

**J**OSEP MARIA BARTOMEU looks out of his office to the mini-Nou Camp across the road, where Barcelona B play, and then beyond to the main, more imposing arena. Outside it is a rare grey day in the city. There has been persistent drizzle since dawn and no sign of the sun.

It is more Mancunian than Mediterranean, which is ironic given that Barcelona's president is pondering just what will keep Lionel Messi, Neymar and Sergio Busquets at the club and away from the clutches of Pep Guardiola and Manchester City. 'The weather,' says Bartomeu with a wry smile, pointing at the rain and rolling dark clouds over Montjuic.

Former Arsenal vice-chairman David Dein once said Roman Abramovich had parked his tanks on their lawn and was firing £50 notes. These days it feels as if City, owned by Sheik Mansour, are doing the same, only the guns are now pointed at Barcelona.

On Tuesday, in the Champions League last 16, Barcelona go to north London to play Arsenal. Barca are overwhelming favourites to successfully defend the trophy they won in style last May, which would be unprecedented in the modern era.

They boast the best player in the world, the best strike-force, the best team. They recently put seven past Valencia and six past Celta Vigo, playing some of the most exhilarating football we have seen. It is no wonder teams want to copy them.

City took their chief executive, Ferran Soriano, their sporting director, Txiki Begiristain, and next season



EXCLUSIVE  
**Rob DRAPER**

CHIEF FOOTBALL  
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BARCELONA

here that we are not only a football club. We are more than a club.'

Yet Manchester United are ready to pay the €190million release clause for Neymar and generally cash, not charitable work, is king in football.

'Let's see,' says Bartomeu. 'We are confident because we know our players are very happy in our club, in our city. They enjoy sport, their profession, and they are in a group. So we are very confident those players are not moving, taking decisions because of money.'

'Messi said a few days ago "Barcelona will be the only European club that I play for". So if someone is interested in Messi, forget it. He said this. I didn't say it. He said this.'

Bartomeu, it seems, is relaxed, even regarding Neymar, whose entourage seems to offer most encouragement to suitors. Barca have not assembled what many feel could be the greatest attacking line-up in football history just to see it unravelled by their former employees.

When you see the manner in which they destroyed Valencia and Celta Vigo and the sheer joy Messi, Neymar and Suarez seem to have playing together, it not only makes you fear for Arsenal this week; it suggests that perhaps Bartomeu is right, and that the players realise that together they are rewriting the game's history.

'I think in the whole life of our club, maybe in the whole of world football, we haven't joined three players of this quality,' says Bartomeu. 'Messi we knew, he was here from 13 years old; Neymar came in 2013 and his first year was about improvement. Then Suarez came and we changed a little bit the way we play. We don't always play with a No9, sometimes with a false 9. Now he has found his place (at No9) quickly and perfectly.'

Surely, though, Suarez could be the star of the show at any other club in the world.

'He is a star,' replies Bartomeu forcefully. 'In his position, for us he is the best player in the world. Neymar is brilliant, he is also the best player. What can I say about Andres Iniesta, Busquets, Pique? All these players are incredible in their position.'

'But Suarez accepts perfectly his role in the team. At the end what we like from our players is that they don't look at their individual success but they look at team success. And that's not something that happens in all the teams in Europe, for sure.'

'I was here as a member of the board with [coach] Frank Rijkaard, with Pep also, with Tito Vilanova, with Tata [Martino] and now with Luis Enrique and what I can say is that it's the first time I see a locker-room where they are a block, they are a group.'

'Sometimes there are two or three groups in the locker-room. In this team they are one group. And everyone is happy for the individual success and the team success.'

However, Bartomeu and his board may have to act fast. Messi and Neymar have contracts which expire in 2018. Busquets, mooted as the ideal pivotal midfielder for Guardiola, a player taken from the Barca B team by the celebrated coach in 2008 and

**Champions League**

**THE LAST 16**

**Tuesday, February 23**

Arsenal v Barcelona 7.45  
Juventus v Bayern Munich 7.45  
(Second legs: Wed, March 16)

**Wednesday, February 24**

Dynamo Kiev v Man City 7.45  
PSV Eindhoven v Ath Madrid 7.45  
(Second legs: Tues, March 15)

**Tuesday, March 8**

Real Madrid (2) v Roma (0) 7.45  
Wolfsburg (3) v Gent (2) 7.45

**Wednesday, March 9**

Zenit St P'burg (0) v Benfica (1) 5.0  
Chelsea (1) v PSG (2), 7.45

**ALL MATCHES  
LIVE ON BT Sport**

they will be led by the most successful coach in Barca's history, Guardiola.

When you approach the Nou Camp in Barcelona, the main stadium is on one side of the main road, with a walkway providing access to the mini stadium. Go to the Etihad in Manchester and you'll see an exact replica. City have extracted almost all of the intellectual property they can from the club, so why not the players?

'We know Messi could earn more money in other teams, or Neymar, Busquets, Gerard Pique or Luis Suarez,' says Bartomeu, 53, who was elected as club president by Barcelona's 140,000 club members — or socios — last summer. 'Neymar, for example, when he came to Barcelona, had better offers from other teams. Suarez also had better offers.'

He doesn't name from who, but on both occasions City were the club.

'But they decided to come to Barcelona because I think this club attracts players, because we are more than a club.'

'We take care of a lot of other things, being closer to children in the world, through UNICEF, through the Melinda Gates Foundation or through the International Olympic Committee in Africa, through projects with children. All of this creates an atmos-



# TAKE ME NO CHAI

As the world's best player comes  
Barcelona warn City, Guardiola  
Premier League they will need  
stars away from the

**41**  
GOALS  
IN 37  
GAMES

**23**  
GOALS  
IN 32  
GAMES

Goal statistics from 2015-16 season

transformed into a world-class player, has a deal which runs out in 2019.

Bartomeu hints that it is all in hand. 'All of our players are in a moment where we renew their contracts, we extend their contracts,' he adds. 'Right now I don't see that any of our players have to leave next summer. I cannot tell you if we have done it or not done it. But as a member of the board we are responsible people. We know what is best for our club. When something is done, we will announce it.'

The threat from City is apparently not a huge concern.

'City and all the big clubs are a threat. Barcelona is a threat to them too. The big clubs in Europe compete on and off the pitch, not only for players but for sponsorship, for commercial deals, for ticketing — everything. It has always been like this through history, so we sleep well, it's normal.'

Bartomeu, though, insists that however hard City try they cannot emulate the Barcelona model. At their heart,

Barcelona are a co-operative, a club owned by 140,000 members. Bartomeu had to stand for election to speak for this club. You cannot imagine Sheik Mansour doing that any time soon.

'I don't like the word copy,' says Bartomeu. 'I don't like it because no one copies everything. When Pep was here he helped our club to grow, when Txiki was here he helped our club to grow. I came with Ferran Soriano when the club were in a very difficult financial situation and the board and