.

Cesc Fàbregas (1987–): A Masia boy who played with Messi and Piqué on the adolescent "Baby Dream Team." Joined Arsenal at sixteen, then returned home at twenty-four, just in time for Barcelona's last glory years.

Francisco Franco (1892–1975): A Galician who became an army general, Nationalist leader in Spain's civil war (1936–1939), and then dictator of Spain from 1939 until 1975. His White Terror during and after the war killed an estimated two hundred thousand Spaniards, and drove many others into exile. Brutally suppressed Catalan nationalism.

Louis van Gaal (1951–): A Cruyffian who was hated by Cruyff. Coached Barcelona from 1997 to 2000 and again in 2002–2003. Won two Spanish league titles but is remembered in town more for his very un-Catalan rude directness, and for his Amsterdam-accented Spanish.

Joan Gaspart (1944–): Hotelier, former waiter at the Connaught in London, and from 2000 to 2003, unsuccessful president of Barcelona. Played a hotel receptionist in Antonioni's 1975 Barcelona-based movie *The Passenger*.

Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926): Catalan architect. Started the still-unfinished Sagrada Família cathedral. The author draws possibly overambitious parallels between him and another mad genius, Johan Cruyff.

Antoine Griezmann (1991–): Captain of the French world champions of 2018. A brilliant player, but less so at Barcelona. A mini-Messi, which may be the problem.

Pep Guardiola (1971–): Johan Cruyff's best pupil, who joined Barcelona at age thirteen. A Cruyffian who renovated the cathedral that is Barça. Since his departure as coach in 2012, the club has never been quite the same again. Catalan nationalist.

Thierry Henry (1977–): French striker who spent his best years at Arsenal, but from 2007 through 2010 he enjoyed a late heyday at Barcelona. Played with and observed Messi.

Zlatan Ibrahimović (1981–): Swedish striker whose two seasons at Barcelona (2009–2011) went wrong because Messi decided he didn't want a massive Swede blocking his runs into the middle. Not a fan of Guardiola.

Andrés Iniesta (1984–): Pale-faced genius. Came through the Masia, won everything with Barcelona, overcame some sort of depression, and left for Vissel Kobe in Japan in 2018. A great footballer who was happy to play in the service of an even greater one, Messi.

Frenkie de Jong (1997–): Dutch midfielder who gives his coaches anxiety dreams by dribbling out of his own defense. Joined Barcelona in 2019, not the best possible moment.

Ronald Koeman (1963–): A hero of Barcelona as a goal-scoring center-back from 1989 to 1995. Scored the winner in the 1992 Champions League final at Wembley. Lived next door to Cruyff. Coach of Barcelona at the time of writing, and probably even by the time of publication.

Joan Laporta (1962–): President of FC Barcelona from 2003 to 2010, and then again from March 2021. A handsome lawyer, the most charismatic man in Catalonia, but more improviser than organizer.

Michael Laudrup (1964–): Upper-middle-class Danish “shadow striker” (or “false nine”) of Cruyff’s Dream Team from 1989 to 1994. Fell out with Cruyff and moved to Real Madrid. A season after helping Barça beat Madrid 5–0, he helped Madrid beat Barça 5–0. Now coaches football and imports Spanish wine to Denmark.

Gary Lineker (1960–): English striker who played for Barcelona from 1986 to 1989, loved the place, and even learned Spanish. Unfortunately, Cruyff didn’t want him. Now presents the *Match of the Day* TV program in the UK.

Antonia Lizárraga (unknown–): Nutritionist. Hired by the health fanatic Guardiola in 2010 to teach Barcelona’s footballers how to eat. Still trying.

Diego Maradona (1960–2020): Played for Barcelona from 1982 to 1984, but the city was too bourgeois for him, and Andoni Goikoetxea, the “Butcher of Bilbao,” destroyed his ankle. Still managed to fit in some orgies.

Lieke Martens (1992–): A forward on Barcelona’s women’s team who has continued the club’s tradition of Dutch imports. Named Best FIFA Women’s Player in 2017, but still earns too little to bring over an entourage.

Jorge Messi (1958–): Father and agent of Lionel. Former manager in a steel factory in Rosario, Argentina. Fancies himself a brilliant businessman. Convicted with his son of tax fraud in 2016, but escaped with a fine. A central figure in his son’s failed attempt to leave Barça in 2020.

Lionel Messi (1987–): The single most powerful person inside the club. Arrived at age thirteen, scored more than six hundred goals for the first team, but ended up turning FC Barcelona into FC Messi. His salary (about €125 million a year at last count) is the club’s biggest financial problem.

Rinus Michels (1928–2005): Former gym teacher for deaf children. Spent most of his coaching career—with Ajax, Barcelona, Holland, and the Los Angeles Aztecs—locked in a maddening yet fertile Lennon-and-McCartneyseque relationship with Johan Cruyff. Coinventor of “total football” and therefore of twenty-first-century football. Grandfather of the modern Barcelona.

José Mourinho (1963–): Portuguese coach. Longtime nemesis of Barcelona who was shaped at Barcelona between 1996 and 2000, working as a translator, tactical analyst, and assistant coach. Absorbed the Cruyffian idea that football is a dance in space, but prefers to shut down space rather than open it.

Neymar (1992–): Joined Barcelona in 2013 and then, disastrously, left it for Paris Saint-Germain in 2017, never to be replaced. The most momentous football transfer of the 2010s. Wanted to be Messi. Ended up the single biggest debtor of the Spanish tax authorities.

Josep Lluís Núñez (1931–2018): Went from real estate magnate to president, in his case of FC Barcelona from 1978 to 2000. Hired Cruyff but never liked him. Hasn't received any credit for overseeing the club's rise to greatness. Barça's last non-Catalan president.

Pedro (1987–): A Masia boy who went from Barcelona's C team in 2007 to winning pretty much everything in football by 2011. Not a genius, which means that his rise is even more of a credit to the Masia than Messi's was.

Gerard Piqué (1987–): Member of the Catalan merchant elite, entrepreneur, husband of the singer Shakira, and FC Barcelona center-back. Has played with Messi since age thirteen. Touted as a future club president. Has the genes for it.

Inma Puig (unknown–): Sports psychologist who worked at FC Barcelona for fifteen years until 2018. Helped Iniesta through his personal crisis. Advises companies as a "chief emotional officer."

Carles Puyol (1978–): Hairy central defender of Guardiola's great Barcelona team, and world champion with Spain in 2010. After graduating from the Masia to the first team, he bequeathed his mattress to Iniesta.

Mino Raiola (1967–): Dutch-Italian "superagent" who learned his trade in his father's pizza restaurants. Agent of Ibrahimović, and therefore enemy of Guardiola.

Carles Rexach (1947–): Has spent his life within the square kilometer around the Camp Nou. A fragile, gifted, and cowardly winger for FC Barcelona, who later held almost every job in the club, including assistant and friend to Cruyff. Inevitably fell out with him.

Frank Rijkaard (1962–): A brilliant Dutch footballer, and Barcelona's head coach from 2003 to 2008. Universally regarded as a gentleman. Won the Champions League in 2005, but drifted out of coaching early because he didn't feel like it anymore.

Rivaldo (1972–): Barcelona's most creative player from 1997 to 2002. Told the team he wouldn't play on the wing anymore. That was probably a mistake. On the

upside, was named European Footballer of the Year in 1999 (as witnessed by the author) and won the 2002 World Cup with Brazil.

Sergi Roberto (1992–): Local boy, a rare Catalan speaker on the first team, and at the time of writing one of Barcelona's four club captains. Possibly more of a presence in the changing room than on the field.

Romário (1966–): Brilliant if frequently immobile goal scorer of Cruyff's Dream Team from 1993 to 1995. Didn't like: training, running, defensive work. Liked: sleeping, sex. Now a Brazilian senator for the left-wing Podemos party. Won the World Cup with Brazil in 1994.

Ronaldinho (1980–): Brazilian creator. Bought by Barcelona in 2003 because they couldn't get David Beckham. Won the Champions League with Barça in 2005, when he was briefly the world's best player, but almost immediately lost interest in football. Messi's hero and mentor. Briefly jailed in Paraguay in 2020 after allegedly entering the country on a false passport.

Cristiano Ronaldo (1985–): Brilliant Portuguese forward. Second-best footballer of his era. Very nearly joined Barcelona as a teenager. Star of Barça's archrivals Real Madrid from 2009 to 2018, then joined Juventus.

Sandro Rosell (1964–): Member of the Barcelona *burgesia*. Club president from 2010 to 2014 after ousting his old ally Joan Laporta. Resigned amid legal troubles over the purchase of Neymar from Santos. Spent nearly two years in prison but was then fully acquitted. Celebrated with the best-ever beer in a hotel bar.

Eusebio Sacristán (1964–): Little midfielder who found his home at Barcelona from 1988 to 1995. Cruyff showed him the essence of an orderly, passing football that Eusebio had had in his head since childhood. Later Rijkaard's assistant coach.

Paco Seirul-lo (1945–): Guardian of Barça's Cruyffian tradition. A physical trainer who started out in the club's handball wing, served as Cruyff's right-hand man, teaches at the University of Barcelona, speaks like a Parisian philosopher, has a magnificent mane of white hair, and is a sort of walking USB stick containing the club's institutional memory. Known inside the Camp Nou as "El Druida," "the Druid."

Ferran Soriano (1967–): Local boy with an MBA. Barça's chief executive from 2003 to 2008. Now does the same job at Manchester City, where he hired Guardiola. His little-known book, *Goal: The Ball Doesn't Go In by Chance*, is a surprisingly rich source on modern Barça.

Hristo Stoichkov (1966–): Bulgarian striker of Barcelona's Dream Team from 1990 to 1995. Cruyff liked his *mala leche* ("bad milk," or nasty streak). Stoichkov liked partying with Romário, until they fell out. There's a great YouTube video of Cruyff showing him how to skip rope.

Luis Suárez (1987–): Uruguayan striker, and neighbor and best friend of Messi. Played for Barcelona from 2014 to 2020, until Ronald Koeman told him in a one-minute phone call that he was no longer needed. Nobody from the board rang to thank him for his 198 goals for the club. Immediately began banging in more for Atlético Madrid.

Lilian Thuram (1972–): French intellectual and defender. When he joined Barcelona at age thirty-four and discovered the club's Cruyffian principles, he felt for the first time that he was fully a footballer. He wondered what sport he had been playing until then. Now an antiracism campaigner.

Oriol Tort (1929–1999): Barcelona's longtime unpaid chief scout. A pharmaceutical representative in civilian life. Sometimes watched fifteen to twenty boys' matches in a day, recording every promising name on his typewriter. He decided Barça needed a residence to house talented kids from out of town. In 1979, the Masia opened its doors. Brought Iniesta to Barcelona.

Jorge Valdano (1955–): World champion footballer with Maradona's Argentina, former coach and technical director of Real Madrid, lovely writer, charmer, and nice guy—pretty much the author's idea of the ideal man. Moved from military dictatorship in Argentina to Spain in 1975, just in time to see Franco die and the country change. A Cruyffian, but also a critical observer of Cruyff and Barcelona.

Victor Valdés (1982–): A Masia boy who became goalkeeper of Guardiola's great team. Too stressed out to enjoy football until Guardiola taught him to analyze the game coldly. True friend of Iniesta's.

Ernesto Valverde (1964–): A bit-part forward with Barcelona under Cruyff from 1988 to 1990. Won two league titles in two completed seasons as coach from 2017 to January 2020, until Barça sacked him. They had no idea how good they had had it. Modest little man, good sense of humor.

Tito Vilanova (1968–2014): Teenage friend of Guardiola's in the Masia in the 1980s, and his assistant coach with the first team from 2008 to 2012. Played good cop to Guardiola's bad cop. When Guardiola resigned, Vilanova agreed to take over as head coach. Guardiola wasn't pleased. While head coach, Vilanova got terminal cancer. His widow banned Guardiola from the funeral.

Arsène Wenger (1949–): Arsenal’s manager from 1996 to 2018. Admirer of Cruyffian football. Features in this book as a veteran observer of the modern game, largely because the author was lucky enough to nab an interview with him in the crucial final months of writing. Now works for FIFA. Alsatian.

Xavi (1980–): The midfielder who defined Barcelona’s passing game: look, pass, look, pass, repeat. So faultless that his teammates nicknamed him La Maquina, “the Machine.” Came through the Masia and played for the first team from 1998 to 2015. Long tipped as Barcelona’s future head coach.

Boudewijn Zenden (1976–): Much-traveled, multilingual Dutch former winger who played for Barcelona from 1998 to 2001, and later for Chelsea, Liverpool, Marseille, and others. An anthropological observer of football mores, and occasional interviewee of the author since 1997.

Andoni Zubizarreta (1961–): Basque and wise man. Goalkeeper of Barcelona from 1986 to 1994, and sporting director from 2010 to 2015. Signed Neymar and Suárez. Bartomeu shouldn’t have sacked him. Played nearly a thousand professional football matches.

A BARCELONA LEXICON

burgesia: The Catalan merchant class, the local version of the bourgeoisie. Members of the *burgesia* fill Barça's boardroom and usually provide the club president. Almost all of them speak Catalan at home.

Can Barça: "The House of Barça." An elevated moniker for the club as an institution.

Clásico: The Barça–Real Madrid game, the biggest match in the Spanish calendar—though only since February 1974, when Cruyff's Barcelona won 0–5 at the Bernabeu. Before then Real Madrid–Atlético Madrid was the big game. The Clásico has become a forum for expressing the centuries-old tension between Catalonia and Madrid.

culer (*culé* in Spanish): Barcelona fan, though the literal meaning is "backside." The nickname supposedly dates from the days of Barça's old stadium a century ago, when people on the street outside could see spectators' behinds jutting out over a wall.

en un momento dado: "At a given moment." Cruyff's favorite stalling phrase when he ran out of words in Spanish.

entorno: Literally, "surroundings" or "environment." Cruyff repurposed it to mean the specific surroundings of Barça: the *socis*, the *ultra* fans who'd come round the president's house to threaten him, the journalists who lived off the club, the interfering local politicians, sponsors, current directors, former directors, and staffers who were trying to get back into the club, and the opposition plotting to unseat the board.

indepe: Short for *independentiste*: a supporter of Catalan independence, i.e., about half the population of Catalonia. *Indepes* tend to be native Catalan-speakers.

madriditis: An anxious obsession with Real Madrid, and with the Spanish capital more broadly.

Masia: Literally, “farmhouse.” Barcelona’s Masia—originally based in an old farmhouse—is the club’s no-longer-quite-so-famed youth academy.

Més que un club: “More than a club,” FC Barcelona’s motto. The phrase stands for Catalan nationalism, Cruyffian football, homegrown players, and a general sense of dignity and *valors* (“values”). *Més que un club* is genuinely all those things, as well as a self-congratulatory and now somewhat outdated marketing slogan.

pa amb tomàquet: Bread smeared with tomato, an everyday Catalan specialty.

rondo: Essentially, a piggy-in-the-middle game. Barça’s favorite training exercise since Cruyff became coach here. A few players pass the ball to each other in a limited space, while defenders try to intercept. The rondo captures the Cruyffian essence of football: time, space, passing, and geometry.

soci: A dues-paying club member (*socio* in Spanish). Barcelona’s 150,000 or so *socis*—almost all of whom live in Catalonia—are considered the owners of the club.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

When talking about Barça, I have favored Catalan terms over Spanish ones, because Catalan is the club's main language. For instance, I call the club's dues-paying members *socis*, rather than using the Spanish word *socios*. Even when Spanish and Catalan words are the same, Catalan usually dispenses with accents: "methodology" is *metodología* in Spanish, but plain *metodologia* in Catalan. La Masia (the name of Barça's youth academy) has an accent on the *i* in Spanish but not in Catalan.

PART ONE



INSIDE THE CATHEDRAL

INTRODUCTION

BARÇA AND ME

I now see that I began researching this book in 1992, when I walked into the Camp Nou as a twenty-two-year-old in a torn jacket. I was traveling around the world on £5,000, with a typewriter in my rucksack, writing my first book, *Football Against the Enemy*. I stayed in the Hostel Kabul on the mugger-rich Plaça Reial, eked out my money by skipping lunch, and dined every night on a falafel from a stall. Barcelona, long considered a shabby provincial backwater, had been freshly renovated for that summer's Olympics. I had never known it was such a beautiful city. I played bad chess in the sun at Kasparo bar, and decided I wanted to return here one day.

I had come because I was fascinated by the local football club. I grew up in the Netherlands (which may show here and there in this book), so my childhood hero was Johan Cruyff, the Dutchman who first came to Barcelona as a player in 1973. By 1992, he was the club's head coach and spiritual leader. Cruyff was both a great footballer and a great thinker about football, as if he were the light bulb and Edison in one. He is the father of Barcelona's style, which is a thrilling one-touch high-pressing game of constant attack. In this book I'll argue that he is also the father of modern football itself.

One day in 1992, I took the metro to the Camp Nou to see if I could interview him for *Football Against the Enemy*. The kindly press officer, Ana, took in my dubious journalistic credentials and torn

jacket and suggested I interview Barça's elderly first vice president, Nicolau Casaus. In hindsight, he probably needed to be kept occupied. Ana told me he had no English, but waiting outside his office I heard him repeat several times, in an American accent, the word "siddown." He seemed to be practicing for me. When I went in, Casaus was smoking a large cigar. I asked whether the club's motto—*Més que un club*, "More than a club"—referred to FC Barcelona's political significance in Spain. Speaking Spanish, he replied that it didn't. He said people of different parties and religions supported Barça. So why the motto? "Barcelonism is a great passion," he answered vaguely. Politics seemed to be too sensitive a topic for him. I didn't know then that he had spent five years in jail under the Franco dictatorship as a Catalan activist, after initially being condemned to death.

I nagged Ana to produce Cruyff, but she fobbed me off with his assistant, Tonny Bruins Slot. I was secretly relieved: the thought of meeting my hero was overwhelming.

Football in 1992 was a more intimate business. Barça in those days trained on a pitch beside the Camp Nou. One morning before training began, I was given a seat outside the changing-room door to wait for Bruins Slot. At this point I think I'd met one professional footballer in my life. Michael Laudrup emerged from the changing room and glanced at me. Then Cruyff came out, with a football in his arms, walking at top speed ("If they time normally with me, they're always just too late"). He was bantering simultaneously with a changing-room attendant and a Colombian journalist hoping for an audience. It was a beautiful morning, he was about to train the European champions, and he wanted to let the kid in the torn jacket share in his happiness. I'm fairly sure he beamed at me from a range of two yards, but by the time I managed to get out "Hello" in Dutch, he was gone. Bruins Slot came out and asked how long I needed. He was in a hurry to get to training. I said twenty minutes.

Bruins Slot was unmistakably a working-class Amsterdammer like Cruyff. He took me to a lounge, found me black coffee in a paper cup, wandered around looking for an ashtray, used another paper cup instead, and then engaged me in a two-hour argument about football. He never did get to training that day. “We have a copyright, a patent,” he said. “You can imitate every patent, but there is a finishing touch which only one man has.”

Cruyff created the great Barça. In the words of his chief disciple, Pep Guardiola, he built the cathedral. More than that, Cruyff arguably created modern football itself. He is the Freud or Gaudí of the game, the most interesting, original, and infuriating man in football’s history. The cathedral of Barça was later updated by Guardiola and perfected by Lionel Messi, before it began falling into decay.

Messi is the other person who prompted me to write this book. I have always wanted to understand how he does what he does on the field. Once I began sniffing around Barça, I became interested in something else: his power. The quiet Argentinian might seem like Cruyff’s polar opposite, but in fact he inherited the Dutchman’s role as the most influential character inside the club. For years, outsiders mistook his blank gaze and public muteness for a lack of personality. Barça people had long known him as a domineering and scary figure. Over time, FC Barcelona has morphed into FC Messi.

That may not end well. It turned out that I was studying Barça as it unraveled. I had first come here at the start of the club’s glory days, in 1992, and I finished as they seemed to be drawing to a close, in 2021, with Messi 34. It felt a bit like writing a book about Rome in AD 400 with the barbarians already inside the gates. I began my research thinking I was going to be explaining Barça’s rise to greatness, and I have, but I’ve also ended up charting the decline and possibly the fall.

• • •

OVER THE DECADES, I got to know Barcelona as a journalist visiting for stories. When you reach middle age, you fall asleep after lunch, but there are upsides, too: you have built up a contacts book, some sense of how things change, and a back catalog. Beside me in my office in Paris as I write is a bookcase containing two-hundred-plus notebooks filled with all my research since 1998. There are interviews with Barça players and coaches past and present such as Rivaldo, Lilian Thuram, Neymar, and Gerard Piqué, and my one encounter with Cruyff, an amiable evening in the living room of his mansion in 2000 (after which we fell out traumatically).

I have even played in the Camp Nou. In 2007, I won FC Barcelona's annual sportswriting prize, and a crew from the club's TV channel wanted to film me kicking a ball around the pitch in my street clothes. When I ran onto the grass, it was so thick, short, and perfect that I actually laughed. The field has the maximum dimensions for a football pitch, to create space for Barça's attacks, and I felt I was gambling on a vast lawn. There was even a small crowd: a few dozen tourists doing the Barça tour.

I dribbled around trying to imagine what it was like playing here in a match. Looking up at the stands of Europe's biggest stadium, I thought: This is strangely familiar. Strip away the fancy packaging and it's just a football field, like every other you've ever played on. That thought must have reassured some debutants down the decades.

In the center of the field it was almost possible to forget that anyone was watching, but when I dribbled down the wing, I was excruciatingly aware of the tourists. The spectators there stare straight at you. Near the touchline, a player is closer to them than to the action in the goalmouth. I could pick out individual faces. It was possible to feel, for a moment, a relationship with this or that person in the stands.

I took some shots at the empty goal, and each time the ball went in, the tourists cheered ironically. Lord knows what they thought was

going on.

When I placed the ball to take a corner and looked up toward goal, my glance took in the entire stadium. It was a theatrical moment: for a second or two, the game was at my feet, and I had a sense of myself as an actor, performing for an audience. I would later learn from a psychologist at Barça that top-class footballers shut out these impressions. During a game they hear the shouted instructions of their teammates, but not the chants of the fans.

My final prompt to start writing the book was a visit to Barcelona in 2019. I had come to research an article for my newspaper, the *Financial Times*, and I happened to arrive on the day that the club awarded the sportswriting prize. Club officials insisted I come to the awards ceremony and to lunch afterward. I ended up sitting for hours at a table in a nook of the Camp Nou, drinking wine and chatting with President Josep Maria Bartomeu and various club *directius* (literally “directors,” but really more like counselors to the president). That was when I realized that Barça regarded me as an alumnus. The media department cheerfully set up interviews for me with Bartomeu, with the then head coach Ernesto Valverde, and with many of Barça’s ordinary employees: doctors, data analysts, and brand managers.

Access is the hardest thing in football writing. Around the same time that I started this book, I asked a lower-division club for an interview with a youth coach, got no response, phoned and e-mailed for weeks to press my case, and was finally told no. Most big clubs now offer journalists little more than a seat at a press conference to hear the managers’ self-justifications, some off-the-record “briefings,” and, every few months, a fifteen-minute “sit-down” with a player determined to say nothing.

I published my newspaper article, but thought: there’s loads more to say. I wanted to understand Cruyff and Messi as people, not as demigods. And I wanted to study Barça not as a theater of dreams but as a workplace. This is a club created by fallible humans who

went to work every day and quarreled with each other, tried things and made mistakes, and ended up creating something Catalan and international, brilliant and flawed, of its time and eternal. What is office life at Barça like day-to-day? Who are the people who run the club? How much power do they actually have over the players? How does Barça manage talent? How do the players live? What should they eat, and can anybody persuade them to eat it?

I asked my contacts at the club whether they were willing to open their doors to me for a book. They were. Nobody at Barça then or since tried to interfere with what I was writing. No favors were exchanged in the making of this book.

From spring 2019 until a last snatched visit during the pandemic in September 2020, I visited Barcelona regularly for research. I dredged up my shaky Spanish, became part of the city's Airbnb problem, and learned to have lunch at three p.m. (Absolutely no skipped meals this time.) My day job at the *Financial Times* is writing a sociopolitical column. It was a joy to switch from the coronavirus, climate change, Trump, and Brexit to writing about the greatest in human achievement. I used to worry that football was a lower subject than politics. I don't anymore.

Football in Barcelona turned out to be deliciously intertwined with food. Barça people really do use wineglasses and sugar packets to explain formations. Over a four-hour lunch of paella and white rioja, Albert Capellas, former coordinator of Barcelona's Masia youth academy and now coach of Denmark under-21s, used a pepper pot, saltshaker, and bottle of olive oil first to set up a midfield and then to teach me how to make *pa amb tomàquet*, the classic Catalan delicacy of bread smeared with tomato. Capellas became one of my best informants, not just on food.

I like my life in Paris, but I would move to Barcelona like a shot if the family would let me. The Born neighborhood of the city, or Gràcia, or the bourgeois streets on the lower slopes of the Tibidabo mountain, or nearby beach towns like Gavà Mar and Sitges

exemplify the European dream: that perfect blend of beauty, good weather, cuisine, wealth, a manageable pace, friendliness, mountains, and sea.

Before each visit, I sent press officers a list of interview requests. Interviews with first-team players were hardest to arrange. Sometimes the club itself struggles to contact a player directly, and is blocked by his agent or press representative or some random member of his entourage. I interviewed three club presidents (one of them freshly released from jail) and midfielder Frenkie de Jong, but I learned the most from my conversations with dozens of mid-ranking club employees: everyone from nutritionists to video analysts to social media experts. Many of them seemed delighted at the chance to explain the thing they spend their lives doing, whether that is coaching kids, setting up the new professional women's team, or running the club's business office in some distant metropole. The club wouldn't allow most of these staffers to be quoted by name. The book is in my voice, but it channels what they told me. In short, though I have had some access to the players, I've had more to the people who run the club day-to-day.

All the while, I was doing my best to understand this parochial Catalan workplace with a global reach. How does Barcelona the club sit within Barcelona the city? How did Barça transform itself, in thirty years, from Catalan to European to global club? What was gained and lost along the way? How did Barcelona create arguably the best youth academy and best football team in history, and why did they fade? Why is the latest version of Cruyffian football played not in Barcelona but in Manchester and Munich?

I found out that the Barça Innovation Hub, a kind of in-house think tank quietly launched in 2017, was asking just these questions. The Hub's job is to reimagine professional football. Its staffers think about everything in the game, from virtual reality to beetroot juice. They admitted to me that they didn't know how football worked (nobody does), but they were at least starting to figure out which questions to

ask. Barça's urgent attempts to understand how exactly it did what it did—something it had almost taken for granted in good times—made my quest all the more interesting, at least to me.

Several interviews ended with pre-coronavirus hugs. José Mourinho, himself an alumnus of Barça, once scoffed, “Barcelona draw you into the trap of thinking they are all likable, nice, friendly people from a perfect world.”¹ It's true that smiles at Barça can conceal oceans, but (and I hope I'm not being naive) my experience is that people here actually are likable, or at least friendly. For nearly thirty years, they've always treated me nicely, and my rule of thumb for football people is that if they are even nice to journalists, they're probably nice to everybody.

Many excellent writers and documentary filmmakers from around the world have studied the club before me. I spent much of the Parisian lockdowns of spring and autumn 2020 devouring their work.

There is always a risk of being seduced by a glamorous institution, but I have tried to keep my head. This book isn't an official account. It's my view of Barça: generally admiring, often critical, always curious, and, I hope, without illusions.

Much of it is about Barcelona as a regular workplace. Much else, though, is about extraordinary talent: Cruyff, Messi, and the young winger who sacked four private chefs in a row. The tension between the everyday and the exceptional is what makes Barça.