Paco Seiru-lo's methodology. Past, present and… future?

Interview by Fernando Palomo, 2

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Fitness coach at FC Barcelona. For many, the true architect of the team's training methodology, which has defined an era in football.

What we see today is the result of an exhaustive study of the human being. Not just the athlete, but the variables that influence the human response to the stimuli of high-intensity sporting activity. Francisco Seiru-lo Vargas (Salamanca, 1945) has been the fitness coach for FC Barcelona's first team since 1994. His background spans physical education and sport. "The aim of physical education is to educate, whilst the aim of sport is to win. They are different objectives, and the training process must therefore be different," says Seiru-lo.

A talk that delves deeply into the approach he applies to the physical conditioning of one of the greatest teams in history, moving away from the conventional methods that were also part of his early career. He joined FC Barcelona in 1977, joining the club's athletics section. Over time, he has recognised conflicts between traditional approaches to physical preparation and the need to reconcile these concepts with training in team sports. The focus is on understanding the athlete and their relationship with the sport they practise and the environments in which that sport is played. A different way of understanding physical preparation.

Q. I understand that, as far as you're concerned, physical training, as such, doesn't exist.

A. It's clear that traditions – or ways of understanding physical fitness – have changed a great deal over time. I don't see physical training as something separate from the game of football itself. Everything done on the pitch that is considered physical training must be linked to football and to tactical and cognitive objectives. Traditional physical training improves fitness through hill work, weight training, sprints, and runs on the beach or in the woods. For me, that kind of physical training for football is worthless; it doesn't exist.

Physical fitness must be integrated into the overall football training programme. To put it in traditional terms: technique, tactics, physical conditioning and the psychological aspect must all form a single whole. Physical conditioning cannot be pursued in isolation, with no connection to the movements involved in football, the spaces on the pitch or the interpersonal dynamics of the game.

Q. When did this change for you?

A. As a child, I played football until I was prescribed glasses, and once I was wearing them I couldn't play any more. That's why I switched to athletics. I have a basic grounding in athletics. The time I spent studying for my degree in physical education helped me to understand the fundamental concepts of human training and sports training. It's about enabling an individual to withstand physical exertion. I realised that athletics – and everything it encompasses: speed, strength and endurance – had specific events designed to measure those speeds, that strength or that endurance. It struck me as very odd, when I moved into the world of team sports, to see that in those sports they were doing exactly the same things as in athletics. Starting from a standing position, 'on your marks, get set', and then five or six players would sprint 25 metres. I have never seen a player in a team sport standing still, waiting for an audible signal to sprint at full speed along a line without anyone getting in their way.

Q. These traditional models need a catalyst for change to transform them. What was that catalyst in your methods?

A. Whilst studying certain models of complex knowledge, I realised that traditional physical training did not go as far as the science of complexity. I understood that by studying complexity, I could transform the approach to the activities required for team sports. From that moment on, I changed my approach. Up until the age of 25–28, I had been providing 'athletic' training for team sports. Understanding the human being as a complex entity – a hyper-complex structure – allows you to structure training tasks in a different dimension and develop a form of physical preparation that is more specifically tailored to team sports.

Q. Given that work in team sports therefore has specific characteristics relating to each sport, are there any similarities in the work?

A. Very few things in common. You need to build specific physical fitness for each team sport. In basketball, for example, you handle an object with your hands, movement is driven by your legs, and interpersonal interaction takes place via the ball, which you grip with your hand. This means that motor skills can be very different. You might spend more time in the air, for instance. You can distinguish between movement actions and actions involving the hands. Volleyball is somewhat similar to basketball but more like football, where, when you're in possession of the ball, you're constantly striking it. But in football, you dribble the ball and move using the same body parts; your arms are only used to balance yourself, protect yourself from opponents or identify the spaces you can occupy with your body, anticipating your opponent's moves. Having to perform the task of moving whilst controlling the ball makes football one of the sports that places the greatest demands on human motor skills.

Q. What makes you see football as such a unique team sport?

A. To strike the ball in a particular direction, I have to align my whole body in that specific direction. To adjust the striking surface of my foot, I have to reposition my body once again in the direction I want to strike the ball. In sports played with both feet and hands, this is completely different. I can be moving to the right whilst orienting myself in a different direction to the one I'm moving in. In football, this isn't possible, which complicates the relationships I can establish within the space. Great footballers must identify the purpose of their movement before they move. Whereas players in other sports where they move using their feet but work with their hands can conceal this potential for interaction with the opponent right up until the last moment. In football, if I'm running in one direction, my legs – which are the executors of the movement – are oriented towards that direction. I must constantly readjust my body posture to orient myself in the most efficient direction for interacting with my teammates. If I'm playing near the touchline, a large part of my scope for adaptation is restricted, and I have to orient myself in the direction where I can see the most of the pitch; I'm limiting my motor skills and need to have superior resources in that space and at that moment compared to other sports where I can be in that position near the touchline and have the whole space available to interact with my hands. All of this makes football distinctly different because the cognitive, motor and physical aspects are closely linked to the specific movements of the game.

Q. Another distinctive feature of football is whether or not a team has possession of the ball. A common misconception leads people to believe that teams either defend well or attack well. Is it possible to both defend and attack in football? Is it a question of possession?

A. It's about having the ball or not. Football is played with a ball, and if you have the ball you can attack or defend, or keep hold of it in some way. The process of distinguishing between defending and attacking is very complicated. The game is played through the ball. You can only play when you have it. That's what children do. I always give this example. The ball was mine, but my brother would come after me to take it away. They'd do that, and I'd have to shout because they wouldn't give it back. If I want to play, I must have the ball. How do I get it? I pass the ball to my teammate, but neither of us actually has it. In handball, you 'have' the ball. But in football, you carry the ball; you don't have it securely in your possession. When we play possession drills, we understand that once the same team has made three touches, then we've had a period of possession. If it's lost on the second touch, then we never actually had it. The moment we have the ball, we can decide whether to keep it without the risk of losing it; in that case, we're defending. If we play the ball with a greater risk of losing it, then we are attacking. But the distinction between defending and attacking does not refer to the action itself, but to the intention of each player when passing the ball to a teammate. In the relational, socio-affective dimension. The intention behind interpersonal or intergroup communication.

Q. In a possession-based game, is winning the ball back just as important as keeping possession?

A. The thing is, if we don't win it back, we don't have it. In football, people often say, 'Now let's win the ball back.' The idea each player has is that 'the ball belongs to me and my team, and we want it so we can play.' If we don't have the ball, we're just running about, and we don't like running. We like playing football, passing the ball around. That inner drive fuelled by that intention is what means that, whenever you lose the ball, you're constantly eager to go and win it back, wherever you are. The manager's role is to organise that process of winning the ball back as quickly as possible. The moment we lose it, how do we organise ourselves to regain possession straight away? If we can instil in our players the belief that the ball is what makes us strong, we'll have taken a huge step forward.

Q. In that system, which is designed to retain possession, there is also the phase following the loss of the ball. Does the team prepare collectively to be positioned in such a way that, whilst in possession, they are better placed to regain the ball?

A. Of course. To link up via the ball, we need a certain spatial and temporal organisation. There are areas of superiority that relate to different aspects of the game. When there are more players in a particular area, we have numerical superiority. But sometimes, even when we're outnumbered, we're better positioned; or if we're linked up – those of us who understand each other best and pass the ball to one another most often – we have socio-emotional superiority. If there are three players with a strong 'attacking' instinct, capable of creating spaces to get to the goal, then we have technical superiority. Emotional-evolutionary superiority. All these types of superiority help ensure that when you lose the ball, you make use of whatever superiority you have. If it's numerical, by closing down the nearest opponent, whilst the others cover the opposition's potential recipients of the ball. If it is positional, we are limiting the ability of the player who has stolen the ball from us to link up with others. If it is emotional-volitional, we have an immediate space for cooperation where, like wolves in a pack, each player fulfils a specific role to attack the prey. This situation allows us to recognise that when we lose the ball, we should utilise whichever form of superiority best benefits the team at that moment.

Q. How are these superiorities organised?

A. Because of the way we organised ourselves on the pitch before losing possession. That's why people who say you need to make lots of passes to reach the goal are often wrong. You need to make just enough passes to organise yourselves in terms of space and time, in the way that you judge at any given moment to be the most efficient for achieving those two things. Whether it's to retain possession without the risk of losing the ball, or to position ourselves in the space where we're prepared to risk losing it, we organise ourselves with the understanding that we might lose the ball and the opposition might gain possession. We seek superiority – be it numerical, positional, cognitive or socio-emotional – in order to act effectively when it comes to regaining possession.

Q. That conceptual interpretation places great demands on the player's physical condition and mental resolve. Given this,
how does a player prepare to cope with a 60-match season at that pace?

A. The process I'm talking about – this way of understanding football – doesn't happen in a single season. It's a philosophy of understanding the game, somewhat akin to Barcelona's philosophy. A team's identity is specifically defined by the type of players it has and the philosophy inherent in the environment in which those players operate. If, in training, we were to promote something other than that, it would become complicated. If we ensure that a player's physical condition is tailored to their needs, it can be maintained throughout the season. The predominant quality, in traditional terms, for this is endurance combined with strength and speed. That sort of quality recovers very quickly and can be trained on practically all year round. Whereas, if we were to follow the 'traditional, endurance-based' training cycle, we'd have a lot of trouble maintaining it throughout the season. The competition workload is very high – three matches a week – and if we also had to train for endurance, we'd be slowing down the movement patterns the player needs in this type of game. We always tend to train for short periods, but always at very high speed. These high-speed elements are always optimised with very few repetitions and longer rest periods, using real game situations in confined spaces. All of this enables you to stay in good shape for practically the whole season.

Q. Tradition tends to talk about pre-season training as if it were a petrol station where you fill up the tank in the hope that it will last the whole season. Given our understanding of what physical conditioning entails, does this mean that conventional pre-season training is a thing of the past?

A. Another concept we believe to be fundamental to football is player optimisation. This does not mean organising training time according to the stage of the season. It means that during a player's formative years – perhaps at 12, 16 or 18 – we may need to adhere more closely to the traditional concepts of pre-season, the season itself, and rest or transition periods. However, for those who have been training in this way for six or seven years, their metabolic organisation—which has adapted to this type of training—has become so consistent that it is very difficult to improve any specific aspect of that organisation. If you want to build up endurance during the pre-season, you have to do high volumes of endurance work, which means you cannot train the elements of the game, because it slows down the game and affects team dynamics. By the time you want to regain all that, the endurance you have optimised may have lost its benefit. Once you are at the top level of competition, the pre-season no longer makes sense.

Q. How do you organise a pre-season training programme within this framework?

A. We're travelling to the US, and we're doing so after a week of training without a match. Five days, and on the sixth day we're already competing. We have to focus on ensuring the player is ready to play a match at any given moment. If that means every three days, then so be it. For almost four years, we've been playing two matches a week in over 80 per cent of our weeks, as we're involved in three competitions. It's impossible to think that a month and a half of pre-season training will be of any use nine months down the line. That's a pipe dream, an impossibility. You have to be carrying out structured microcycles and micro-training sessions, which help us to design the training loads immediately ahead of matches and are tailored to the individual, ensuring they're always in a position to compete and that their training condition isn't too far removed from being able to compete at the highest level.

Q. Does this concept mark the end of developing athletes to play football?

A. It used to be said that you had to train athletes first and then footballers. I've spent a long time coaching athletes, sprinters and throwers. If you train someone to be a true athlete, they will be an athlete. From the age of six, a child has to be a footballer and has to learn the specific motor skills of football, the spatial and temporal aspects of the game, interpersonal relationships, the excitement of the game, and the traditions and wisdom of football. It's very difficult to develop someone as an athlete first and then switch them to being a footballer. They won't come to feel as connected to the game as they would if they'd started out as a footballer. They must be a footballer from the very beginning.