

MICHEL SANCHEZ'S GIRONA 2023-2024

Raise your hand if anyone would have expected Girona, the Catalan team, to be competing with Real Madrid for top positions in this early part of the season. The team coached by Michel Sanchez is undoubtedly the true revelation of La Liga and, in general, among the most surprising teams in Europe. The coach is in his first season at this level in the Spanish top division, but he had already demonstrated excellent football in Segunda División (now LaLiga Hypermotion), achieving promotion three times with Huesca, Rayo Vallecano, and Girona itself.

Despite Girona being part of the Football City Group (the same group as Manchester City), the summer transfer market was far from stellar. In fact, compared to the previous season, the team lost key players such as Castellanos and Oriol Romeu, who moved to Barcelona's counterparts. Perhaps it was precisely this transfer that changed the face of Girona, shifting from having a defensive midfielder like Romeu in the playmaking role to a former attacking midfielder like Aleix Garcia. The dynamism and quality of the captain have become crucial elements in the fluid style of football that Sanchez is trying to impose this season.

Basic system: 4-3-3

Possession phase: 3-1-5-1/3-1-4-2

Non-possession phase: 4-4-2/4-3-3

On paper, Girona lines up in a 4-3-3 formation with Gazzaniga in goal, a goalkeeper capable of playing with his feet, and a defensive line composed (from right to left) of Martinez, Eric Garcia, Blind, and Gutierrez. Both central defenders have great qualities and are more adept at building up the play than defending. Martinez has more defensive characteristics and stays more anchored compared to Gutierrez, who tends to push forward. The captain Aleix Garcia plays as the holding midfielder, dictating the tempo in the middle of the field and spreading the play to the wings. The central midfielders are Herrera and Martin, both offensive and skillful players capable of contributing to the

build-up as well as finishing the play with a shot or an assist. Tsygankov plays on the right wing, a left-footed player who enjoys one-on-one situations and cutting inside to take a shot. On the left wing is the star player: Savinho. The Brazilian, born in 2004, is also left-footed and skillful in dribbling, making him unpredictable and effective. Lastly, the striker is the Ukrainian Dovbyk, also left-footed, tall, physically strong, and good in aerial play. This makes him a perfect target for crosses and for holding up play against opposing center-backs.

POSSESSION PHASE

Initial Build-up

In the build-up phase, Girona always tries to start from the back, organizing itself in a sort of 3-1-5-1 formation with Martinez staying close to E. Garcia, and Blind widening as the left third. Aleix Garcia positions himself in front of them, and Gutierrez tightens in the midfield, acting as an additional central midfielder alongside Herrera and Martin. Tsygankov and Savinho remain wide, and Dovbyk provides a reference up front for potential long balls. If Girona struggles to overcome the opponent's pressing and build from the back, they can opt for a direct approach, with the central defenders finding the wide midfielders behind the opponent's pressing line or even directly playing a high ball to Dovbyk for a knockdown. In this phase, Sanchez emphasizes the need for his players to be very active, especially Aleix Garcia, who is crucial in the team's build-up. When marked, Aleix Garcia is skilled at exchanging positions with the central defenders to disrupt the opponent's pressing and create space for his teammates. Herrera and Martin also get involved in the build-up, dropping alongside Aleix Garcia when all passing options are marked, providing an additional passing option and avoiding long balls.

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In the photo: Girona's constant effort to start the action with the ball on the ground. Rayo aims to force E. Garcia into a pass by man-marking A. Garcia,

Martinez, and Blind, closing all passing lanes. Martin recognizes the difficulty of his teammate and drops back to the edge of his own area to receive the ball as an added playmaker.

Development

Once the potential first line of opponent pressing is overcome, the development of the play continues with a staggered midfield. Aleix Garcia, as mentioned earlier, plays the role of a playmaker in front of the defense, while the central midfielders Herrera and Martin generally play further forward, looking for space behind the opponent's midfield. Gutierrez joins them, transitioning from the left-back position to create numerical superiority. The development often involves short passes, with the team remaining compact. If there is no space centrally for the midfielders in the half-spaces, against particularly defensive teams, the player in possession (usually Aleix Garcia or one of the central defenders) opens the play to the wings to stretch the opposing defense.

Laterality and Finishing

When the ball reaches the wide midfielders in the finishing zone, Herrera and especially Martin have the quality to find Dovbyk moving behind the defense or combine with the Ukrainian striker through quick one-twos, utilizing his physicality before taking a shot from outside the box. Against low-block teams, one of the center-backs (usually Blind) may also join the attack, carrying the ball up to the edge of the opposing penalty area to draw defenders and free a teammate from marking. However, Girona is most dangerous when the ball is on the wings, utilizing crosses as their primary weapon. The team creates triangles on the flanks, involving the defensive-side central defenders, the wide midfielder, and the winger to create numerical superiority and free the player to deliver a cross.

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In the photo: The triangle that Sanchez uses to create numerical superiority on the flanks. Blind, followed by Rayo's right-back Palazon, moves towards the left. Gutierrez, acting as an additional midfielder, positions himself behind the right-back Ratiu, forcing him to follow, freeing Savinho to receive undisturbed for the cross.

Finishing

Therefore, Girona is a team that plays proactively, leveraging the technical quality of its attacking players. The team attempts shots from outside the box with midfielders and wingers like Tsygankov and Savinho. The Ukrainian is adept at cutting inside onto his left foot while playing on the right, and although Savinho, a left-footed player on the left, has the ability to cut inside towards the center and take a shot.

Most of the dangerous chances, however, come from within the penalty area. Sanchez's team is second in La Liga for assists derived from crosses: Girona consistently fills the box with many players, often even Gutierrez (who theoretically starts as the left-back) finds himself heading alongside Dovbyk. The striker is a threat on balls into the box due to his physique, but even Savinho and Gutierrez, despite not being giants, have excellent timing for attacking the ball. Most offensive actions are developed on the right side, but most shots come from the left side, with so-called "from fifth to fifth" crosses towards the far post being particularly dangerous.

NON-POSSESSION PHASE

Initial Defensive Action

When opponents start their attack, Girona always seeks to close all passing options to the ball carrier, executing aggressive pressing that involves even the attackers. Sanchez demands a lot of attention not only to man-marking but also to the ball's position, aiming to close passing lanes and force opponents to one side or to play backward or make long passes. However, this high aggression can be a weakness for Girona. Bringing many players forward and positioning the defensive line in midfield is a significant risk, especially with defenders not particularly adept at preventive marking and midfielders not very quick to recover.

If opponents manage to play a quick first-pass in the build-up and move rapidly behind Girona's first pressing line, a mistimed challenge or an error in pressing can lead to dangerous counter-attacks, catching the team too high up the field and forcing them to chase back.

Defensive Play in Midfield

In the defensive phase, Girona lines up with the starting 4-3-3 or a 4-4-2, depending on the opponent and the phase of the game. The midfield trio consists of Aleix Garcia in a covering role in front of the defense, with Herrera and Martin marking ahead of him. When Sanchez opts for the 4-4-2, one of the wide midfielders moves next to Dovbyk to pressure the opposing center-backs, while the other stays in line with Aleix Garcia, who still covers defensively.

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In the photo: Against Rayo, Sanchez lines up with the 4-4-2 in the defensive phase. Martin is the wide midfielder alongside Dovbyk, while Herrera drops back in line with Aleix Garcia.

Defensive Line and Defensive Laterality

A constant in Sanchez's defensive phase is the reorganization of the defensive line, which is lost during possession. The defensive line always marks opponents closely and maintains an aggressive stance, a characteristic that permeates all phases of Girona's play. Both central defenders and full-backs tend to break the line and advance high against their respective opponents, with Aleix Garcia often compensating by covering the space behind them. Even the wingers, especially the young Savinho, show a strong sense of sacrifice, dropping back to help the full-backs on their respective sides and providing double coverage.

TRANSITIONS

Offensive Transitions

Once the ball is regained, Girona tries to quickly initiate attacks through their quality midfielders, the speed of their wingers, or directly to Dovbyk for a quick counter, always accompanying the action with many players. If immediate offensive options are not available, Girona can be patient (they are among the top teams in La Liga for possession) and look for Aleix Garcia to regain control of the game through reasoned passing and gain territory.

Defensive Transitions

Girona's offensive spirit is reflected in defensive transitions as well. The team's compactness and well-studied spacing allow them to keep many players near the ball and execute a highly aggressive pressing once possession is lost. The re-pressing on the opponent's ball carrier is done effectively, aiming to regain possession as quickly as possible or at least disrupt the opponent's counter-attack. If this re-pressing is bypassed by the opponents, Sanchez's team tries to quickly retreat behind the ball line to close all spaces and regroup.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths

Savinho: One of the most promising young players in Europe at the moment – a modern Brazilian player with great speed, technique, and a willingness to sacrifice.

The team's technical quality is high, resulting in excellent ball management, with Aleix Garcia orchestrating the play masterfully.

Sanchez's meticulous game organization is extremely effective, especially in the offensive phase, with precise crosses and many touches in the opposing penalty area.

Gutierrez is everywhere: a modern full-back capable not only of playing in midfield but also of getting into the penalty area with excellent timing to finish the play.

Weaknesses

The team is sometimes too high, risking counter-attacks when the aggressive pressing is bypassed.

The central defenders have good technical ability but sometimes lack concentration and make mistakes in decision-making.

In the non-possession phase, Sanchez asks his players to focus on both their direct opponent and the ball's position and passing lanes: the risk of mistiming the defensive line or a mistimed challenge is high.

HOW TO EMULATE THIS TACTIC ON FOOTBALL MANAGER 2024

To emulate Girona's tactic in Football Manager 2024, we start from the basic outline, a 4-3-3 formation. The mentality is **positive**.

This encourages the team to play with a positive mindset, taking the initiative in matches.

In possession

As said in the analysis above, Girona's football is possession based, with shorter passing and building the play from the back. About the tempo, Aleix Garcia is the one who decides about it, even if they often play a slower and patient game, it does not mean that it's their only solution. When the opportunity arises, Girona swiftly covers the ground starting from Garcia's boots. This is why I chose a standard tempo.

To enhance Girona's ability to create chances from inside the box with multiple players involved, I also considered other instructions that promote support, movement and increased presence in the attacking third. Here are my choices:

- Work the ball into the box; encourages players to be patient in the final third waiting for the right opportunities to create chances inside the box. This can lead to more composed and calculated attacks.
- Focus play through the middle
- Overlap Left and Right
- Attacking Width: slightly narrow this encourages players to operate more centrally helping to create numerical superiority inside the box.
- Be more expressive: this instruction allows your players to make more unpredictable and creative decisions, which can be beneficial, especially

for attacking players in the final third. Adding "Be More Expressive" can lead to players attempting more flair, trying ambitious passes, and taking on opponents with greater creativity.

- Run at Defense: this instruction encourages your attacking players, especially wingers like Savinho and Tsygankov, to take on defenders and attempt dribbles to penetrate the opposition's defensive lines. This instruction aligns well with the profile of wingers who excel in one-on-one situations and can exploit wide areas effectively. It adds a direct and aggressive dimension to your attacking play, potentially forcing defenders to commit and creating space for other players inside the box.
- Whipped crosses: to exploit Dovbyk's good heading skills.

In transition

- Counter-Press: this instruction encourages your players to immediately press the opponent after losing possession, aiming to regain the ball high up the pitch. It's an aggressive approach to disrupt the opposition's build-up play.
- Counter: when the ball is won, Girona tries to pass the ball to midfielders who have good quality and to launch fast counter attacks.
- Distribute to center backs
- Distribute quickly

Out of possession

- Higher Defensive Line: A higher defensive line can help compress the space between your defensive and midfield lines, making it more challenging for the opposition to play out from the back.
- Higher Line of Engagement: this instruction sets the line of engagement closer to the opponent's goal, increasing the intensity of your pressing and making it difficult for the opposition to build from the back.
- Using the "More Often" trigger for pressing can be effective, especially if you want your team to be proactive and apply pressure more frequently.
- Prevent Gk short distribution

- Trap outside: force opponent's players to play near the touchline, this way you can use the touchline as an additional defender because the opponent players can't dribble in the direction of the touchline.
- Step up more: to use offside trap

PLAYERS ROLES

Gazzaniga: sweeper-keeper (support): he is good with his feet and we need him to be more involved in the team's build-up play and act as a "sweeper" by coming off his line to clear the ball when necessary. It complements a possession-oriented style of play and can contribute to the team's ability to play out from the back.

Martinez: Martinez, as we said, he is much more defensive than Gutierrez on the opposite side and in possession he stays narrower closer to the central defenders Eric Garcia and Blind. For his role, we can use the **inverted full back** that can be set only to defend. Eric Garcia can occasionally play in this position too.

Eric Garcia: Ball-Playing Defender (Defend): this role allows Garcia to contribute to the team's possession-based style, playing accurate passes from the back and potentially attempting longer passes when needed.

Daley Blind: Ball-Playing Defender (Defend): this role suits his ability to carry the ball forward and make progressive runs. Instructions:

- stay wider: this helps him cover the wide areas, especially when Gutierrez moves forward.
- Dribble more: encourages Blind to carry the ball forward, creating opportunities for the team.

Using the new inverted full-back player role on the right in conjunction with a ball-playing defender instructed to stay wider on the left (Daley Blind) gives us the back three we desire.

Miguel Gutierrez: Inverted Wing-Back (Attack): Gutierrez, Blind and Aleix Garcia are the three key players of Girona football, they rotate their positions, exchange positions with each other (especially when Garcia drops down and Blind pushes forward). Gutierrez starts as a left wing-back (inverted) in the 4-3-3 but when Girona is in possession, Gutierrez moves inside and contributes centrally during possession.

Aleix Garcia: Deep-Lying Playmaker (defend/support). Instructions if you choose the support option:

- Dribble Less: This instruction can be used to minimize unnecessary dribbling and ensure he focuses more on distribution and ball circulation.

Yangel Herrera: Box to Box Midfielder (support): Herrera could actually be used as a central midfielder on support giving him the instructions you prefer to emulate his ability to push forward and to shoot from outside the box. In Football Manager, the central midfielder role has less preset instructions and this allows you to edit it the way you want. Nothing wrong about it. But personally I really like the box to box midfielder role in the game because since Football Manager 2022, it really plays well and can help you to win games.

Instructions: mark tighter, move into channels, get further forward

Ivan Martin: Advanced Playmaker (attack): the Advanced Playmaker role will focus more on his creative abilities. Instructions:

- Roam From Position: Provides freedom for him to roam and find spaces to exploit.
- Get further forward: allows him to run forward and create chances with assists or shoots from outside the box.

Savio: Winger (attack). Instructions:

- Cut inside with the ball: this allows Savio to be a goal-threat on the ball
- Roam from position: allows the player to find spaces where he feels easier to create chances and become a goal-threat

In order to facilitate Savio's ability to locate the ball within open areas, Girona typically opts for a stronger emphasis on constructing their plays on the right side. This strategic approach leads to the ball eventually transitioning to the left

side in the critical attacking zone, presenting a more expansive area for effective maneuvering.

Savio serves as our primary option on the left, providing a valuable one-on-one presence. Designating him as an attacking winger ensures that he closely follows the touchline, establishing an advantageous space for Gutierrez to exploit with an underlapping run. You have the option to guide Savio to cut inside, enhancing his goal-scoring potential, or leave him as a versatile two-way threat.

Viktor Tsygankov: Inside Forward (support/attack): this allows Tsygankov to be a more dangerous threat to the opponent because he will move inside the box and overload spaces. Instructions:

- roam from position; this allows Tsygankov to find and overload spaces more.

As we said in the analysis, Girona tends to build the play and overload spaces on the right side to leave Savio wide and high on the opposite side, thus giving him the opportunity to win 1vs 1 situations and cross into the box. That's why on the right side we have more support roles. In my tactic I put Tsygankov in attack to give it a try, and he played a great season but you can leave him in support if you want to stick more to the original tactic.

Artem Dovbyk: Target Forward (Attack).

Given Dovbyk's characteristics as a typical target man who stays forward and serves as a focal point for the attack, setting him as a Target Man on Attack is appropriate. This role suits players who are physically strong, good in the air, and capable of holding up play. Here's the suggested role: This setup plays to Dovbyk's strengths, allowing him to be a presence in the box for crosses, hold up the ball, and be a target for through balls. Monitor his performances during matches and make adjustments based on the team's needs and his individual contributions.

N.B. If in your matches you observe that Dovbyk drops too often, congesting the areas already utilized by his teammates instead of pressing the opponent defense creating room for other players, you can set him as a pressing forward on attack. Even with this role you can see him dropping back to retain possession.

This is all for this tactic, I hope it works for you too.