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FLY BETTER TO OVER 130 DESTINATIONS

THE MAKING OF MIKEL ARTETA

by Rob Draper

MIKEL ARTETA was 16 years old. Study in the boarding school library was tedious, so he and some mates decided it would be more interesting to prank some unsuspecting adults. As such, they gathered above the boarding house entrance to tip water over incomers. Hilarious, except that their first victim turned out to be Lorenzo Serra Ferrer, Barcelona manager.

Which isn't the best way to make an impression on the man on whom your future depends. Arteta was housed in the Barça boarding quarters at the time, La Masia, the 18th century farm house that sits incongruously next to Camp Nou, a relic amidst the modern Barcelona city centre. Until 2009 it housed out-of-town academy players recruited from the provinces to come to Barça. Arteta is a graduate of a boarding house that also honed Pep Guardiola, Andres Iniesta and Cesc Fabregas.

Arteta insists that it wasn't Ferrer they doused in water that day but someone less distinguished, though he doesn't deny he was part of the prank, for which he received short shrift from his coaches. Pepe Reina the former Liverpool goalkeeper, tells the tale with Ferrer as the victim and as it's a better story, we'll stick with Reina's version. But Reina also played a more important part in the Arteta story. If you know the goalkeeper, you'll appreciate he's the extrovert in any group, cajoling the team and rousing spirits. When Spain won the World Cup, they didn't have a celebrity DJ host the pubic party in Madrid: Reina was the MC on stage and did it all brilliantly. (He got Xavi in all sorts of trouble for getting him to say 'Viva Espana' but that's another story)

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When Arteta arrived at La Masia via San Sebastián at the age of 15, it was initially an ordeal. 'There were many nights when I cried myself to sleep from homesickness but Pepe looked after me,' said Arteta. They shared a bunk bed, Reina in the top berth. Admittedly his way of making Arteta feel more at home was to chuck socks, boots and pillows at him in the bottom bunk. Hilarious banter, we can all agree. Arteta though seemed to appreciate it and became part of the group.

Without going all amateur psychologist, it's instructive to analyse Arteta as a vulnerable boy, homesick and 350 miles away from home - a six-hour car journey - weeping himself to sleep. Latin culture allows boys to show their emotions more readily than our own and yet there is now a resolve to Arteta which suggests this was a key rite of passage he endured and overcame. 'A steely little f*****', one associate calls him. He meant it as a compliment.

Yet he also remains a sentimentalist, still open to those boy's emotions. It's hard to forget some of the wackier team bonding exercises on the Amazon Prime documentary. In one of those team talks, he referenced an earlier vulnerability, the open heart surgery he had as a baby. He must have heard that story a thousand times from his mum. Again, you might conclude that this was a boy with a pronounced sense of his destiny.

Arteta and his family are Basque and that's key to understanding his sense of himself. Most Basques would consider themselves a nation apart from Spain. Arteta was raised speaking Basque at school and taught the stories as to how they were bombed by General Franco during the Spanish Civil War, Picasso's Guernica at The Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid the ultimate cultural representation of that trauma. He will have absorbed all that history. He would look at his home town club, Real Sociedad, which maintained its 'Basque players only' policy until 1989 and retains its clear sense of cultural identity and realised that Arsenal were lacking anything like that since the move to The Emirates. The fact that Arteta instigated the playing of Louis Dunford's The Angel before games is significant in that he gets the bigger picture amongst the small details. He intuitively understands what togetherness looks like and how much it can offer a team because he is Basque. It's harder to generate in London. You don't have the 'single-club-in-a-big-city' appeal of Leeds or Newcastle nor even a strong city identity of Liverpool or Manchester. London is too disparate for that. But 'North London forever' somehow brings some shared threads together into a stronger cord. Every big game now seems to be 'the best atmosphere yet', the latest being Porto. Charles Watts in his book Revolution wrote that Reiss Nelson's goal last season against Bournemouth 'topped everything' he has seen at The Emirates since 2006. 'The noise, the togetherness and the energy perfectly symbolised what this team is all about. The Emirates felt alive again.' Of course, decent players and results help. But as outsiders, we have noticed a profound ratcheting up of intensity at the stadium formerly known The Library.

To return to those sometimes cringe-inducing Arteta motivational moments: who can forget playing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' in training before the Liverpool game to prepare the players for the Anfield onslaught? (Reader: they lost 4-0). Team talks that sounded like David Brent to me, a middle-aged man, were fresh and new to teenagers. Watching him speak, the players are often rapt.

There was only one moment when the spell seemed broken, the circle of trust before the Leicester game that season. Arteta rubs his palms (whatever?!) and insists the players do the same, quite the cult leader. He then announces: 'We're going to grab each other's hands and we are going to create the energy in a bubble that we're going to play out there. Close your eyes, feel it in your body, who we are.' They won, of course, 2-0 and after the game, above the celebrations, you can hear a player shout: 'I want everybody in a circle and to rub their hands.' Even Arteta laughed. So maybe they weren't always as rapt as it appeared and there was some Ray Parlour style scepticism. (When faith healer Eileen Drewery was working with England, she placed her hands on Parlour's head to discern his aura and he famously asked for a 'short back and sides'.)

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To pull some of these strands together, Arteta has a soft heart - remember the tears when he played his last game in 2016? - but a hard exterior shell. Alex McLeish described him as 'timid boy' when he turned up at Rangers, aged 20. He had already been on loan to PSG and now was moving miles away again, having left home at 15. There's a formidable mental resilience being developed right there, at least for those that survive the system. He might have seemed 'timid' but he was tough enough to take the last-minute penalty against Dunfermline that season, which Rangers needed to score to be sure of winning the league. And he pulled rank on Barry Ferguson and Ronald De Boer to do so and score.

It can sometimes be hard to get beyond the shell in press conferences, though this season he's clearly worked on being lighter and more communicative. Last season he was hard work and perhaps that tension transmitted to the players.

But he remains that man of contradictions. He extended the arm of comfort to Aaron Ramsdale when his partner miscarried. 'He cares so much about his players, he went above and beyond the call of duty,' wrote Ramsdale. Two weeks after Ramsdale wrote that, Arteta dumped him.

But in the Amazon Prime series, Arteta referred to the Spanish cycling term *pájara*, a physical meltdown in a race. Arsenal had their own *pájara*, last season and Ramsdale has borne the brunt of the blame. The Southampton error in 28 seconds perhaps encapsulated what was already a growing distrust from Arteta. The stats says he committed six errors leading to opposition goals.

But others have too paid the price, and not just Rob Holding and Granit Xhaka.

Thomas Partey I think suffered too and it's instructive as Arsenal to prepare for another defining Manchester City game to review last season's 4-1 thrashing. That was an Alpha Male asserting himself over a challenger. Ramsdale got some blame and Holding was the main scapegoat. But Partey also came up short and it's significant that Arteta went with Jorginho over Partey for the City game at The Emirates.

Partey completely lost his head in the opening 20 minutes at the Etihad. Although Arsenal were only 1-0 down, they were completely out-played in the opening exchanges. City had 34 per cent possession in those opening 20 minutes and Erling Haaland had dropped back into midfield, with Kevin De Bruyne playing as a false No.9. It was wholly unexpected and Partey was discombobulated. He repeatedly allowed Haaland to set up De Bruyne and then run past him. It was a classic Master v Apprentice moment in that Guardiola outwitted Arteta and Arsenal. My hunch is that Arteta realised his holding midfielder couldn't cope with the position in that kind of game. I'm not sure whether Partey would have been trusted as much this season, even if he hadn't had the injuries.

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No-one should really have been surprised that Arteta reverted to 'steely f*****' mode in dealing with Ramsdale, Holding and Xhaka. Bombing out Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang at a time when he and the club were much more vulnerable than now was a huge call. One of the most significant scenes in the Amazon Prime documentary is Holding and Mohamed Elneny discussing Aubameyang's departure. 'Boss had balls,' says Elneny. 'Yeah, boss had balls,' agrees Holding. I know that they knew that they had the cameras on them but it's still instructive: the players knew he was serious about standards.

With Mesut Özil, the relationship had already deteriorated under Unai Emery but Arteta initially seemed to believe in him, starting him for his first ten games. It seems he never forgave him for holding out as a refusenik when Arteta appealed to the team to take pay cuts during Covid and you could argue Özil was on the right side of history on that. But Arteta has an authority that will not brook opposition. Nigel Winterburn compared it to George Graham coming in 1986. 'If you have a look at the senior players that were then, those senior players were gone within a year and a half,' he said. 'And he bought players in who he thought he could mould into a style of play. Mikel said it before and I have said it for long time: certain players were too comfortable in achieving nothing at Arsenal and he needed to move a large selection of those players on and bring in the players he wanted, along with the academy players coming through.'

Graham and Arteta couldn't be more divergent in style and so we have come full circle, back to La Masia and Barcelona. Arteta might be Basque but the team he grew up idolising was Johan Cruyff's Barça, known as The Dream Team. They won the first ever European Cup for Barça and four successive La Liga titles between 1991 and 1994, at a time when Barça were far from the force they are today. (Their previous La Liga title had been under Terry Venables in 1985 and before that with Cruyff as a player in 1974). Of course, the pivotal midfielder for that team, the one Arteta idolised and emulated, was Guardiola.

That's why he ends up at Barça and not Real Sociedad. That was the dream that made the tears at bedtime worthwhile. But it also permeates Arsenal. Like Arsene Wenger's team, they are a possession side. I would argue though that they are much more systematic than Wenger's teams, more organised in their pressing and the positional discipline is much more clinical. All of which is a Cruyff legacy, inherited by Guardiola and honed by Arteta during his time with Pep at Manchester City.

Cruyff really invented modern football and the disciples who understood him best have turned out to be the most successful coaches today. Of course, the philosophy has evolved: Guardiola and Arteta are much more open to playing a long ball now than Cruyff ever would have been: that's the Premier League influence and the challenge of pitting your wits against Jürgen Klopp. The fact that Guardiola was happy to concede possession in those early exchanges against Arsenal at The Etihad last season shows he's a more nuanced and less doctrinaire coach than he once was.

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But both are Cruyffian at heart. All of the elaborate schemes to create the midfield overload, be it under-lapping full backs or false No.9s, or central defenders stepping into midfield, is pure Total Football. Control the ball and the midfield and you will control the result, was the Cruyff motto. Arteta and Guardiola are endlessly thinking about ways to do that.

Arteta was taught a lesson at the Eithad last season and that will sting. This year he will be better prepared. Crucially he will also have better players. The game isn't the classic title showdown, given it's a three-way race. But it will be a marker of how far Arteta has come. Is he ready to surpass Guardiola as the true heir of Cruyff?

Not many people know that Arteta did actually play for the Barça first team in a pre-season friendly game against Hertha Berlin in 1999. He came on for the second half, a 17-year-old hopeful given a run out by Louis van Gaal. The man he replaced in holding midfield that day? Guardiola. 'With Xavi, Iniesta and Arteta, everything suggests Barça won't have problems in this position for the next 20 years,' said Guardiola after that game. Well, two out of three isn't bad. And the ugly duckling from that trio has turned out OK in the end. He might have failed to oust his mentor in the playing role. But he now has the opportunity to do so in the coaching realm and supplant him at Premier League champion.

Further reading

https://twitter.com/draper_rob/status/1652298498006564864?s=46

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2023/04/mikel-arteta-san-sebastian-childhood-la-masia-Antiguoko/>

https://www.espn.co.uk/football/story/_/id/39293565/from-arteta-alonso-why-many-top-managers-basque

Rob Draper



Rob Draper was Chief Football Writer of *The Mail on Sunday* from 2008 to 2023. Prior to that he worked in Barcelona as a European football reporter.

He is the current European Football Writer of the Year, Football News Reporter and Social Media Sports Journalist of the year. He writes for *The Guardian* and is working on a book on Gareth Southgate's England, having previously worked with Gary Neville on *Class of 92: Out Of Our League* and *The People's Game*.