

Diego Simeone's strengths at Atletico Madrid could be his weakness when trying to attract a new club

Argentina has been an unqualified success in Spain, transforming the club's fortunes based on a rigid and disciplined structure



Atletico manager Diego Simeone. EPA

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Diego Simeone is undoubtedly one of the greatest coaches in football world.

After a long and distinguished playing career as a combative midfielder for the likes of Atletico Madrid, Inter Milan, and Lazio – as well as more than 100 caps for Argentina – Simeone made his start in management in 2006.

Six clubs in five years hardly paints a picture of stability, but that was until Simeone was appointed manager of former club Atletico in 2011 and he has been there ever since.

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Simeone is now one of the highest paid coaches in the world and earns around €24 million (\$28.6m) a year when factoring in salary, bonuses and advertising earnings.

Yet, despite being a great coach who is clearly valued at Atletico, he is consistently overlooked when other big clubs are in the market for a new manager.

In my opinion, this can be largely be put down to two reasons. First of all, the financials: very few clubs in the world - especially in Italy, where he would like to coach because Serie A is his favourite league - can even come close to his Atletico salary.

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Then there is his game philosophy. Simeone has raised the bar for Atletico these past nine years, establishing the Spanish side as a genuine force in domestic and European competitions on a significantly smaller budget than their rivals.

The club has won two Europa Leagues, reached two Champions League finals, and clinched the 2013/14 La Liga title after 18 years.

Atletico's success under Simeone has been achieved on the foundations of defensive solidity, team unity, and insatiable work rate – very much a reflection of the manager from his playing days.

The Argentine usually sets his team up in a compact and organised 4-4-2 format. When off the ball, Atlético tend to defend deep to reduce space the middle and force opponents out wide.

In possession, the team changes to a counter-attacking 4-2-2-2. Midfielders have the freedom to advance and aim to stretch the play, creating width that can open up spaces in the opponents' defence.

This formula in Spain is commonly known as 'El Cholismo' and is an adaptation of the 'Il Catenaccio' tactics used by Helenio Herrera at Inter Milan in the 1960s.

This has always been Simeone's approach and it has yielded many memorable achievements.

Effective, yes, but progressive and aesthetically pleasing? Not usually, and for major clubs seeking an attractive and attacking style of play, this has worked against Simeone.

Take for instance, the situation at Manchester United. With manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer under severe pressure, speculation is rife over who the next coach could be at Old Trafford. Former Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino is the heavy favourite but among the other potential contenders, Simeone is way down on the list.

Compare Simeone's approach to those of the managers of the Premier League's two best teams at present. The high-pressing, quick-passing, front-foot football deployed by Jurgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola at Liverpool and Manchester City respectively stands in stark contrast to Simeone's style.

Klopp himself appeared to dismiss Atletico's tactics after the Spanish club eliminated Liverpool from the Champions League last-16 in March when he said: "It is difficult to play against a team like this. I don't understand that with the quality they have, they play that football."

So where could Simeone go when he decides it's time to leave Atletico? It may be a day Atletico fans can't bear to think about, but it will be interesting to note what his options will be.

Surely there will come a time when Simeone takes charge of the Argentina national team, while former club Inter Milan, where he played for two seasons, would be a good fit. But even with Inter's recent heavy investment, a return for Simeone would only take place if he agreed to a pay cut.

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