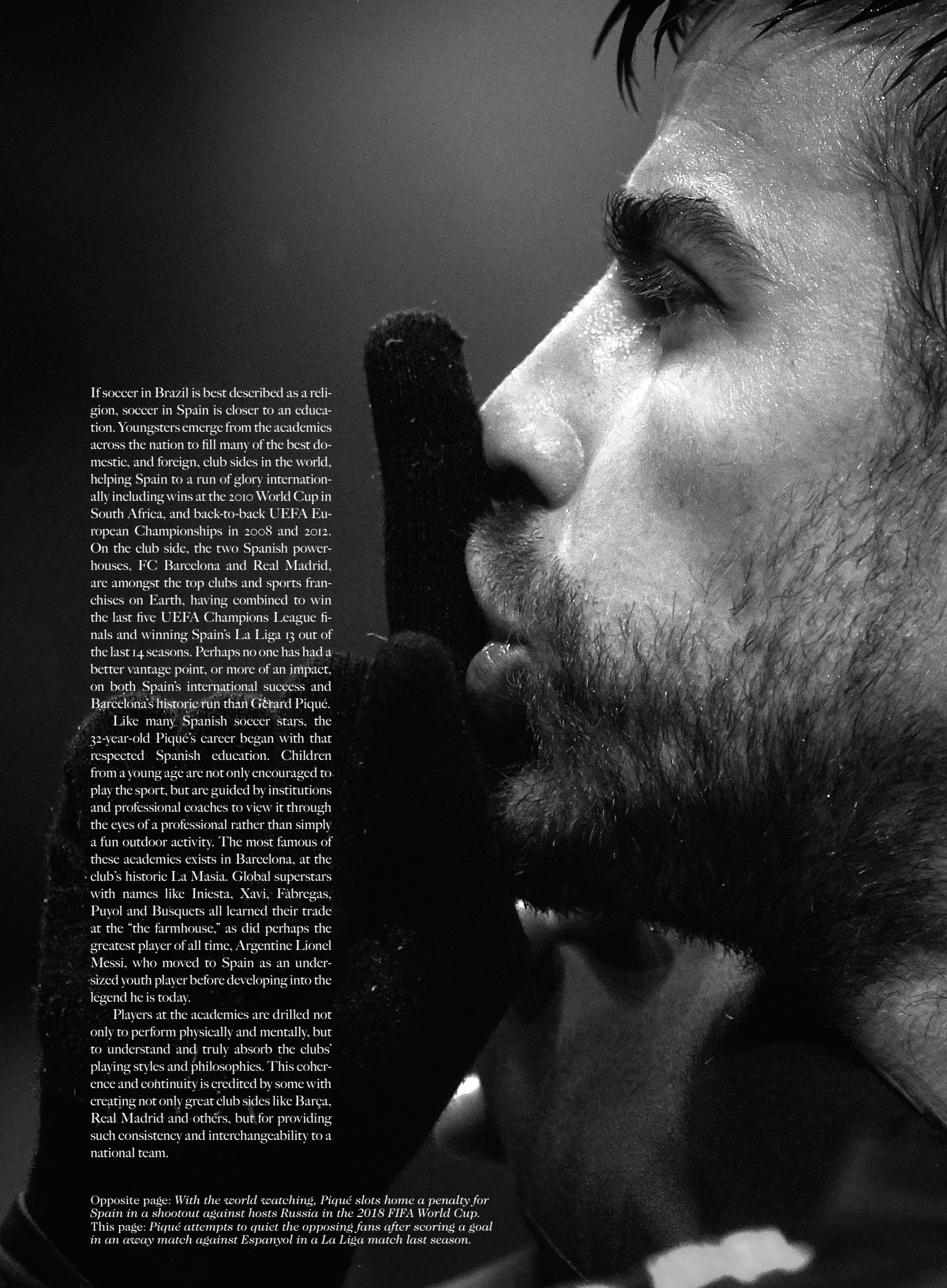


Sneak Piqué

The Spanish soccer star and Shakira's better half is one of the sport's true talents

Text by KEITH GORDON





If soccer in Brazil is best described as a religion, soccer in Spain is closer to an education. Youngsters emerge from the academies across the nation to fill many of the best domestic, and foreign, club sides in the world, helping Spain to a run of glory internationally including wins at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, and back-to-back UEFA European Championships in 2008 and 2012. On the club side, the two Spanish powerhouses, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, are amongst the top clubs and sports franchises on Earth, having combined to win the last five UEFA Champions League finals and winning Spain's La Liga 13 out of the last 14 seasons. Perhaps no one has had a better vantage point, or more of an impact, on both Spain's international success and Barcelona's historic run than Gérard Piqué.

Like many Spanish soccer stars, the 32-year-old Piqué's career began with that respected Spanish education. Children from a young age are not only encouraged to play the sport, but are guided by institutions and professional coaches to view it through the eyes of a professional rather than simply a fun outdoor activity. The most famous of these academies exists in Barcelona, at the club's historic La Masia. Global superstars with names like Iniesta, Xavi, Fàbregas, Puyol and Busquets all learned their trade at the "the farmhouse," as did perhaps the greatest player of all time, Argentine Lionel Messi, who moved to Spain as an undersized youth player before developing into the legend he is today.

Players at the academies are drilled not only to perform physically and mentally, but to understand and truly absorb the clubs' playing styles and philosophies. This coherence and continuity is credited by some with creating not only great club sides like Barça, Real Madrid and others, but for providing such consistency and interchangeability to a national team.

Opposite page: *With the world watching, Piqué slots home a penalty for Spain in a shootout against hosts Russia in the 2018 FIFA World Cup.*
This page: *Piqué attempts to quiet the opposing fans after scoring a goal in an away match against Espanyol in a La Liga match last season.*

So it was a surprise, to say the least, when Piqué packed up his things at the ripe age of 17 and made a business decision to leave Barcelona, and Spain, for the rainy fields of Manchester, UK. Joining Manchester United's youth setup, Piqué worked his

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way through the ranks during his four years with the team, eventually breaking into the senior team under the club's iconic manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. Piqué looks back on that time with enormous respect, writing in *The Players' Tribune*, “I arrived at Manchester United a boy, and I left a man. It was a crazy time for me, because I had never been away from home before. I spent my first 17 years growing up in Spain in Barcelona's youth academy, and it almost felt like I was playing for the local school team or something. I knew everybody there, and I was close to my family. So, to me, football was just fun. I didn't understand the business side of the game at all. Then I arrived at United, and honestly, it was a complete shock.”

However, while Ferguson entrusted him up to a point, Piqué never reached the level of involvement he was hoping for at that critical point in his career. So, with Ferguson's blessing, Gerard requested to move back to Barcelona, his home, both on and off the field, and Ferguson eventually relented. Upon his return, he became a mainstay at center-back just as the club was going on an unprecedented run of results and playing highly entertaining soccer that captivated, and confounded, much of the sporting world.

Piqué has been as steady a force for his sides as there is in the modern game. While both Spain and Barcelona's dominant sides will be remembered for their attacking verve and transcendent offensive talent, they were only able to threaten opposition so ef-

fectively because they knew that Piqué and his fellow defenders could handle any counterattack. He's also capable of winning balls in the air in the attacking third, becoming a threat on set pieces. He's comfortable with the ball at his feet, and acts as a manager-on-the-field of sorts, helping to organize not only his defense but the entire team around him. That's where the education, both at Barça's La Masia and under a legendary figure at Manchester United, makes Piqué a truly special player. He has all the physical tools, but what makes him truly great lies between his ears.

It'd be easy to see the success that Piqué has had on the pitch and forget about the complications that come with not only a life as a world-class soccer player, but as the face of two of the sport's biggest sides in one of the most soccer-crazed nations on Earth. First of all, there's the obvious divide in the national team, and national public support, between Piqué's Barcelona and their archrival Real Madrid. Their regular face-offs, known around the world as El Clásico, capture the global soccer community's



attention, while the stars of these teams must then come together with their bitter rivals to compete for national glory.

Piqué even cops to having created a special WhatsApp group for some of the guys on the Spanish national team who play for Real Madrid and Barcelona. But don't assume this is a way of maintaining national unity, far from it in fact. Playfully admitting in *The Players' Tribune* that “All we do in that group is talk shit to one another about Barça and Real! It's the best. We're just like little kids... I can joke around with those guys,

because they are my brothers on the Spanish national team. We might hate each other's clubs, but we are all playing for the same country, with the same dream, and that's something that I'm very, very proud of. Ever since I was a little boy watching Luis Enrique bleed all over his jersey at the '94 World Cup, my dream was to play for the national team.”

As if Piqué, at the center of all the success for both club and country, couldn't get any more high-profile, one must remember European soccer players live in the media age of WAGs, or wives and girlfriends. Athletes in America, where there are many different sports fighting for the public's attention, make headlines all the time because of their relationships. Now imagine if all of that sporting passion was concentrated into a single sport, especially into a couple of the biggest clubs.

Millionaire celebrity athletes fill the locker room, so it's no surprise that the WAG coverage by the Spanish press is extensive. But just like the Spanish World Cup victory or dominance at the Euros, Gerard

Piqué comes out on top as always. Because while teammates might have a date with a supermodel or actress, Piqué's longtime partner is a bona fide global superstar in her own right, Colombian singer and dancer Shakira. The couple, who met on a music video shoot in 2010, have two children together, and serve as an international power couple in a way that makes American duos such as Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union, or Russell Wilson and Ciara, appear seemingly insignificant on such a global scale.

But for all of the hype and attention, on and off the field, Piqué still resembles the young boy who learned all he could, in Barcelona and Manchester, to become a truly world-class defender. He recently announced that he would retire from Spain's national team to concentrate on Barcelona, and remains a rock of stability there. So while the press may focus on his partner Shakira, or the slightest error he may make, the simple facts remain. Piqué has been a cornerstone of some of the most successful sides, for club and country, in the sport's entire history.

Sounds like a man who's gotten the most out of his education.

Piqué and his longtime partner, global music superstar Shakira, celebrate Piqué and Barcelona's victory in the 2015 Copa del Rey final.