

How to know if a youth player will go all the way?

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I've been following youth football at Barça for a while now. And there have been many talents produced, many "safe" stars for the future. However, most of those "safe" future stars, those everyone thought would make it, didn't. In other words, they didn't live up to their potential. Instead, a few of those no one really paid much attention to, did make it.

But how can we really know that a youth player will make it? That he will go all the way to the first team or even become one of the best if not the best in the world one day? This task might prove impossible. Because the ball is round and everything can happen in football, and everything can happen in life. Even the most talented lad can drop his focus for one reason or another or get injured or take the wrong decision at the wrong time. We simply cannot predict who will make it big.

But what we can know is who has the biggest potential to make it. And I can tell you what I've learnt since I started to follow the youth set-up at Barça: the one with the biggest potential to make it, is not necessarily the one with the biggest talent. But the one with talent along with strong mentality, the one who can tackle the obstacles, can learn from his mistakes, and go through hard moments will come out on top.

I can honestly say I believed Bojan would make it and become a top scorer. I was sure Gai Assuilin would get to the first team. And a few years ago, I thought that Gerard Deulofeu would come to be our main man, but I'm not too sure anymore. Because I've learned a lesson.

Bojan failed to get his self confidence back.

Bojan is a great example. He was the boy who was asked by his coach to not cross the half-line because he didn't want to upset the opponents by having Bojan scoring tons of goals on them. For five year olds, the game of football should be fun. But not crossing the half-line wouldn't stop five year old Bojan from scoring goals. He was the kid who arrived at Barça as a 9-year old, who during his seven years in the youth

teams of the club became the best scorer in the history of La Masia by scoring 3,5 goals per game (for seven years). He was the boy who scored over 200 goals during a single season.

Bojan Krkic was the goalscoring king. He could enter a game his team was losing to score what was needed for them to win in the last minutes. He also became the youngest goalscorer ever for FC Barcelona's first team and he ended his first season at Camp Nou with 10 goals, taking over the record from Real Madrid's Raúl to the best debut season in La Liga for a youngster. But what Bojan had missed while growing up, was that he had never had any problems, any obstacles. He was the guy who always succeeded. So when the regular forwards at Barça recovered their form and returned from their injuries, young Bojan was left on the bench. As he got less time on the pitch, his self-confidence would hit rock bottom. For the first time, he had no clue how to get it back up again, because he had never been in this position before. It didn't matter how many goals he scored before or how great his goalscoring talent was, because his mind stopped him from performing. Bojan didn't succeed at Barça because he had succeeded all his life. He couldn't handle the hardship of being on the bench and fighting for a starting berth, he wasn't mentally ready.

Unknown Pedrito made it, wonderboy Gai didn't

Another example is Gai Assulin. Gai was the star of the 1991 generation at Barça, one of the best generations in the club's history. He was touted as the new Messi. Or at least, that's what people were saying about him. In the 2007-08 season, Gai, while still at Cadet level, would get his debut with Barça B under Guardiola (one who believed a lot in the Israeli boy). During the same season, he was given his first team debut for the Israeli national team, at just 16 years of age, becoming the youngest ever to do so. Everyone was so impressed, it was hard not to think that he was one for the future.

But to focus on football would get harder and harder for Gai. There was a war in his home country and he was concerned about the safety of his family. As he turned 18, the war would create more problems for the young boy as he was obligated to join the Israeli army. Traveling home to work a way around his two years of mandatory military service, Gai missed the start of the 2008-09 preseason with Barça B. That would come to have a serious impact on his career, as bad preparation for the season later saw him get badly injured, and he was forced to miss nearly the entire season. After the injury, Gai wasn't the same football player, he struggled to get back into form and his development seemed to have stalled. In 2010, his contract expired and the boy who was said to be the new Messi was released from the club.

Gerard has the talent, but does he have the mentality?

The first time I watched Gerard Deulofeu work his magic was when he was 14-years old. He had already been dubbed the new Ronaldinho and some of the major English clubs had been in contact with Barça for his services. Since then, I've watched him on and off and I have told people that this kid is special, that he will make it. But I have come to realize that it's not that obvious anymore. He is still a fantastic player and I still say he has boundless talent. But can he handle set-backs?

So far, the Deulofeu show hasn't stopped. Fans are talking about him, not only as a future first team player but as a future Ballon d'Or winner. He, himself, seems to believe them. Gerard has got the talent, he even exudes it. But at the tender age of 18 years, he is just not there yet. Even if the press, fans and Gerard himself sometimes seem to forget that. The other day, at the Mini Clásico, everyone was talking about Gerard, he was being put under pressure. Pressure he had never really been under before. And unsurprisingly, he played one of his worst games of the season, as he looked like he forgot his teammates were playing by his side. Sure, the Madrid players were on him from the start, but he showed he isn't ready to handle that type of pressure just yet. I won't say Gerard won't make it, but what I will say, is that it will

not be down to his talent (that he has) but down to his mentality whether he makes it or not. Will he be able to tackle set-backs or will they do to him what they did to other promising players before him?

The set-backs have made Montoya stronger

While I've been more or less screaming at people to stop hyping Deulofeu so much, I've myself been praising Martin Montoya relentlessly. I believe he should have started instead of Dani Alvé's in several games. The reason for that, is that I think Montoya is ready. We all know he has the talent, but he has shown he has the mentality as well. Now it's time to feed him to the sharks, because he's shown that he will be able to beat the sharks. Martin Montoya has never been hyped like any of the players I already named. He is a player who went through tough times, both on and off the field. The hardest one was when he lost his mother a couple of years ago, but Martín bounced back to make his first team debut. In his second first team game, the first at Camp Nou, he suffered a serious injury after only a few seconds, and missed the remainder of the season. Montoya came back, was one of the most vital players as Spain won the U21 Euro and was named to the Spanish national team, all this while still a Barça B player. Martin Montoya has shown many times that he knows how to handle set-backs, that they make him stronger. Mentally, he is more ready than anyone and we have all seen what he's capable of on the pitch.

Tello and Cuenca both have the mentality but do they have the talent...?

Other players who I think have the right mentality are Cristian Tello and Isaac Cuenca. Both players started out at Barça at an early stage, but both also left Barça at one point: Tello because he wasn't good enough and Cuenca because he missed home. Both players also worked their way back to Barça. It is not an easy thing to return to La Masia after having had to leave once. Tello had worked himself up in the Espanyol shirt where he was offered a first team contract but he turned it down as Barça B was asking for his return. He chose the bench of Barça B instead of the Espanyol first team. There, he worked himself up to get playing time, caught the attention of Guardiola and suddenly Tello was scoring goals for Barça's first team. Hard work paid off. Tello later showed his mental strength once again, when Guardiola started the youngster against Madrid. Tello didn't play badly, but he hit a terrible miss and Barça ended up losing. Media and fans blamed the loss on Tello or rather on the decision of starting him in a game of this magnitude. Many a youngsters' self-confidence would have hit bottom after that, but Tello's didn't. He kept on working hard and scoring when given the chance. Regarding Cuenca, he was sent out on loan at Sabadell. However, he didn't give up, he had an incredible season at Sabadell and came back to the club with a bang, earning himself a promotion to the first team. Tello and Cuenca might not make it all the way, but they have the mentality to do so. All that's left for them to do now is show they have the talent as well.

Two other players worth mentioning are Busquets and Pedro. Two of today's first team's most vital players. They didn't have an easy ride either: Busquets failed to impress Barça as a kid and it wasn't until his late teens that he was able to enroll in the club, while Pedro was asked to look for another club before Guardiola jumped in to save his skin. They were never the youth players fans and media talked about. But they were two boys who knew the worst parts of football. Pep saw their talent early and almost overnight, he took Busi and Pedrito from being unknown fourth division players, to World Cup winners and household names.

What I try to do when I want to know if a player can make it or not, is to look at the player's history, what obstacles did he face, how did he handle them. I'm not saying a player that always succeeded will not be able to handle set-backs, I'm just saying we don't know how he will handle them. With a player that has overcome them before, we know how he will react to the obstacles coming his way.

There is never a safe answer to what player will make it and who will not. But what I've learned and what I would like to convey to you, is that it takes more than raw ability and talent for a player to make it. Also, to

over-hype a player who's not ready yet can result in a great talent getting lost. Mistakes are important, obstacles and set-backs are what can make a good player become a great one.

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