

Munich, July 29, 2013

The day-and-a-half long master class in defence has begun. This is only the first of many the coach will lead during the season. It starts with Pep giving a yellow bib to Javi Martínez and sending him to work with the defenders. If the Spanish midfielder hasn't already read it in the papers, he now knows that the boss wants him in central defence.

The rain is torrential. The four defenders, all wearing yellow bibs, are Rafinha, Javi Martínez, Dante and Alaba. Guardiola is in the middle of them, explaining the moves he wants them to make.

The players Pep wants to attack are Lahm, Boateng, Van Buyten and Kirchhoff. It's significant that Lahm, the captain, isn't in the first-choice back four. It seems the coach is already thinking of him principally as a midfielder. For 40 minutes Pep dedicates himself wholly to explaining how and where he wants the back four to mark and how to move as a group. What the full-back does when he's being attacked by a winger, where the nearest central defender should be in that situation, where the other central defender must be, what the other full-back is looking for, when the central defender needs to come out and press an opponent, up to what point he offers cover to his central defensive partner and where the *pivote* positions himself with regard to the back four. These are all pre-determined, minutely configured movements – perfectly choreographed with the aim of closing all the gaps which can be exploited to open up a defence.

Dante is in his element, but Javi is struggling. This rainy afternoon is significant for two reasons. Without anything having been openly said, it is obvious that this is a first step towards him returning to the position of central defender, and he also knows that he will have to undo almost everything he learned at Athletic Bilbao under coach Marcelo Bielsa, who also occasionally used him as a central defender, but who always asked for man marking. At Bayern, Pep wants zonal marking and it is proving to be a bit of a psychological barrier for the man from Navarra, who will be starting from zero all over again. In almost every move, Javi ends up where he shouldn't be, starts a run when he shouldn't and distances himself from Dante when he should be playing close to him. It's a hellish afternoon for him and he is constantly being corrected. The group has to go over and over the same choreography, with the coach apparently trusting in their infinite patience.

Kirchhoff attacks wide down the line, Lahm tries to reach the byeline, Alaba defends with aggression, Dante covers the Austrian full-back, Javi loses concentration and Pep stops the whole action, corrects Martínez and it's 'Once more from the top, lads...'

They have worked for 45 minutes in the thunder and lightning at the Munich stadium and still the exercises continue, unabated. For Javi it's an ordeal – and not just because of the new playing concepts. He has come back from the holidays in very poor shape and yesterday left the training ground vomiting from fatigue. Today he needs to concentrate, hard.

Pep covers the last third of the pitch with marks so that every defender knows how and where he should be moving. From afar, the training drill reminds you of the choreography of ballet. Despite their exhaustion after such a prolonged period of concentration and effort, the players ask Pep's permission to go for a quick hill run at the end of the session. The coach laughs. "What do you know about athleticism? What purpose do these long runs have other than to hurt your back?" He chuckles again and continues: "Now they'll come back thinking that they've trained really hard because they've had a 15-minute run, but it's just the placebo effect. They think that when they're doing these positioning and conservation exercises that they're not really working."

The defenders all come back, drenched in sweat after a good 15-minute run. They look very pleased with themselves. Guardiola slaps a few backs and gives the younger players a clout

on the head. He goes into the dressing room, still joking and winks at them. “Placebo effect!” The master class in defence has only just begun.

The next morning, now under a blazing sun, we get to watch the first practical application of the choreography. There are three teams of six players plus a wildcard, the Bayern B goalkeeper Leo Zingerle, who is fantastic on the ball and is always called in to help the attacking team.

As expected, Javi Martínez and Dante team up on the red side. The group that scores a goal is immediately replaced by the next group and the game mustn't stop for a second, which means that everyone has to pay attention. The game, which lasts for 45 long minutes, represents yet more torture for Javi. Just 25 minutes in and he's already crippled.

The exercise, which they refer to as ‘double area’, only stops if no-one scores. In this instance, after four minutes, Hermann Gerland blows the whistle and everyone freezes. It is intense work done at high speed and demands great concentration. It is also all too easy for fatigue and confusion to set in. Pep is cracking the whip. Although we are used to Guardiola issuing instructions in German, this morning in Säbener Strasse, he yells almost all his orders in Spanish: “Javi, jump!

“Javi, look at Dante, look at Dante!

“Javi, no, don't go towards the forward!

“Javi, open, open, more, more!”

There is no rest for Javi. Even Dante starts shouting to help him out. Meanwhile, Ribéry and Robben do their own thing. Bish, bash, bosh, they put in one goal after another, but no-one's interested in the score. Everyone's watching the master class in defence that Martínez is receiving. Thiago Alcántara, who is stuck doing gym work and sprinting until he gets the all-clear from the medics for his knee, is one of those watching the game attentively.

Guardiola says to him: “He's almost got it. As soon as he's mastered it completely, we'll have another first-class centre-back.”

But the lesson doesn't stop here. Just before 7pm this Tuesday evening, the second training session kicks off with another defensive exercise. There are seven players in attack against five defending: Rafinha, Javi, Dante and Alaba, plus a midfielder, who on this occasion is Kirchhoff. The seven attack with everything they have and their five team-mates defend to the death.

“Javi, go for the forward!

“Not now, Javi, not now!

“Javi, look at Dante, look at Dante, the line, the line!”

The player's mental reset button has been set. His unofficial initiation into playing as a Bayern central defender has taken 24 hours and three training sessions. He has had to rid his mind of any lingering memory of man-to-man marking.

When the second session of the day finishes, Pep and Javi stay on the pitch. The coach explains to him, one by one, all the channels the back four need to protect and how he wants those spaces closed down.

Javi Martínez asks him about the old battles fought by Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao. He wants to know the secrets of those two cup finals, when Pep thrashed the Basque team.

Guardiola describes in detail everything he did to gain the advantage: how Javier Mascherano drove forward with the ball to achieve numerical superiority in the middle of the pitch; how Messi dropped deep, far from the penalty box and left a huge space in the centre-forward position; how he taught the rest of the Barcelona team to take advantage of that space and the midfield superiority in order to pull Athletic around and to catch them by surprise. Today it is Javi's turn to scratch his head whilst he relives the bad memories. He now understands

precisely how Pep did it. Guardiola is delighted with the work they've managed to do in the last couple of days in July. But why give them a master class on defending at all? "It's basic. For me, the way we defend is the most fundamental thing of all."