



“Bad and cruel nursing is unacceptable. Is no one bold enough to do something?” Minette Marrin 30.08

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Real Madrid take the wrapping off their star-filled box of tricks

Gabriele Marcotti

As the Bernabéu prepared for the much-hyped debut of *Galácticos 2.0*, news spread that Arjen Robben, sold to Bayern Munich 72 hours earlier, had come off the bench to score two goals against Wolfsburg, the German champions. It was a fitting contrast.

Robben, the quintessential old-school, chalk-on-his-laces winger, had been offloaded from Real Madrid to help to make way for Manuel Pellegrini's "magic box", a quartet of attacking players without clearly defined positions, free to wander wherever their footballing genius takes them. And the front four of Kaká, Cristiano Ronaldo, Raúl and Karim Benzema were about to get their first taste of competitive football, against Deportivo La Coruña.



The magic box — or whatever you want to call it — is Pellegrini's compromise solution towards satisfying Florentino Pérez, the Real president, and his craving to have his most "mediatic" (his favourite word to describe star power) players on the pitch. As a tactical system, it is filled with peril. The last time a high-profile manager attempted something such as this was at the 2006 World Cup, when Carlos Alberto Parreira, the Brazil coach, played Adriano and Ronaldo ahead of Kaká and Ronaldinho.

It backfired dramatically, partly because some of the quartet were in poor form, but mostly because it left the Seleção with no width and four players who rarely tracked back, putting an enormous strain on the rest of the side.

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Would Real suffer the same fate? For much of the first half on Saturday, it appeared that this would be the case. Deportivo are a far cry from Javier Irureta's "Super Depor" sides of years past, having failed to finish in the top six for five years, and yet they gave as good as they got. And, in many ways, the subplots overshadowed the main event.

Real twice took the lead in the first half thanks to Raúl, the ageing captain, of whom it has been said that his *galáctico* status rests more with his reputation than his performance. Yet it was he who scored the opener. And, after Riki equalised for Deportivo, exploiting Real's perennial aerial issues (especially with Pepe suspended), it was Raúl who cleverly won a penalty, duly converted by Ronaldo.

Then the spotlight shifted to an immensely talented but maddeningly inconsistent 34-year-old, a non-conformist free spirit whose workrate makes Emmanuel Adebayor look like Roy Keane.



Gabriele Marcotti

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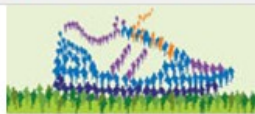
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But for injuries and a tendency to march to his own drum, Juan Carlos Valerón might have been a Ballon d'Or contender. Instead, he is a local hero in the twilight of his Deportivo career who, for half an hour on Saturday night, stole the *galácticos'* thunder. First, he made a crucial goalline clearance. Then, just after half-time, he conjured up a highlights-reel equaliser. Shortly thereafter, when it appeared that he was almost single-handedly bringing the *galácticos* to their knees, he fluffed the easiest of chances to give Deportivo the lead. In some ways it may have been a fitting allegory of his career.

By this point, angst was filling the Bernabéu. Again, an unlikely hero took the stage. Lassana Diarra, a man who has already come up short at Chelsea and Arsenal and who, this time last year, was playing for Portsmouth, drove home the winner, a gorgeous long-range effort.

Having regained the lead and provided the entertainment that Pérez was looking for, Pellegrini, the coach, played it safe. Off came Benzema and Raúl — Kaká had been replaced by Guti earlier — and on came two worker bees in Esteban Granero and Gonzalo Higuain. The magic box went back into its cupboard; Real now had a tactically rational, athletically balanced formation, the kind Pellegrini prefers. Riding out the final half-hour of the 3-2 victory was relatively uncomplicated.

All of which points to this being a work in progress. Which makes sense; integrating six high-priced stars into your starting XI is bound to take time. And finding a way to turn something as seemingly illogical as the 4-2-2-2 magic box into a rational system will likely take even longer.

The good news for Madridistas is that there is genuine steel in the side and plenty of solutions off the bench, qualities that were missing in the previous *galáctico* experiment.

The even better news — for neutrals — is that we were reminded once again what makes football so wonderful: once you are on the pitch, star power and wage packets matter little and the unlikelyst of heroes can emerge from nowhere.

And another thing...

Special talent confirmed by Milan derby mauling

If the mark of greatness is the ability to bounce back during moments of adversity, José Mourinho has proved again why he is the highest-paid coach.

The "Special One" has been having a rough ride from Italian pundits. First, he needlessly attacked Marcello Lippi after the Italy coach predicted that Juventus would win the title, having detected a sinister hue in Lippi's words. Then, the Inter Milan coach had to defuse an attack from a lunatic fringe who accused him of being anti-Muslim for suggesting that Sulley Muntari's lack of fitness may be down to his observance of Ramadan. On this point, Mourinho was blameless, his words clearly twisted.

Finally, he warned of a conspiracy on the part of Juventus and AC Milan, based largely on the fact that Giovanni Cobolli Gigli, the Juventus president, was a Milan supporter as a boy and had said he hoped Milan won the derby on Saturday.

Many predicted that this was Mourinho cracking up. How wrong they were. Mourinho threw Wesley Sneijder — signed less than 24 hours earlier — straight into the line-up and Inter pummelled Milan 4-0. Once again, the Special One has defied the critics and conventional wisdom.

Arresting experiment

Something curious took place in Florence, less than 24 hours after the violence at Upton Park. Fiorentina took on Sporting in their Champions League play-off without an on-duty policeman at the Stadio Franchi. With Uefa's permission, security was left to the stewards.

It is all part of an ambitious plan by Francesco Tagliente, Florence's progressive chief of police. Tagliente believes in reducing — and in some cases eliminating — police presence to combat fan violence, including creating special "pram parking" areas at the ground for families with toddlers and urging Fiorentina's Ultras to "twin" with Liverpool supporters' groups before their Champions League match.

It is about time someone in Italian law enforcement tried a different approach.



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