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Review of Simon Kuper, *The Barcelona Complex: Lionel Messi and the Making -- and Unmaking -- of the World's Greatest Soccer Club*

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Kuper, Simon. *The Barcelona Complex: Lionel Messi and the Making -- and Unmaking -- of the World's Greatest Soccer Club*. New York: Penguin, 2021. 393 pp.

Simon Kuper's *The Barcelona Complex* is not about football, it is about business—albeit the business of football (soccer). Simon Kuper is a columnist for The Financial Times and has published several books on football, including five editions of *Soccernomics* with Stefan Szymanski, a professor of sports economics at the University of Michigan. Kuper's most recent book is *Chums: How a Tiny Group of Oxford Tories Took over Britain*, which came out in July 2022. He is very well qualified to write *The Barcelona Complex*, and there is no better writer on the business of football today. Football Club Barcelona (FCB) gave Kuper almost complete access to the club. He interviewed people at nearly every level of FCB, and provides vivid portraits of the people who do not get the media attention but are the basis for its functioning as a sports business. The interviews range from the current and former players (with one exception discussed later), the staff, the board, the *socios*, the Masia “school” (it is fully accredited as an academic institution), and the people who have left the club. An in-depth profile of the club (but not the team) written during the pandemic, it ends with Lionel Messi's spectacular falling out with FCB and the uncertainty of the future of both Messi and the club. Kuper's is a history of a business that lost its historical *raison d'être* and began to follow the path already trodden by other super clubs (especially Manchester United) while reducing *més que un club* from the pillar of FCB into a marketing slogan.

The book is carefully laid out. There is an opening list of important figures and a glossary of terms. The chapters are in sections, some with passing nods to Gaudi's Sagrada Familia (Part 1: The Cathedral, Part 2: The Architect, and Part 5: The Cathedral Crumbles), and ends with a “recipe appendix,” a select bibliography, and endnotes. While not a historian of Spain, Kuper makes numerous references to the history of Catalonia and the tendency of Barça fans to attribute problems at the club to Madrid. Kuper discusses the significant role of FCB in Catalan identity, arguing that probably half the *socios* are supporters of the current federal arrangement. Kuper discusses the strong support for independence among the rest, and support either way would split the club. Because FCB holds elections for the president of the club (like Real Madrid, Athletic Club Bilbao, and Club Atlético Osasuna), outside factors can come into play in club elections. Written after Laporta won the election (with [54% of the vote](#)), Kuper examines the possible impact on the club of Laporta's position as a vocal *independentista*. But what has really hurt the club is more than the fine line

FCB walks on that question. Instead, what has happened is the emulation of its methods by other clubs (the academy and promoting youth players from within rather than purchasing from without), its failure to replenish the aging “Golden Generation,” a “brain drain” (including players like Thiago Alcântara) as people from the club go elsewhere, and a series of disastrous financial decisions. FCB lost its soul pursuing commercial goals.

Kuper did not interview the one person who figures prominently in the book: Lionel Messi. Kuper makes a completely convincing case that interviewing Messi would have added nothing to the book. *The Barcelona Complex* gives the reader arguably the fullest picture of the taciturn Messi. Messi is a far more intelligent and astute observer of the game and the club, a quality that goes beyond even his astounding natural (yet waning) talent. Messi is referenced repeatedly in the narrative by Kuper and those whom he interviewed and the sources he quotes. Kuper argues that Messi became so powerful that after Pep Guardiola left, Messi was the club. This changed its basic operations: “No wonder Barça gave Messi the keys to the club. For fifteen years, the choice paid off, keeping him involved and on board. On the downside, though, his presence allowed the organization to get lazy. With him on the field, Barça didn’t need to think as hard” (163). It was this *Messidependencia*, the ever escalating cost of his salary, combined with the financial impact of the pandemic, that led to the “unmaking” of FCB.

The Barcelona Complex contains nothing spectacularly new or revealing. Those of us who have followed the club knew something was not right at the core and that trying to maintain status by buying expensive players (many of whom underperformed) was not sustainable. Kuper’s narrative not only confirms much of what we suspected, but also puts it all into context. I was part of a [Football Scholar’s Forum](#) with Kuper just after the book was published, and I have interviewed him in Paris. During the FSF session, he said that the first team male players goofed off and joked around. In the book he writes about attending a *Femení* training session at which another spectator pointed out to Kuper that the women were completely serious and worked far harder. He also attended one of the women’s matches and notes that it was the same style one associates with the club: fast passing Cruyffian football. “Generally, the *Femení* give Barça a handy sheen of gender equality” (238). Understandably, Kuper doesn’t spend much time on the *Femení* nor on the other sports, but when I want to see *jogo bonito*, I watch the *Femení*. Last year undefeated in the League, scoring 159 goals and only allowing 11, they are so fantastic that I will get up before dawn to watch them play.

Kuper's bibliography includes Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Barcelonas* but not his *Fútbol: Una religión en busca de un Dios*. Unfortunately for Barça that God was Messi and he left. The fallout continues today (Champions League elimination, a deserved league defeat by Real Madrid, etc.) I cannot recommend this book highly enough if you want to understand the changes in FCB, the complexity of its financial situation, the failed transfers, the pushing out of players for reasons of age and cost, and the stunning descent into a brand rather than a club.

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