

**The Making of the Greatest Team in the World**

# **BARÇA**

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## 8. THE ODD COUPLE



“We’ve reached the stage now that we don’t need to talk, it’s sufficient for a little glance at each other to agree what needs to be done in any given situation”

*Gerard Piqué*

IT IS JANUARY 5, 2011 and Barcelona, playing at El Catedral of San Mamés against Athletic Bilbao in the Copa del Rey, are clinging on. Éric Abidal has made it 1-0 and Barça will go through to the next round if they don't concede twice in the last 16 minutes, but Athletic have their tails further up than a peacock in heat.

Fernando Llorente, muscles bursting out of his XXL shirt, is close to unplayable and the ball is being launched to him by player after player in red-and-white stripes. High above them in the coliseum, the eager Basque mob bays for Barça's blood.

On Pep Guardiola's bench sits his captain, Carles Puyol. Tarzan. The man for a crisis. However, he's not fully fit. He has missed the previous couple of games due to a knee problem which is about to cripple his season.

The plan was to take him to the game but mop up a win without using the 32-year-old. Now there is no choice and so the talismanic defender, whose absences that season coincided with all six of his team's defeats, strips off and waits for the referee, César Muñoz Fernández, to wave him on. There are 13 minutes left.

Puyol trots out and takes up his position next to Gerard Piqué. The younger man turns to his captain and says: "Bloody hell, Puyi, I've really missed you – it's good to have you back."

Instead of a quick high five or a little wink to confirm that Butch and Sundance are back in the saddle, Puyol explodes: "Stop fooling around Geri and concentrate on the bloody game!" Although Llorente scores, Barça see out the match and power onwards to a final against Real Madrid.

It's a constant theme between them. Piqué admits that his concentration powers aren't on full beam all the time; Puyol might admit that his playing partner's youthful zest has taught him not to be on guard, tense and serious 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

Off the pitch, Piqué calms Puyol down. On the pitch, the older man gives his playing partner hell if his intensity drops for a split second.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Gerard Piqué and Carles Puyol – football's Odd Couple. You should have the theme tune to Neil Simon's Academy Award-winning film of that name,

about Felix and Oscar – the sport-obsessed, testosterone-fuelled Walter Matthau foolishly offering niggly, neurotic Jack Lemmon a place to stay in his apartment – playing in your head as you read this.

Honestly, the World Cup-winning partnership shouldn't even like each other, never mind have a bountiful playing relationship and a friendship which has changed each man profoundly.

There is nearly a decade in age between them, a world of difference in their upbringings, a six-inch gap in height, radical differences in their style, haircuts, personalities and life experience – and yet they have forged a remarkable bond.

By the time he was 23, Carles Puyol had not won World Cup and Champions League medals, dated a pop superstar, been chosen as the face of Spanish clothes store Mango, or published an autobiography.

No prizes for guessing that Piqué had.

At 23, Puyol had not won a single trophy and had spent his early years dodging Louis van Gaal's demands that he get a haircut. Far from being compared to the game's most elegant sweeper (Piquénbauer is a nickname which even Franz Beckenbauer has endorsed) Puyol was a winger, converted to a full-back, who was about to become a centre-half.

When Piqué was signed back from Manchester United for £5m in 2008, he was a rarity. Other exiles from La Masia had been bought back – Luis García, who went on to win the Champions League with Liverpool, was one; Gerard López, a Champions League finalist with Valencia, another. Each returned for sizeable fees, but encountered relatively little success. They certainly didn't represent value for money. The return of Piqué was not universally popular – and he knew it.

Think about the other defenders in the dressing room. Puyol had just won Euro 2008 with Spain; the proud Mexican World Cup star Rafa Márquez was his regular partner at centre-half; Gabi Milito (who at least Piqué knew from his loan spell at Zaragoza) was there; Éric Abidal wanted to play at centre-half more often and Martín Cáceres had been bought that summer for a remarkable €16m.

Piqué was born to a well-to-do family in posh Pedralbes. He

was confident, a practical joker and he had been repatriated at a cost. Nothing would have been easier than for the other central defenders to take against him. Instead, Piqué quickly matured into a vital component in the revitalisation of team spirit and quality of football at Barcelona.

In his debut year, season 2008-09, he ranked sixth for minutes played in all competitions as Barcelona won the treble (he was the third most-used in the Champions League). At the end of that first season, Piqué produced a world-class tackle to prevent Manchester United scoring first in the Rome final. Barça owe that triumph almost as much to Piqué's remarkable block on Park Ji-Sung as they do to their goalscorers, Samuel Eto'o and Leo Messi.

"One of the problems in football is that defenders ... they don't value us that much, because there isn't as much spectacle and prestige in our work as for a forward," explains Piqué.

"The most beautiful thing in football is scoring a goal, and then you have the assist. Personally, I think moments like that one in Rome are key, because if United had got the advantage it would have been much tougher to turn it around. Park could definitely have scored after Ronaldo's free-kick. I stayed aware and was able to produce the block."

That Piqué inspired Puyol to form a three-man Rat Pack with Cesc Fàbregas and radically change his entire character is an extraordinary achievement. To appreciate it, we have to get to know Puyol.

Though history will mark him down as one of Spanish football's all-time greats, his achievements can appear to be triumphs of effort, rather than talent. That's a false impression partly driven by the fact that Puyol was the most emblematic player at the Camp Nou during the great trophy drought of 1999-2005.

This raw, 17-year-old country boy arrived at the Barcelona youth system just a few months before Johan Cruyff was ousted. He was the ultimate utility player: not tall, but possessing a great leap; not supremely talented, but driven to work on every aspect of his game. Eventually, he would become a World Cup-winning centre-half, but in his youth he'd played almost everywhere, from goalkeeper to striker, and in his first couple

of years in the first-team squad at the Camp Nou he was a winger and then a right-back.

Born in deepest Catalonia, in the small village of La Pobla de Segur, his parents, Josep and Rosa, had land and a herd of cows. Their two sons, Carles and Josep Xavier, attended the local Sagrada Familia School. Josep Xavier, known as Putxi to his younger brother's Puyi, was perhaps the more talented – a striker – but Puyol the younger was fired by a raw determination. His sentiments haven't changed and one of his tattoos reads: "Power is inside the mind. The strong can endure."

A devoted Barça fan, he would stomp upstairs and slam his bedroom door for the night without eating his dinner if his team lost.

They played on a hard-packed sand and gravel pitch, life-threatening for a guy with Puyol's never-say-die playing style. Any contact between skin and playing surface meant horrible lacerations, and sliding tackles were for those completely oblivious to their own well-being.

Puyi had the great good fortune to chance upon a local coach, Jordi Mauri, who was as driven as he was. Mauri and Puyol were tough enough to agree on extra training in the freezing cold of the dark mornings.

Mauri recalls two incidents that taught him that this was a kid of extremely rare determination. "In the training we used to get old socks, fill them with 10 kilos of sand and tie a knot so that they were linked," he remembers. "Carles would put one on each shoulder and do sit-ups with them like that. It was freezing cold, a home-made training solution and his mates faded away, but he was completely driven. Perhaps I could have got away with that with the younger kids, but the other guys of Puyol's age just wouldn't have come back to the next session. He did, though.

"Once, when we were playing foot-tennis, Carles threw himself full length to try to rescue a point with a diving header. When he got up he had mashed his face and it was all covered in blood – but he was just pissed off that he'd lost the point and wanted to get going to win it back.

"Most kids of 14 would have been lying there moaning and feeling sorry for themselves. He was ultra-competitive then, a thoroughbred who had the capacity to learn things very quickly."

Puyol would have a football with him at all times, whether he was playing a match, practising, or just at home. His progression from that bloody game of football-tennis to lifting the World Cup was never fuelled by a desire for fame and fortune, always by a 10,000-volt will to win.

“As a youngster, I used to completely lose it if we were beaten,” he recalls. “I’d find it very hard to think about losing a match and not being pissed off – I get pissed off even if it’s just a match during a training session. I don’t think I’ll ever change. You need to be very competitive to make it to the elite.”

There was only one senior team in the local area and Puyol therefore played street football, seven-a-side or *fútbol sala* until midway through his teens. This emblematic warrior of Spain and Barça’s golden eras didn’t start at 11-a-side football on a full-sized pitch until he was 14-years-old.

When the call from Barça came there were around 30 kids at the big test to decide who would sign. Puyol seized the gauntlet. “Throughout it all I had no idea if I was doing well or not,” he remembers. “There was very little feedback, but I loved every minute of it. What a dream, just to be wearing the Barça shirt!”

It would be a decade before ‘Puyi’ would win his first senior trophy with the club, but the golden era was forming. Xavi and Víctor Valdés were already in the system, Iniesta had been selected and, two years later a pair of 10-year-old kids, Francesc Fàbregas from Arenys de Mar and Piqué, signed up too.

When he was a kid and playing as a fearless goalkeeper, Puyol’s mother Rosa was sufficiently worried about her younger son throwing himself about the hard pitches that she took him to the local doctor. The wise medic laid a stone in the foundations of Spain’s World Cup win by advising her that her son risked developing spinal problems and should throw away his goal-keeping gloves. Puyol had only become a keeper because he played with his older brother and his friends and the smallest kid was ordered to play in goal.

Piqué started out in the *Torneo Social* for six and seven-year-olds, where the disparity between ability levels can be jaw-dropping. Barça began charging for kids who had no proven talent but wanted to play social football. Very few would get invited to La Masia for trials, but Piqué was one.

“I remember I had to pass a test to be a striker,” says Piqué. “I scored a couple of goals and we won 3-1. My whole life at the time was schoolwork, playing football and having fun. I didn’t want or need anything else.

“I tried not to indulge in dreaming about playing for Barça, because I’d seen other guys who didn’t make it and I didn’t want to end up living with frustrated dreams and feeling like a failure.”



Piqué’s upbringing could barely have been more different than that of Puyol in rural Catalonia with his cows and his socks full of sand. To begin with, Piqué’s grandfather, Amador Bernabéu, is a genuine Barça blue-blood. Under three different club presidents – Josep Lluís Núñez, Joan Gaspart and Enric Reyna, across 23 years – he was a director who represented the club with the Spanish Federation, UEFA and FIFA. Under Sandro Rosell, he has been invited back to do the same job.

He was on the board when his grandson was tempted away to United. Amador Bernabéu made Piqué a *socio* (club member) the day he was born and the boy with the silver spoon in his boots grew up with the Camp Nou as a second home. Pedralbes, his neighbourhood, is a 10-minute walk from the Camp Nou.

So the young Piqué could spend as much time as he wanted down there, playing junior football, watching the B team, attending basketball matches. Living the Barça life.

However, there was an incident which nearly cost this elegant world champion not only his career but his mobility, perhaps even his life. As a toddler, back in 1988, he was at his grandparents’ holiday home in Blanes, on the Costa Brava. The house was being renovated and the first-floor balcony had only a temporary barrier, rather than a wall. Piqué was chasing a football and ploughed right over the edge of the balcony, plummeting a few metres to the ground. Pandemonium ensued. The local medical facilities were insufficient for a child with head injuries; the trip down to Barcelona initially took the petrified grandparents to the wrong hospital and only when Piqué was hurtled to where his mother was working was he properly treated. Even so, he remained in a coma for a few hours before recovering

fully. He's made of tough stuff, this kid.

Piqué's dad, Joan, a more than decent amateur footballer, qualified as a lawyer and is a director of a construction company. Montse, his mother, is a director of the Institut Guttmann, which was inaugurated in Barcelona in 1965 as the first hospital in Spain caring for people with acquired spinal injury and brain damage.

Piqué's mother sometimes took her sons to her work as a reminder that there were people in the world far less fortunate than them and they should make full use of the gifts they had been given – more academic than footballing in Gerard's case, if you asked Montse Piqué.

Ultimately, the difference in the backgrounds of the two men reached its starkest point in November 2006, a few months after the best day of Puyol's life, when he lifted the European Cup in Paris. His father Josep was constructing a road on the family land. He was using an earth-mover, approaching the end of a hard week's labour, around five o'clock that winter night, when it tipped over, killing him. He was 56.

His son was en route to a Barça match in La Coruña, but flew back, then drove the three hours to his small, heartbroken community for a funeral which brought together the ordinary humble people of Pobla de Segur, plus those great and good of the football world who hurried to be there for the immensely popular Puyi. The months that followed must have seemed catastrophic to Puyol.

Frank Rijkaard's rebuilding of Barça had been fun and stimulating. The Camp Nou was vibrant and the football breathtaking. However, the physical, psychological and sporting decline after the 2006 Champions League final was almost instant.

One minute Barça were lions, the next lemmings. Their form fell off a cliff, standards were ripped up and if there was a responsibility that fell on Puyol, as captain, to assume the role of Rijkaard's 'bad cop' it coincided with one of the low points of his life.

Meanwhile Piqué, who would eventually be part of the remedy to this slump, was living it up. In Sale, Lancashire.

One of Piqué's great virtues is his directness. He has often talked about the fact that his life was *mimado*, which can mean

spoiled or indulged, while growing up. In Manchester he discovered what it was like to be alone, to have to grow up fast and fight for what you need.

However, the reasons he is sometimes viewed as a lucky, silver-spooned *pijo*, or posh-boy, are clear. He is tall, handsome, smart, and talented. He was born into a well-educated, successful family and pushed to do well at school; selected for excellence by the club he loves and, by fluke, born to that 1987 generation which includes Cesc Fàbregas, Leo Messi and Víctor Vázquez.

Fàbregas and Piqué were partners in crime and they admitted in a television documentary to running into trouble while stealing petrol caps from parked cars. Patrolling the Barceloneta beach front, they spotted one target and were in the middle of effecting their robbery when the car owner clocked them, roared out of the restaurant he'd been eating in and set off in furious pursuit.

Charmed lives that they lived, they got away with it.

The football philosophy at Barcelona has not always been as clear-cut and well-executed as it is now. Cruyff's philosophy of pushing talented players through the system quickly has flitted in and out of fashion. Much more important than the idea that 'if you are good enough you are old enough' has been the concept that the best players must be pushed out of a 'comfort zone' and into a level where their team-mates are more experienced and their opponents bigger and more brutal.

When Piqué, Fàbregas and Messi were youngsters, things could seem moribund. They got tired of winning by double-figure margins.

Around this time, the then Barcelona coach, Louis van Gaal, came to Casa Piqué for dinner. On being told that Amador's grandson, Gerard, was in the *fútbol base* system designed to feed the first team, the Dutchman roared about how skinny the kid was and gave him a firm shove, which sent the bewildered young Piqué sprawling to the floor of the living room.

Whatever embarrassment he felt at the time has since been repaid handsomely via defeats of Van Gaal's Bayern in the Champions League and Holland in the World Cup. Don't even imagine for a second that Piqué wouldn't think like that. He would.

By 2012, Pep Guardiola had promoted Sergio Busquets, Pedro, Thiago, Andreu Fontàs, Jeffrén, Marc Bartra, Jonathan dos Santos, Martín Montoya, Rafinha and Isaac Cuenca. This hasn't just been highly successful, it has also become deeply fashionable as far as the media, fans and other clubs are concerned. Barça's youth coaches know that they are expected to find, train and promote the best talents.

Both Piqué and Cesc, since returning for a combined total of about €46m, have hinted that, had there been proper promotion, then they probably wouldn't have left. However, it's hard to fault Fàbregas' decision. Practically upon his departure from Barcelona in the summer of 2003, he became Arsenal's youngest first-team player.

The Camp Nou then was a chaotic place. Arsenal nipped in and pinched Cesc. Six months later, Laporta discovered to his fury that something similar was about to happen again. This time it was Piqué and there was no way that another gem was going to be allowed to go without a fight.

Both Arsenal and United came looking for Piqué. It was, and remains, simple to scout such talents, given that they often play on what amounts to municipal pitches in the *Juvenil* leagues around Spain. Mick Brown or Martin Ferguson at United, or Steve Rowley and Francesc Cagigao for Arsenal (those clubs' elite scouts then) could discreetly turn up and pay a couple of pounds in Sabadell, Girona or Tarragona to watch one of Barça's youth teams play a league match and get a good look at their best young players.

Barcelona's treatment of Piqué contributed greatly to his departure. He was dropped from the *Juvenil A* side, in which he was a dominant figure, and which was the stepping stone team to Barça B. Before being relegated to *Juvenil B*, he was prevented from playing for nearly two months. That decision would cost Barça £5m.

In December 2003, Barça were first alerted to Premier League interest in their tall, elegant, but still pin-thin centre-half. By spring, Piqué chose United and by July, he was presented at Old Trafford with the United manager, before defending himself ably on Catalan radio.

“Barça didn't want to negotiate with us over a contract and

just told me that I was ‘theirs’ as if I was a slave,” he said. “And if they won’t negotiate with me, my agents or United, there is a FIFA process for agreeing compensation. That means I am free to move to Manchester.

“When you are a young footballer and your club shows that it doesn’t want you, then you must seek out your living. It can also be useful to seek fresh pastures in order that, one day, you can be better valued and return.”

Piqué’s grandfather, Amador Bernabéu, went a good deal further. “Gerard has been with the club since he was nine, but since Barça found out, in December, that United and Arsenal were very interested in him, they have made his life impossible,” he said.

“The people in charge of youth development at this club knew they were dealing with the feelings of a 16-year-old kid, but they punished him by relegating him down a level and then stopping him from playing.”

Laporta swallowed his indignation four years later, not only repatriating Piqué but paying good money for him. In retrospect, Barcelona inadvertently gained by losing Piqué. He matured in England, learned what a man like Sir Alex Ferguson demands from his footballers, tested himself in training against Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Cristiano Ronaldo and Roy Keane and he became stronger – adding nine kilos in pure muscle. However, he also experienced some of what the new recruits at La Masia go through, the experience which finishes so many of them off.

From being the 17-year-old golden boy, at home and in his junior teams, to living alone in an apartment, working in a foreign language, is quite a challenge. Unlike Cesc, it was pretty clear that instant access to the first team would be very limited. It became an occasionally tearful experience.

I met Piqué in early 2004, just before his move to England. What struck me back then was that he was extremely slender for a top quality centre-half and that he was unusually articulate. One thing changed in England, the other didn’t.

On his return, he said: “It was a completely new experience for a boy who was used to being picked for every match, to have to suddenly compete in a team of outstanding players. I had to live in a little house there and at times I used to say to myself,

‘Nothing is worth this misery!’ But I learned so much at Manchester United during the training sessions. It was no longer enough for me to be tall and kick the ball well. I had to learn to use my whole body, to defend without the ball – and I learned to overcome the moments of loneliness.

“I used to call my mum and tell her that everything was fine, but I was always holding back the tears. She really missed me and I couldn’t tell her, ‘Mum, I’d give anything to come home tomorrow. I’m sick of this and I miss you.’”

Piqué has often referred to Ferguson as a ‘second father’ and, had it not been Barça calling him, Piqué would have stayed with his Scottish manager and pushed to displace either Nemanja Vidic or, more likely, the injury-plagued Rio Ferdinand at Old Trafford.

However, training against the great players of United was an education for Piqué. He hated being out-jumped by players more street-smart about when to leap, or when to use a well-timed nudge. He realised that while the Barça classroom had made him a fine footballer, there were other schools of thought on how to defend. The Carrington training ground is where Piqué’s unbounded competitive spirit was unleashed (pick any leisure pursuit from table tennis to PlayStation and he’ll tell you he’ll beat you).

Once back in Barcelona, he explained to me: “English players have the reputation of partying and drinking a lot of alcohol, but they are very professional in their everyday work, in training, following the coaches – they are all very much there. They stay together after training, stay out longer. They all go together to the gym. They have the culture to spend a lot of time with sports and that’s what I brought back with me from there. It’s the professionalism with which they do things.

“It was a difficult time, and there were hard moments when you don’t understand why you’re not playing, but they just had two great central defenders, Rio and Vidic. It was tough for me to get a chance to play, but it was still a great experience to play there with the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Rooney, Van Nistelrooy. They always have great players there and it was a nice experience. I went there when I was 17 and came back to Barcelona when I was 21. The Gerard who went there was very different to the one who left.”

The year United sent him on loan to Zaragoza (2006-07) was also hugely valuable. He featured regularly in cup and league, sometimes deployed at centre-back, sometimes in the midfield *pivote* role – and when on the road, he roomed with his defensive team-mate, Gaby Milito.

They decided that facing them should be a rough-house experience for any striker and used to jump up and down howling and roaring on their hotel beds to get ‘into the zone’ before a match. Then the two central defenders would lump into each other, dealing out slaps and punches to get into warrior mode.

Zaragoza, with the gruesome twosome at the back, beat Barcelona, Sevilla and Villarreal at La Romareda, drew with Real Madrid and finished sixth, six points off Champions League qualification. The following season, Milito went to Barcelona and Piqué went back to Old Trafford. Zaragoza were relegated. Draw your own conclusions.

Piqué admits that it was during this time that “I proved to myself that I was ready to play consistently in a top league”. However, his final season at United was to prove bittersweet. His three Champions League appearances yielded two wins and a draw plus a pair of goals for the Catalan – at home to Dinamo Kiev and away to Roma. At the same time, his excellence while at Zaragoza had been well noted at the Camp Nou.

Barça contacted Piqué, his agents IMG, and finally Manchester United in February 2008. Ferguson was a believer in his developing sweeper, but the Vidic-Ferdinand partnership was excellent, and he had back-up in Jonny Evans, John O’Shea and Wes Brown. Nonetheless, he initially fought for Piqué to stay, but eventually, negotiations advanced – at a cost to the player.

The two clubs were drawn in the Champions League semi-final in April 2008. On the eve of the first leg, at the Camp Nou, Piqué was in form and, he felt, in contention. Then, on match day, Vidic was declared unfit and Piqué was sure he would play. However, following United’s afternoon siesta, Ferguson came to the defender and told him he was not, because within a couple of weeks he was almost certainly going to sign for the opposition. Apparently it wouldn’t be proper. “It was a monumental disappointment,” Piqué admits.

“With regards to Sir Alex Ferguson, I have to say that although

I didn't play a lot, I had a good relationship with him," explained Piqué, the last time we spoke about it. "He was always very direct with me. There are other coaches that kind of hide from you and just don't let you play, but we talked openly, and I never had a problem. We had a good relationship. Then I got the offer from Barcelona, and I went to tell him that I wanted to go back home to the club of my life, and he understood. He still tried to convince me, but in the end I decided to come back. It was just the best thing to do."

\*

So, what of the defender he was returning to partner at the Camp Nou? Like Piqué, Carles Puyol once appeared to be unloved at the club he would come to symbolise.

The summer of 1999 had been pivotal for Puyol. Both Málaga and Sevilla enquired about him and football director Lorenzo Serra Ferrer told them that he would consider offers for the Barça B winger/full-back. In training with the B squad, Puyol was larking about in goal and injured a shoulder – lightly, but enough to slow the moves down. During the down time, he made a decision to stay and fight for his place. Reward promptly followed.

Puyol's first game for Barça, under Louis van Gaal, who trusted him more than Serra Ferrer, came in October 1999. The timing was symbolic. Barça's centenary coincided with a monumental crisis on and off the pitch, which would need new footballers with a different mentality and different priorities. Puyol would prove to be one of them.

There were relatively few La Masia alumni making it into the first team – only Xavi and, much more intermittently, Gabri and Pepe Reina – because of a policy of high-price international signings.

Van Gaal gave a brief summation of the hairy kid he was promoting which stands examination today. "He's got a great mentality, impressive strength and his technique isn't too bad," said the Dutchman. "He is quick, he can get up and down the pitch and his attitude is perfect."

Guardiola captained the side that day. Nine years later the Barça coach paid his defender a huge compliment in the press

conference before hammering Madrid 6-2 in the Bernabéu during Guardiola's first, devastating season in charge. "He's a shining example. I can put him at right-back, left-back, on the right or left of the central defensive pairing and not only does he never moan about it, he also never puts a foot wrong," said Guardiola.

Puyol's father would tell him, 'Give everything you have got to fulfil your dream, because if, eventually, you don't manage it then you won't be left with the feeling that it's your own fault.' That sentiment drove Puyol, as did his competitive edge.

He told Albert Puig, a *fútbol base* coach, in Puig's book, *La Fuerza de un Sueño*: "I've shared a dressing room with many players more talented than me but who didn't go as far as I did simply because I had a better attitude. Until the *Juvenil* level [from 16-19] you can look as if you will fly through your career, but without the correct discipline, hunger and predisposition to hard work you won't make a career, especially at Barça."

Puyol began his Barça career as a rampaging wing-back, less devastating in attack than Dani Alves, but just as fond of lung-bursting runs up the pitch.

His home debut was the frantic Camp Nou Clásico of late 1999 – Barça's last enormous match of the century. While he didn't start against John Toshack's side (who would become European champions under the Welshman's mid-season replacement, Vicente del Bosque), he came on for Sergi after half an hour in a team which then lined up: Hesp; Reiziger, Abelardo, Cocu, Puyol; Luis Enrique, Guardiola, Zenden; Figo, Kluivert, Rivaldo.

Toshack's side was Illgner; Salgado, Campo, Julio César, Karanka (José Mourinho's assistant at the Bernabéu); Geremi, Redondo; Anelka, Raúl, Sávio and Morientes.

Rivaldo and Luis Figo wiped out an early Raúl header for a 2-1 lead, but after Kluivert was sent off, Real Madrid's legendary No 7 scored a famous late goal to tie the match 2-2 and put his finger to his lips to silence a furious Camp Nou. Typically, Puyol made straight for Raúl on the final whistle to swap shirts: 'Never mind what anyone else thinks. I'm doing it my way'.

Perhaps his boldness was fuelled by relief. "I wasn't as nervous as I thought I was going to be," he revealed to reporters afterwards. In fact, this game was going to have a major impact on Puyol's immediate prospects.

Figo was brilliant that night, five-star, but he accepted an outlandish offer by a new powerbroker called Florentino Pérez: If this construction magnate won the 2000 Real Madrid presidential elections and paid the buy-out clause in Figo's contract, then the winger would jump ship.

It is history now, but at the time it was a move of seismic proportions. Figo didn't deserve the bicycle chains, mobile phones, cans, bottles and a solitary suckling pig's head which were subsequently thrown at him when he played at the Camp Nou, but he did leave a gaping wound.

Madrid, now European champions, coached by Del Bosque, with young Iker Casillas in goal and featuring Figo, were back in the Ciudad Condal nearly a year after Puyol's first Clásico. Lorenzo Serra Ferrer had succeeded Van Gaal and the Mallorquín came up with the idea that asphyxiating Figo's creativity, especially in a coliseum-like atmosphere with the fans constantly baying their outrage at him, might pay dividends. Puyol was the shadow stalking Figo.

"The boss just told me to man-mark Figo and follow him everywhere on the pitch, which I was delighted to do," he recalls. "It was tiring, but it worked because I concentrated really hard and I don't think Figo contributed to the game. However, he showed what a great player he is, irrespective of the result. The atmosphere was boiling, but he never hid, he was up for the ball all the time and he made me work hard."

In the interim, between his debut Clásico and this 2-0 win almost a year later, Puyol had emulated Guardiola and Albert Ferrer, gold medallist in 1992, as Camp Nou Olympians of note, when he won a silver at the 2000 Games in Sydney. He and Xavi were part of a cracking squad, including Carlos Marchena, Joan Capdevila, David Albelda, Raúl Tamudo, Gabri and Albert Luque. In a thrilling final, Cameroon beat nine-man Spain on penalties thanks to Samuel Eto'o making it 2-2 after Xavi and Gabri had put Spain 2-0 up in the first half.

A gentle easing back into Barça B football when they returned might have been more logical, but while they had been away Barça had hit the rocks and sent out an SOS call to the returning young heroes.

Thumped 3-0 away to Beşiktaş, defeated 2-0 in the Camp

Nou by Milan and humbled 2-0 in La Coruña, things were pretty desperate (Barça would fail to qualify from a Champions League group of Leeds, Milan and Beşiktaş).

Puyol's 'seek and destroy' mission on Figo's return to the Camp Nou earned him a run of matches which helped Barça to the semi-finals of both the Copa del Rey and the UEFA Cup (including Guardiola's last European match as a Barça player, a 1-0 defeat by Liverpool at Anfield).

His marking of Figo and his Olympic heroics made Puyol a folk hero among Camp Nou fans, enduring a woeful Barça side that season. At last! Here was another *canterano* – full of the Migueli spirit (Migueli was Barça's original 'Tarzan', playing nearly 700 matches as a 'no-prisoners' central defender). After a breakthrough second season, the fans voted Puyol the club's outstanding defender.

Then came the decisions which sealed Puyol's status with the fans forever – long before he began lifting trophies.

Madrid's buy-out of Figo's contract (a world record £37m deal) had devastated FC Barcelona. A truly great player had been ripped away, Barcelona's board had been made to look penny-pinching and dopey while, suddenly, Real Madrid looked immensely powerful – football-wise and institutionally.

Florentino Pérez fancied a repeat smash and grab: buying out the rescission clauses (the mutually agreed buy-out fees written into each player's contract in Spain post-Bosman) of any or all of Cocu, Kluyvert and Puyol. Each of them, in turn, received golden handcuff contracts to stay at the Camp Nou, despite the fact that Puyol would have been an extremely unlikely Real Madrid signing. So he stayed and became a lynchpin, enduring four changes of president and four changes of coach before lifting his first trophy with Barça, La Liga in 2005. These were chaotic times.

"I can't pretend I've never thought about leaving," he recalled, much later. "There was a time when not only were we not winning any trophies, but it didn't feel like we were even trying to. I got really annoyed and was thinking about leaving, but eventually decided to stay and fight.

"There was a lot of talk at the time in the press about me signing for Madrid, but I've never met with anyone in Madrid

to talk about going there. I can tell you that it will never happen. Winning is the most important thing of all. You can play brilliantly, but if you don't end up with any trophies, it's totally unsatisfying. It's like in 2004 in the knock-out match against Chelsea. We played lovely football, but were knocked out all the same. That's no use to me. We've got to win."

While all around him was crumbling, Puyol's standards never slipped. The match that embodies what was going on came on October 23, 2002. Lokomotiv Moscow came to town in the Champions League. With the score at 0-0, Barça's Argentinian keeper, Roberto Bonano, foolishly came racing out to try to intercept a run from the Lokomotiv striker James Obiorah. The Nigerian stepped round him and had an open goal from about 30 metres out, but Puyol was sprinting across to cover. As Obiorah jogged forward, Puyol arrived at breakneck speed. The entire goal remained at the striker's mercy, with 'Puyi' standing on the penalty spot, arms wrapped behind his back to avoid handling the ball, eyes looking intently down at Obiorah's feet, waiting to guess the next move.

All of this happens in a split second: Obiorah shoots and Puyol flings himself to his left with the speed of a cobra, saves the shot with the club badge on his chest and the Camp Nou erupts at this little footballing miracle.

Nine years later, Puyol is in Monte Carlo for the draw for the 2011-12 Champions League and the UEFA Super Cup match, the next night. It's a gala, so everyone else is in formal dress, but Puyol pitches up on stage in his club polo shirt and Barça's official, plaid, knee-length summer-shorts. Inevitably, Piqué ridicules his partner on Twitter. Back comes the answer, quick as a shot: "I was at home looking through all these nice suits I've got and I decided that I couldn't be more comfortable or happy than in my club gear with the Barça badge right next to my heart."

That message sent me right back to that night when Puyol saved his team's bacon with the club crest, just above that raging-bull heart of his.

At the time of the Lokomotiv match, he explained: "I thought about my old goalkeeping skills and just tried not to save with my hands out of sheer instinct."

That victory put Barcelona top of their group. By the time they played in Bruges, Barça were already through to the knock-out stages and Louis van Gaal could throw in a handful of *canterano* debutants ... including one named Andrés Iniesta.

Puyol enjoyed the Rijkaard years – winning in Madrid, taking the title, beating Arsenal in Paris and becoming the first Barça captain to lift The Cup with the Big Ears since Alexanco (who had first called Puyol for a trial at La Masia) in 1992.

Not that he found it easy. At the time, he admitted that Thierry Henry had been “easily the hardest player I have ever had to mark. They only had 10 men, but I still needed help from Rafa Márquez to contain him and even then it took some fantastic saves from Valdés to stop him scoring”.

Immediately prior to that Champions League win, I interviewed Puyol, and asked him who the most under-rated guy in the squad was. He instantly named Valdés and then, as now, it is hard not to agree.

More than one Barça player didn't hit peak that day and, while Puyol admits there were nerves, it is an important comparison with the Guardiola era that there was no Messi and Rijkaard's team was about to begin its descent into mediocrity.

Puyol has kept his shirt, boots and both captain's armbands (the club one in Catalan colours and the official UEFA one), but I would wager that the 2009 triumph means more to him than that victory in Paris.

His father's death in the winter of 2006 changed Puyol radically. Struggling to cope with the impact of his loss, he found some solace in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. It so intrigued him that he took steps to make contact with the Honourable Thubten Wangchen, the Dalai Lama's representative in Catalonia, and also spent some time at Tibet House.

Puyol also met the Dalai Lama when he visited Barcelona in 2007 and is supportive of Tibet's push for autonomy from China. “I really identify with the Tibetan people,” he has said. “I like their philosophy and way of seeing the world.”

Puyol went from his most anguished moment to a radical change in lifestyle. Exposure to a culture of meditation, forgiveness, tranquillity and dignity coincided with him taking up pilates and yoga, which have greatly extended his peak years.

What's more, just as he was lightening up, along came Piqué, this 6ft 4in lump of vital energy, full of noise, pranks, a lust for life and immense footballing potential.

The surprise, I think, was that Puyol was up for the larking about on and around the training pitch. Not in the matches. He's not changed that much.

The on-pitch symbiosis between Puyol and Piqué is easier to explain. Puyol once looked happiest when it was chaotic on the pitch. He would be running around with his superman pants over his shorts, putting out fires, saving small children from pile-driver opposition shots, leaping in and out of danger; certainly not happy if his night didn't contain some high-octane heroics.

However, over the years Puyol has adapted. It started under Rijkaard, who as a player switched between centre-half and *pivote* for Holland, Ajax and Milan, teams where imposing control of the ball and dictating the pattern of play meant much more composed, decisive and dominant defending. Rijkaard helped change his captain.

Puyol still relied on pace, anticipation and tackling power, but now he wanted to be a controlling, rather than a reactive, influence on a match. He used his judgement differently, was happiest when a clean sheet also included clean shorts – not a night of diving in and making the type of skin-ripping tackles which once failed to save him a point at football-tennis back in Poble de Segur.

The decline during the latter years under Rijkaard was something that Puyol could neither understand nor reverse, no matter how much work he put in. He expresses the horror of it all with one, bitter memory. "There were lots of bad matches ... Losing to Sevilla in the UEFA Super Cup in Monaco was the beginning of the end – but we didn't know it then," he recalls. "Then you remember losing the World Club final in Tokyo, but easily the worst of all was the defeat at the Bernabéu [a 4-1 loss in May 2008]. No question that was the pits. Forming a guard of honour for them, the pasting we took in the match – everything we had built was coming crashing down. It was the worst game of my life and it seemed to go on forever, like it would never finish. Them lapping it up, us suffering – it was the end of an era."

Losing is part of the sporting life, but humiliation, desolation

and frustration were not what Puyol had earned. So, as a present, the sporting gods sent him not only Guardiola, but Piqué.

Their very first game in the saddle had a nicely appropriate venue. Puyol had missed the 6-0 and 5-1 wins over Hibernian and Dundee United during the Scottish pre-season camp in the summer of 2008, but was ready for the next friendly. The football renaissance began at the Artemio Franchi stadium in Florence, the city of the artistic and cultural Rinascimento, when Barça beat Fiorentina 3-1 with a stunning performance.

There is no question that Piqué's arrival had beneficial effects on and off the pitch. Xavi said: "Since Gerard's arrival, everyone is much more laid-back. He's young and his character has fitted brilliantly into this group because he's full of the joys of life. When he first arrived it was obvious that he wanted to have a good time, but that's not what football's all about.

"You can have a laugh, but at the end of the day it's a job of work, we are under tremendous pressure and Piqué had to adapt to that. To a certain extent it was the captains, Valdés, Puyol and I, who taught him about that – but he learned quickly and he learned a lot.

"However, Piqué and Puyol are really close friends who work brilliantly together on the pitch. Off the pitch, Puyol has changed completely. He's so much more relaxed now. Piqué is the chief joker in the squad. He is behind every prank, whether it involves mobile phones, team-mates' shoes or clothes."

The degree to which Barça's Odd Couple like to fool about has become famous. It was Puyol and Piqué who planned to surprise Fàbregas during the World Cup celebrations in Madrid, by hauling a Barça shirt over his head while Pepe Reina was introducing him to the adoring throng. It wasn't a universally popular jape at the time.

When Piqué and Puyol were sitting together in the Camp Nou main stand watching a cup match against Ceuta, for which they hadn't been squad-listed, Piqué was filmed throwing sunflower seeds at Juanjo Brau, the club's senior fitness trainer. The more cheesed-off Brau got, the more Piqué blamed Puyol, sitting next to him.

Twitter is where a lot of the Odd Couple's nonsense is played out.

They and Fàbregas pepper their Twitter exchanges with the phrase “Oooooohh. Moc moc!” That started when Piqué saw a YouTube video of a Spanish pensioner being shown an image of how a mirror could distort her face and making weird ‘Ooooooooh’ noises. Piqué showed his mates the video, added ‘moc moc’ as a kind of air-kissing noise and a new language was born. It doesn’t make much sense written down.

Or take this Twitter exchange. Piqué: “Right! That’s my warm-down session finished. I’m off to eat with some kid called Carles Puyol who I’m helping find his feet in the team.”

Puyol: “And many thanks for that, I hope that we can both retire at the same time. How many years have you got left? 3? 4?”

At training, there are bursts of abuse and laughter, perpetual ear-pinging and horse-play. However, when the daily work is being accomplished to such high standards, all of this becomes a stress release and the antidote to boredom.

Before the Champions League final at Wembley I asked Piqué to tell me a bit more about his playing partner. “We’ve reached the stage now that we don’t need to talk, it’s sufficient for a little glance at each other to agree what needs to be done in any given situation,” he told me.

At least that’s the situation when they are in the midst of the action and the game is in full flow. Piqué also admits that there are still moments when he gets a massive row from his friend and playing partner.

“There was one match where we were winning by four or five and there were only a few minutes left,” Piqué told me, laughing at the memory. “One of the opposition was injured and the stretcher was coming on and I just went up to see how he was. The next thing I knew Puyol was roaring at me to concentrate. He was on me like a hawk, telling me to leave them to it, get back in position and concentrate. He never stops.”

But it’s more than just their Odd Couple banter. Piqué accepts that, particularly when the team in front of you is playing fantasy football, and your crucial interventions in the match are usually few and far between, concentration can be a test. He knows his mind wanders and, also, he expects not to play to a grand old age, doing the same things over and over again. Games when

you know you will win handsomely, return legs when the first match was 5-1 in your favour, matches like Spain played in Lithuania on a criminally poor pitch during qualifying for Euro 2012 – sometimes it's hard to get up for the test.

“Good concentration is a fundamental part of the game and I have to admit I struggle with it sometimes,” he said. “I look at Ryan Giggs, who's still playing at 37, and wonder what planet he's from. Or Puyol, who approaches every game as though it is a Champions League final. I always look at him and think, ‘Relax buddy, relax.’”

Puyol and Piqué are united by more qualities than separate them. Each is a born athlete, with exceptional footballing qualities. Each of them cares passionately about winning and doing so with a certain degree of style.

However, the work that they have invested in their careers, and continue to invest, is probably the single element which has brought them such success.

At Guardiola's Barça, talent isn't sufficient. The effort put in to every single training session marks which players will, or will not, earn the coach's approval, and on top of all that, Piqué and Puyol represent something else that is crucial to the spirit of this remarkable era. Between Piqué's remarkable zest for life and Puyol's serious-minded quest to push himself to the limit every single day lies a zone where they can laugh, joke and cut through the boredom and tension – *carpe diem*, seize the day

During the 2010 World Cup I was exposed to Barça's Odd Couple at first hand. One of our jobs was to film the Spain squad, one by one, in front of a green screen so that their images could be projected individually on the giant stadium screen at each match, while the announcer named the line-ups. Spain were one of the last squads to arrive in South Africa and they did so with a mix of travel-tiredness and nervous energy.

The only gap in the schedule for our filming was immediately after an hour-long briefing by the referee supervisor Horacio Elizondo. I was left by the FIFA delegate to the job of breaking the bad news to the players. There was a collective bear-growl when I made it clear that this was an obligatory task and we would be ready to start in five or six minutes. They were told that every single player and coach had to be dressed in Spain's

first-choice playing kit and that no jewellery or watches of any kind could be worn.

The cameraman and technician were working furiously to clear chairs at the back of the room, set up the lights and use tape on the floor for the 'marks' (each player had to step forward and turn, arms folded to stare at the camera) while I placated the growlers.

Puyol was first and he was restless.

"Ready yet?"

"Can we start now?"

"Let's just do this now."

Impatience began to overcome politeness. However, having told them all, repeatedly, that there were to be no watches or jewellery, I noticed that Puyol was wearing one of his own range of timepieces. So we started, got him in position and just as the cameras were rolling I gently pointed out that he had been warned about not wearing any accessories.

For a second I thought I'd be killed on the spot, then the group took over, Puyol's team-mates pounced on the defender's slip-up like hungry wolves and he gave a sheepish smile. Everyone relaxed and the rest of the session was terrific fun because the atmosphere changed completely. I doubt he would have been quite so easy-going before teaming up with Piqué.

Later in the tournament, we were asked to get the Spain players to do short films which would be used for mobile-phone subscribers to watch. Spain's training camp was located right in the heart of rugby country – Afrikaner farming land. We had the idea to fool about with a rugby ball and Puyol was our guest that day in our improvised studio on the North Western University campus. Once it was explained to him, he was happy to start in a close-up shot, with a rugby ball held up towards his chin and say, "They tell me this is rugby country. Well [dramatic pause and bemused face] I know nothing about rugby".

He throws the rugby ball out of shot to his right and almost simultaneously catches a football thrown to him from off camera, to his left.

"But I do know how to play football". He follows his pay-off line with a steely look down the barrel of the camera.

Okay, it's not Battleship Potemkin, but it's a nice promo and

he did it with a sense of fun. Some of my Spanish colleagues were amazed that he'd been happy to fool around, but it was another example of the new Puyol.

One of the famous images from Wembley in May 2011 is Piqué, plus his army of helpers, cutting down the entire goal-net and then wandering off with it as a souvenir. It wasn't a new caper, simply a technique improved on since the night of the World Cup final.

Having beaten Holland in extra time, Vicente del Bosque's players lifted the trophy and paraded around the pitch in triumph. The dressing room was mayhem, but my cameraman and I were allowed in to make an exclusive film as the Queen of Spain, Rafa Nadal, and Placido Domingo danced and sang with the Spain players (watched by a dignified if disappointed former Barça player, the Dutchman Phillip Cocu).

Not long after we completed our work and edged out to the reception area between the dressing room and the start of the tunnel, Piqué burst out of the door carrying tiny bandage scissors and a bottle of lager, then trotted off down towards the playing surface.

Instants later he was back again, agitated and urgently asking where the nets had gone. None of the tournament officials looked particularly interested in his enquiry, nor did the stadium staff, so he asked me for help. Off we headed with one of the tournament volunteers, who could envisage the prize of a signed strip at the end of the mission.

Having promised that he knew where the nets were, the volunteer led us all over the stadium, with Piqué's metal studs threatening to spill him all over the concrete stairs. But the entrepreneurial kid had lied. He'd simply led us to a different pitch entrance – Piqué had already been down to the pitch, knew the nets had been gathered and was now volcanically unhappy.

Piqué swallowed his rage and we started banging on the doors of equipment stores, where goal-nets might be housed, only to burst in on the take for the stadium's food concessions being counted in high stacks of bundled South African rand.

It all degenerated into a farce, with Piqué increasingly and justifiably irritated. Every official wanted an autograph or picture

with him, but not one of them would lead him to the souvenir he so desperately wanted.

We finally found the stadium manager's office. There we met a South African who lied about where the nets were and snuck away to hide them from us. Piqué had been containing his growing fury, attempting to smile and accepting dozens of requests for attention, but he was near the edge now.

He'd been operating in English, but turned to me and suggested, in Spanish, "I'll punch him, you take the nets and we'll make a run for it."

Now, I think it was the famous Piqué sense of humour in action (although at the time I was pretty sure he meant it), but with redoubled negotiating skills, the intervention of FIFA, the name-dropping of a few sponsors and the arrival of the Spain-supporting South African stadium manager, a deal was finally reached. Watching this World Cup winning centre-half snipping a 2ft by 1ft portion of the goal-net with tiny little scissors was both comical and a massive relief.

Now comes the sad part. At the start of season 2011-12, Carles Puyol was working towards his comeback, having played only a handful of games in eight months, including a few minutes on the Wembley pitch in the Champions League final of 2011. It led to a knee operation that summer and made the level of his participation in the new season, and the European Championships that would follow it, a matter of debate.

Perhaps Puyol's incredible levels of fitness and dedication mean that he has another two or three seasons at the top of his profession. Despite his injuries, it was still Captain 'Tarzan' who lifted the Club World Cup in December 2011. Nevertheless, I think the shrewd bet is that we are beyond autumn and well into the winter months of the Piqué-Puyol Odd Couple partnership.

In due course, I expect we will see Puyol become part of the Barça coaching set up, although my bet is that he will not beat Xavi to the job of first-team coach.

Piqué? Well, history is his to write. Barcelona is his club, he is immensely happy there and it would surprise me if, in due course, he wasn't captain of club and country. Only time will tell whether or not he remains at the Camp Nou for the rest of

his career, but I think the balance of probabilities is slightly against it. His taste of English football was tantalising, not satisfying. There will come a time when Pep Guardiola is no longer the coach of Barça and that may bring change to the playing staff, too.

It's a stated aim of Piqué's that, in due course, he wants to become Barça president and if he wants it badly enough then it is something I expect him to achieve – and excel in. Perhaps another spell abroad towards the end of his playing career would do him and his career aspirations no harm at all.

So, the credits roll on the story of Barcelona's Odd Couple, Puyol and Piqué, with a montage of their defining moments: Puyol hectoring Piqué to 'pay attention'; Puyol practically using his partner as a step ladder to soar high above the German defence and score a World Cup semi-final winning header; Piqué laughing, always laughing; Piqué scoring that goal in the 6-2 win at the Bernabéu while Puyol minds the shop.

Thanks for the memories, guys.