

# The Technician Interview

**T**he player resembled the coach. His game was unhurried, unflustered and full of elegant touches. He had a shrewd eye for the telling pass and was one of those creative midfielders who had the ability to make the game look simple. Although a native of Salamanca, he moved to the Spanish capital as a youth player and became an influential presence in the Real Madrid midfield from 1970 to 1984, with just a couple of spells on loan to CD Castellón and Córdoba CF in his formative years. After 5 league and 4 cup titles, in addition to 18 international appearances for Spain, he began his coaching career within the Real Madrid youth system, stepping twice into the first-team technical area for a handful of games on a caretaker basis before being offered the job full time in 1999. He responded with a brace of Liga titles, one Spanish and one UEFA Super Cup, and the European/South American title. Most importantly for a club of such rich European tradition, he masterminded UEFA Champions League victories in 2000 and 2002. Released in 2003, he had a spell in Turkey before taking over the Spanish national team immediately after their UEFA EURO 2008 victory and led La Roja to South Africa on the back of ten straight qualifying victories. He is the world champion. He is...

## Vicente Del Bosque

You won the UEFA Champions League twice with Real Madrid – how did that experience compare with your World Cup success?

I had the good fortune to enjoy winning both of them and there might be points of comparison between the two competitions. With a national team, the work is obviously different and the final tournament of a World Cup is more intensive, in terms of time and work, than the knockout rounds of the Champions League. But in both competitions you're talking about common denominators of managing a group, preparing a team for high-intensity competition and trying to maintain top levels of performance. For a World Cup, it's a question of trying to be physically and mentally on peak form during a critical period. The other major difference is that, whereas Real Madrid have been champions of Europe nine times, the national team had never won a World Cup. So the success in South Africa was something that went beyond the realm of sport. It went right into the hearts of a whole nation. It had an enormous emotional impact.

During your preparations for the World Cup, what did you emphasise?

Well, you get your group together in May at the end of a long and tiring season when a lot of the players had

been playing Wednesday and Saturday right through. What we decided was that we were not going to do a sort of pre-season schedule. We tried to find a good balance by playing a few preparation matches but also finding the right times and places to give them a rest. Like most of the other teams, we wanted to get to South Africa mentally fresh and I think it was very important to arrive with a clear mind.

Losing your opening game 1-0 to Switzerland was a blow. How did you set about rebuilding confidence? There were very high expectations in Spanish football with regard to the World Cup, so it was a difficult moment

# The Technician Interview

which caused a bit of mental anguish and anxiety. On the day after the defeat by Switzerland, and before we prepared to play Honduras and Chile, we made it clear that it was not a moment to start pointing fingers of blame. If anyone was to blame, it was all of us. We also made sure that we focused on the good points of our performance and put the result in the context of all the other games we had played on the way to South Africa. We knew we could play better, but I saw no reason to make big changes and, for the game against Honduras, I think all I did was to start with Torres and replace Silva with Navas. The main thing, as you say, was to rebuild confidence. We did that against Honduras and then consolidated it by beating Chile.

A coach can be a good talker – but what he says is more important than how much he says. If you talk, you need to have convincing arguments. The important thing was to stress that we had the courage of our convictions in terms of the sort of football we wanted to play – so the answer was the next game and then the one after that. It was all about playing football, not talking. I think the coach needs to find a just measure in what he says and to transmit firm conviction in certain criteria. I mean, if you overdo the talking, you run the risk of saying one thing one day and something different a couple of days later. We were fortunate to have a group of great people who readily understood the messages.

How would you describe your style of management? And your team's style of playing?

I think every coach has his own personality and his own way of going about the job. There are no two the same. Each man is a different universe. If I had to describe myself – and it's not an easy task – I would say that my style is based on human values and on sharing. And also on being friendly and positive. I don't know whether other

coaches would agree with this, but my view is that it's a game, it's entertainment, it's fun, we all enjoy football, so I don't see any reason to be constantly upset, uptight and appearing to be on edge or angry. You have to be a leader, but I try to be a friendly leader. Coaches are judged on facts rather than words, so you have to control and direct a group in a way that is firm but also focuses on human values and a playing philosophy. We set out to play a possession game with a high tempo, a lot of mobility and a nice balance between short and long passing. Going back to the defeat against Switzerland, the worst thing would have been to go back to the dressing room and say that the style which had got us to South Africa – winning every qualifying game – was not valid. You have to remain faithful to your convictions. You mention 'sharing' with the players. What does this mean specifically?

It means that you have to be prepared to listen and to establish a good rapport with them. Some people might regard that as a symptom of weakness – the fact that you're ready to listen to the players – but I don't see it that way at all. I regard it as essential that a coach should have good communication with his players. At a final tournament, man management is an important factor – to the extent that someone recently said 'if you only know about football, you're lost'. Do you agree with that?

Yes, I do. I've been fortunate to have played under some very good Spanish and foreign coaches who taught me how important it is to have other qualities apart from knowledge of football. They were well versed in other areas and I think this is important.

Which of them might have had an influence over the development of Vicente Del Bosque as a coach?

I would start with a coach that I worked with when I was 24. He came to Madrid after the World Cup in 1974.

*The Spanish coach and his players were literally on top of the world in South Africa in July*

*Michel Platini presents Vicente Del Bosque with a plaque commemorating his success in the FIFA World Cup and UEFA Champions League.*

I'm talking about Miljan Miljanic. He and Vujadin Boskov were different from other coaches I had known. Both came from Yugoslavia, but they were also different, one from the other. They were more than coaches. These days, you can argue that we are only coaches and nothing more. But they were coaches and much more. They knew about football. But they also knew about history, geography... They were educated people. These days, coaches are expected to know about football and nothing else. But they were cultivated men in other facets of life.

If you played for Real Madrid in the old days, you have to mention Miguel Muñoz and another coach who

has a special place in my heart even if he is less well known internationally: Luis Molowny. I think the best way to talk about what he meant to me is just to say that he created and stimulated my desire to become a coach. I should say 'our' desire, because if you go back through that team you'll find names such as Camacho, García Remón... Players who, because of that influence, were keen to get into the coaching profession. So those are the four major influences I would highlight as the most important and I'm happy that two of them came from outside Spain, as I'm a firm believer that there are no frontiers in coaching. There are good coaches and there are bad coaches – and that has nothing to do with the country you're born in. Since South Africa, you've often talked about the importance of managing a group that has to spend 50 days together...

That's right. 50 days is a long time and we were fortunate enough to have no hiccups, no problems, no conflicts. It says everything about a group of real sportsmen with very generous attitudes. Good harmony and team spirit isn't just about winning games – it has to be something that remains independent of results. My squad in South Africa was a group of 23 excellent players and excellent people who made the 50 days together a very pleasant experience.

After UEFA EURO 2008, your predecessor often referred to the importance of what he called 'the captains'. Did you have similar relationships in South Africa?

Well, in principle, your aim is to treat all the players with total equality. But maybe that doesn't do some of them justice, because a group usually contains players who have more experience, who have 'captaincy qualities', are more senior in terms of national team appearances or have natural leadership skills. So you try to draw on those resources and get the best individual and collective responses to situations. I place a lot of importance on human relationships and if these are good, a lot is already won. Matches are usually decided by small details and none of our games were won by big margins. Human values are important in reacting to tight situations and the key is to assemble the individual qualities into a well-organised and structured playing style. That's what we tried to do in South Africa and what we will be trying to do in the future.

What has been your greatest challenge since

taking the job?

Most of the players were in the squad that won EURO 2008 and when I took over, I didn't want to delete or erase any past achievements. My predecessor had done an excellent job and I would say that the aspect of continuity has been greatly beneficial to Spanish football.

On the other hand, I think the worst thing is to stand still. It would have been unrealistic to think that the 23 from Vienna would be the 23 for Johannesburg. So we brought in newcomers like Busquets, Navas, Javi Martínez, Llorente... All in all, we're talking about seven or eight new players who could inject new blood into the squad. So the challenge was to take tough decisions – some of which I feel bad about. Marcos Senna, for example. He was possibly the best player in Vienna and it was difficult to leave him out. But it's not about sentiments and emotions. You have to take sporting decisions and you have to take risks. There's no room for complacency.

What style of play do you favour?

I'm not a great believer in the drawing board. In other words, I don't regard a certain team structure as a guarantee of good football. I think it's more important to build a team that's well aware of the need to operate as a team in defence and in attack. People tend to focus on the Spanish team's attacking qualities, as if we were just raining shots down on the opposition. But we also have *Xavi Hernandez tries to get between Dutch opponents John Heitinga and Gregory Van Der Wiel in the World Cup final.*

defensive qualities and if we don't do certain things well we become a vulnerable, almost weak team. It's important to react collectively and quickly to the loss of the ball.

Why has Spanish football had so much success in recent years?

I mentioned continuity and, of course, that is related to the teams and players who have been successful in Spain's youth teams. It was undoubtedly a contributing factor because they had come through those teams playing in a certain way. But you also have to look at what the players do on a day-to-day basis at their clubs and analyse the roles they play. Then you think about what they can contribute to the national team's style of play. People have compared us with Barcelona – which is logical if you have Xavi, Iniesta and Busquets in midfield – but we also have traces of other Spanish clubs in the way we play our football.

What facets of the tournament in South Africa have stuck in your mind?

I have to start with the organisation, because I thought it was excellent. Whereas so many people had predicted something terrible, I thought it was an extraordinary success. In terms of football, I will remember all our opponents. Germany, for instance, who were great with us. They handled defeat very well and their behaviour

was exemplary at all times. They dignified our victory even more – and I say that from the heart.

In South Africa, were there some significant moments that made the difference and ultimately took your team to the title?

Yes, starting with the defeat by Switzerland. But we also had delicate moments in our matches against Chile and Paraguay, for example. They were very strong opponents and their pressing was done with military efficiency. It was very difficult to play against them. But a player who aspires to being champion of the world has to be able to play against any type of opposition.

Where do you feel more comfortable? Coaching at club or national team level?

I'm comfortable in the role of national team coach, even though I think that the best results come when players and coaches get to know each other well. With a national team, you obviously have less time to do that because there's less contact. In a club, where you know each other well, you can often transmit messages just by the way you look at a player. On the other hand, daily contact at a club can give rise to more friction and more conflicts. In the national team, basically the only 'conflict' is that you have 23 players and only 11 can be on the pitch. Just think: Silva from Manchester City, Torres from Liverpool, Cesc from Arsenal, on the bench. It can be a problem. But I have to say that, as coach of Real Madrid and the Spanish national team, I've been fortunate enough not to have had major problems. What I have learned is that, as a general rule, the greater the player, the fewer problems he creates. Is there one thing that, if you could, you would like to change in football?

That's difficult. If I had one wish, maybe it would be for coaches and players not to talk about referees. I know we live in countries of free speech, but I often think that some of the things said about referees do damage to the game.

*Vicente Del Bosque in conversation  
with Andy Roxburgh and Graham Turner*