

CARLES CUADRAT

# THE MAN WITH A PLAN

**T**he routine got all too familiar. Every time Bengaluru FC won a set-piece, Albert Roca would stay rooted exactly where he was, while Carles Cuadrat would race down to the edge of the technical box, as far as the chalk would let him. All he wanted was a vantage point from which to watch those endless rehearsals on the training ground, unfold one last time in a game. It almost always ended in a massive huddle of joy on the bench, with Cuadrat under the pile.

But circumstances and football scripts have a strange ways of panning out and Cuadrat tracked Bengaluru's big win over Kerala Blasters on New Year's Eve over a laptop from far away Spain. "I've had four surgeries on my left knee and I have no choice but to give it a rest. The needs a 100% commitment and I will never give anything short of it which is why I decided to step down," he says.

But thank God for emails, Cuadrat keeps getting variations and routines across even today. The love affair with set-pieces must have a story and Cuadrat doesn't disappoint. "During my time at Barcelona, the club had (still has!) so much talent and quality that we never really needed to pay attention to set-pieces. We passed the ball around enough before walking it into the goal. Cruyff, Van Gaal, Rijkaard – all of them won titles at Barcelona without ever having to

touch the keys to the set-piece laboratory. So there were no real examples that I needed to follow."

However, things changed once Roca and Cuadrat accompanied Rijkaard to Galatasaray, Turkey in 2009. "The gap in talent between Barcelona and Galatasaray was wide and Rijkaard knew he needed an alternate plan. He left that job to Alberto and me and that's when we started our little school of set-pieces. We soon saw that our efforts were bearing results and kept building on it. Set-pieces gave us some very memorable wins like the 1-4 defeat of Panathinaikos in the Europa League in Athens," recalls Cuadrat.

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If skill or the lack of it in Turkey forced Cuadrat and Roca to turn to set-pieces, El Salvador (where Roca went as head

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coach along with Cuadrat as assistant) had a completely different reason to stick to the routines. "Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica – all our opponents had players with an average height of 185 cms. We, on the other hand, averaged 170 cms. We knew we needed guile to match their strength and set-pieces were the answer! We started out ranked 120 in the world and by the time we left, El Salvador was ranked 90th in the world. It was also around then that the big football nations started to take set-pieces seriously."

To scribble a variation on paper and to then engineer it on the pitch has a difference of daylight between it but Cuadrat is pleased with the conversion rate he and the Bengaluru FC have enjoyed. There are also moments he recalls with alarming detail where he wished a move would have ended in the back of the net. "We had a golden opportunity in the last minute of the AFC Cup final in 2016 with a free kick but Vineeth

couldn't finish it off. We should have also won the Federation Cup 2-0 in regulation time but the referee disallowed what we thought were two legitimate goals from set-pieces involving Udanta and Juanan. But that's football. You have to go back to the training ground and keep working every day."

Club captain Sunil Chhetri cannot praise Cuadrat's influence enough and singled out his eye for detail as a very special attribute. "To say Carles will be missed is putting it mildly. Along with mister (Roca) they were a solid pair and it's disappointing to see his stint with us end the way it did. Carles is a fantastic coach and manager but his eye for detail came to the fore when we trained for set-pieces. He was like a conductor to an orchestra who knew exactly what he wanted and had the plan about how we were going to do it. The confidence he had in the routine working gave us the belief that we could score from it."

The West Block never hold back when it comes to making their love for the men who anchor the club known and Cuadrat says the experience from the stands is one he will forever treasure. "The Bengaluru fans are incredible and the way they stood by us in the tough times is something that doesn't happen at too many clubs in the world. I will always keep their love with me. Albert often jokes about how this is the only stadium in the world that chants the name of the assistant manager! But like I said, I am grateful for the way the fans have treated me during my time with the club," says Cuadrat.

He may not be there on the touchline, arms folded in anticipation, any more. But whenever the Blues line up for a set-piece, there will always be a Carles Cuadrat touch to it.





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