



How Spain 'got a new DNA' that has put EURO 2024 on notice ahead of Germany quarter-final

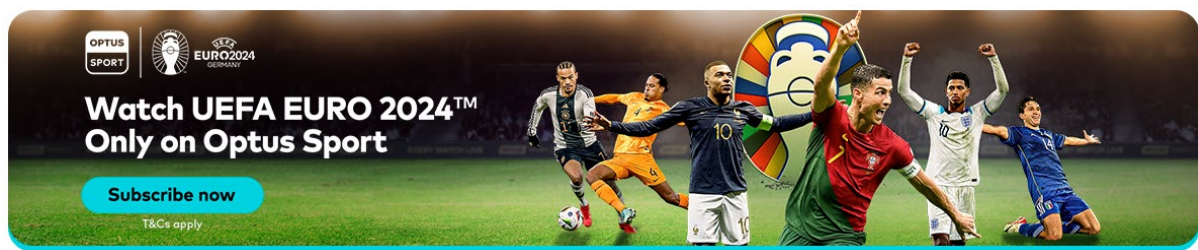
Spain won back-to-back EURO titles and a World Cup in four years thanks to tiki-taka football - so why are they so successful this tournament with a thoroughly different DNA?

By Kristy Williams
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Spain have lit EURO 2024 on fire with their scintillating attacking play, and it has heralded the beginning of a bright new era ahead of a mouth-watering clash against Germany in the quarter-finals.

You might not think side that won back-to-back EUROS on either side of a World Cup trophy would need a 'new DNA'; but the Spanish national side had been increasingly disappointing over the last few years.

But after the meek exit to Morocco in the 2022 World Cup, a set of two prodigies and the dynamic flexibility of new manager Luis de la Fuente has La Roja primed to let go of the past and forge a new destiny.



Ex-Premier League star Michael Bridges said La Roja's development over the past year or so has paid dividends in the tournament so far.

"The way Spain has kept the ball from teams, the way they have been able to use (captain Alvaro) Morata in different moments (is impressive)," he said on [Optus Sport](#)'s coverage following the Round of 16.

"They've got themselves a different outlet when they need to, and are delivering crosses into dangerous areas.

"Normally they like to play tiki-taka, recycle the ball and look for the perfect passing moment but they've got a new DNA."

For those not familiar with the tiki-taka playing scheme, a brief introduction for you.

It was popularised by the Spanish national team under Luis Aragonés in the side's golden generation from 2006 onwards - and then subsequently at Barcelona thanks to Pep Guardiola three years later.

To describe it in the most simplest of terms, tiki-taka is about maintaining possession.

To do that, players prioritise short passing and working the ball patiently through the channels on the field by efficiently using space.

A series of quick, small passes would aim to continue until a defensive player was caught out of position, and it could often lead to long, stagnant periods of play as the side patiently tried to probe the line.

In the so-called 'golden generation' for Spain, this was hugely effective; with the side winning back-to-back EUROs in 2008 and 2012, as well as the 2010 World Cup.

Legendary players like Andrés Iniesta, Xavi, Xabi Alonso, Cesc Fàbregas and David Silva were perfectly suited to this style, and the team would often play without a striker. Indeed they won the World Cup final without playing one, something that was the talk of the football world.



So deep-rooted is the philosophy now, that the Spanish and Barcelona women's teams have also adopted the style, with the latter recruiting specifically to ensure they can maintain the style at the highest level.

But as the golden generation began to retire, the effectiveness of tiki-taka began to wane, as the quality of players decreased and opposition teams figured out how to deal with it tactically.

In the 2022 World Cup, Spain managed a whopping 1019 passes against Morocco, garnering 77 per cent of possession.

But in that match they managed just one shot on target in 120 minutes as they sensationally crashed out on penalties to the African minnows in the Round of 16.

To put that into perspective, Germany made 683 passes in their dominant 5-1 win over Scotland in the EURO 2024 opener and had 10 shots on target from 20 attempts.

Then-manager Luis Enrique was promptly sacked after the 2022 farce, with his inability to veer from his tiki-taka philosophy and 'perfection football', as he termed it, counting against him. There was no 'Plan B'.

Simply put, tiki-taka wasn't working anymore, the results weren't there and a new generation of players deserved the opportunity to play to their creative strengths.

Under De la Fuente that has slowly appeared to change, despite Spain barely playing any genuine world-class opposition since the World Cup.

While La Roja has continued to use their technical skills to have more of the possession than their opposition, the LALIGA legend has shown a desire to be adaptable and flexible with his managerial tactics.

That's highlighted in the average possession percentage table of teams at EURO 2024, with Spain sitting 10th at 54.4 per cent. Their quarter-final opponents Germany sit top with 69.4 per cent, with Portugal in second at 67.3 per cent.

And what players are driving the effectiveness of the bolder, more fluid system that has a smattering of more direct, fast play with the world's best No.6, Rodri, as the anchor and captain Alvaro Morata as the target man?

Then there's 21-year-old Nico Williams, and 16-year-old Lamine Yamal, who wasn't even a year old when Spain won their first of their back-to-back EURO titles.



Obviously there is still plenty of room for growth, and more consistency, but there aren't enough superlatives to describe Williams this tournament. The winger has attracted plenty of interest across Europe to move from Athletic Club, and it's not hard to see why.

He takes on the defence directly with brilliant speed at almost every occasion, but is also clever with his positioning around the box and always keen to bring his teammates into the contest.

A scintillating top speed of 34.71km/hr is nothing without the 12 runs into the final third, 18 dribbles and passing accuracy of 89 per cent in a tournament he has played 90 minutes just once (and rested for an entire match).

Spanish football expert Phil Kitromilides was full of praise for what the young pair bring to side that wasn't exactly lauded as a favourite pre-tournament.

"We know he's quick, we know he's skilful, but he's adding the ability to finish to his game, adding the correct decision making to his game as well," he said on [Optus Sport's coverage following Spain's win over Georgia](#).

"He is maturing into a world-class player. Him on one side, Lamine Yamal on the other."

As for Lamal, one can sense there is much more growth to come from the Barcelona prodigy, who has one of the highest ceilings of any player around the world right now.

He is the leading assist provider in the tournament and has generated a thoroughly impressive 11 chances and 11 successful take-ons this tournament. Like Williams, he is a long way from playing the full minutes, too.

And he and Williams are inseparable right now - something which shows on the field.

The elder statesman even joked: "I've already told him [Yamal] that he has to learn from 'his father', me!" after Spain's win over Italy.

Bridges, a renowned goalscorer in his day and Pro Licence coach who knows a thing or two about building an attack, said the ability Spain now have to go into matches with a more flexible approach means there are more threats right across the pitch.



Infinitely harder to defend and plan for than a slower, short-pass led approach.

And it's all down to the two wunderkinds.

"A perfect example of having different outlets is the creativity of Yamal and Williams," Bridges said, pointing to the former's beautiful cross that Fabian Ruiz scored against in the Round of 16 match against Georgia.

Even Germany know they will be up against it to contain this fluid Spanish side that has the most valuable tournament trait of all: momentum.

Defender David Raum told reporters that while he was confident shrewd tactician Julian Nagelsmann and his coaching team would have a great plan; Spain undoubtedly posed different risks than in years gone by.

"The whole Spanish team is very well equipped. You watch the games and you can see what ideas these guys have. They are never really predictable," Raum said.

It's certainly set to be an enthralling encounter for neutral football fans, with both sides keen to play with speed and a more ambitious passing game, not worried about leaving themselves open on the counter.

Former Bundesliga star Alexander Baumjohann said La Roja would be a tough opposition for his countrymen.

"I think Spain has been the most convincing team in this tournament so far, it will be a very tough game for Germany," he said on Optus Sport as he preview the quarter-final.

"I think the chances are 50/50, but having the home crowd in the stadium and with the form Germany is in, I think it will be very interesting to watch, but it can end either way."

Bridges was full of praise for a German side that began the tournament with a 5-1 win over Scotland, but said

"The pressure was on (Germany) to start this tournament well, and they couldn't have gotten off to a better possible start - you've got to be very impressed with the way they've played," he said.

"This game is going to be outstanding."

The quarter-final between Spain and host country Germany will be shown live on [Optus Sport](#), with coverage beginning at 1.30am.

Kick-off is at 2am - and you will not want to miss this.