

Manuel Pellegrini

To play well is to win

After successful spells in his native Chile and in Argentina, 54-year-old Manuel Pellegrini has been coach of Spanish club Villarreal since 2004. In this interview, he talks about his "project" at the Yellow Submarine (as Villarreal is called), his footballing principles and the prospect of one day taking charge of the Chilean National Team. The following interview was first published by FIFA on FIFA.com.

In 2004 you joined Villarreal and embarked on an ambitious project, but one that you have always approached calmly. Almost four seasons later, there is no doubt that your time in charge has been one long success story. How would you assess your time at the club?

When you join a club, you come with a lot of expectations and the desire to transmit your footballing beliefs. I knew that this was a solid and coherent project, and I have given it all I've got.

Like life itself, this project has had its highs and lows, but you have always come out of it in the best possible manner. Did you ever consider leaving Villarreal when you were going through a period of bad results?

First of all, if you analyze the past four years, I don't know if there have been any lows. In the first season we qualified for the Champions League after finishing third in the league and reached the quarterfinals of the UEFA Cup. The following season we reached the semifinals of the Champions League, came seventh in the league and played in the Inter-Toto Cup, although we did not qualify for the UEFA Cup.

Last season was difficult in some respects because we did not live up to the expectations we had created for ourselves and because of certain external factors. It was difficult, but we finished fifth. There is currently a lot of dissatisfaction, even though we've spent the whole of the season in the Champions League places. What low points? I don't think we have ever been through periods where we thought that things weren't working out. There have been no internal problems, either. It may be that externally we have fallen short of our objective, but I am very satisfied with the work we have done and with the attitude of the group.

That raises two issues. First of all, is your greatest achievement to have instilled team spirit? And secondly, do you believe that you have particularly improved the team from a psychological standpoint?

My greatest achievement has been to obtain commitment from the players. Here everyone plays the same except Barcelona; we had to ensure commitment to the system because that is always important to a coach. From a psychological standpoint, I think that the team has good moments and bad ones depending on the results. There was a crisis here last year and the squad was not happy. There are 25 different people, and they all think in different ways. The most important thing is that they are all committed to reaching a particular target.

Which target?

Those who are interested only in results say that winning is the only way to play well. I want my players to play well to win.

Do you not think that being solid in defense and quick on the counter-attack is also good football?

To play well is to win. I've always said that. But you have to consider the manner in which you won. A pragmatic coach is someone who praises the team for time-wasting and drawing fouls and is not interested in the cohesion of the team. I respect that idea. But do I want to play like that? When I am asked about that footballing philosophy, I neither understand it nor do I accept it.

My best example of playing well is against Barcelona, and I'm not just

using it because we won the last match against that great team (3-1 away). We never asked for the stretcher, we didn't waste time when taking free kicks or throw-ins. The team wanted to keep playing to the point of being irresponsible, if you want to put it like that. Logically, if you have a good defense you usually play well. I can understand why people praise that approach. Some people come and play like that at the Madrigal and they deserve some credit because winning is the only way to play well.

Which would you prefer, to win the league or to come second playing magnificent football?

Aesthetically speaking it is more important to win the league, but there is less chance of winning the league if you don't play well.

This Villarreal side, your Villarreal, stands out because of its 4-4-2 system, but you constantly adapt this formula as you go in search of victory. Do you believe in tactical systems?

They are useful, but not to win. They can be used to bring a certain mechanical quality to the play, but to win you clearly need the individual skills of the players you have inserted into the system. I personally think that tactics are intelligence applied to the game. We have played against Barcelona several times using a second striker like Robert Pires and we have won, but then that same system and team that beat Barcelona were thrashed by Zaragoza.

Effectiveness and performance also are decisive. My idea is that you can put defenders, midfielders or even a forward on the wings; the important thing is to occupy the space. You have to sacrifice a striker, but it is better with two attacking midfielders because they create more fluidity in attack.

But it all varies; the name may vary, but not the system. You make tactical changes at particular moments in a match in an attempt to change the game. There's a cliché in journalism that says that the ball suffers a lot. I don't understand that. The ball can't play; if Barcelona has the ball, you have to find another way of beating them. The best way to do damage to an opponent is to get in behind them through runs from deep from Eguren or Pires with Guille Franco playing with his back to goal. But it is the team performance that wins matches, never the system.

When you arrived here, you made one remark that has been repeated ad nauseam: "I don't believe in projects of more than three years." You have now been here for four years and have extended your contract for another two.

That comment comes from a statistic that says that 98 percent of coaches do not last more than two years at a club. You have to develop more short-term projects, although there are exceptions, such as Sir Alex Ferguson, Arsene Wenger... But in this project I have targets, maybe not specific ones, because we are trying to close the gap on the big clubs in La Liga. There was no reason not to carry on. However, not all seasons are identical. You have to live for the day. I can't predict the future, which is defined by the present.

You have suffered a lot of adversity in one season, as happened last year with the crisis with Riquelme, the cruciate ligament injuries suffered by Gonzalo, Pires and Nihat, and your poor position in the table. But despite everything, you decided to carry on because the board continued to believe in you.

Without the board's support, it would have been difficult to carry on. Furthermore, the president was of the same view and gave me a new contract last season. We shook hands and continue to move forward. I wouldn't like to go after a bad run; I want to leave the club in a healthy state after everything we have achieved in this time. People have got into the bad habit of seeing the team high up the table fighting it out with the big clubs.

From what you say, I gather that you never considered leaving the club.

The possibility of leaving is always there. There always are offers, but I am happy at this club, and I still have things to offer it.

Imagine that the same thing happens to you as to Juande Ramos. You receive a dizzying offer from another club halfway through the season and have to decide whether to take it.

I was in that very situation this season and decided to say no. That's not a criticism of Juande Ramos; it's my point of view. If I don't feel committed, I say goodbye and I go. Ramos made that decision and there's nothing else to say. I have a commitment with this club and I intend to honor it.

One of the most important features of your project over the last few seasons has been the large number of Latin American footballers who have played for you alongside the Europeans. Aside from their quality, is their ability to adapt quickly a decisive factor in their performance?

I would not make any distinction between Latin American and European footballers. We have tried to bring a good level of performance out of all the players in the squad. Then you have the youth players. Others have not performed well, but that is not so much to do with nationality as with the requirements of the technical staff and the work the player puts in.

Steffi Jones

Continued from page 37.

moment is what I'm actually going to say! Beyond that, I want to see full stadiums. We're convinced we can achieve this goal and that everyone will witness a great atmosphere. We are a country that is fascinated by sports. We're trying to tap into that potential by awakening the World Cup spirit in Germany now. Starting next year, we'll do the same thing on an international level.

As a past World Cup champion, what are your expectations of the German team (the defending champions)?

Well, we haven't been sleeping for the past four years! Our youth teams have been developing real well so that if older players can no longer play then the younger players will be prepared. We have the European Championships this year and the U-20 World Cup next year. This will provide a lot of international opportunities for our younger players to step up. There's a lot of pressure of course, especially on the coaches. But they take that on their shoulders and try to keep it away from the team. We'll have a long pre-tournament phase and will even end the Women's Bundesliga season early so we can get the national team together sooner. We know we're a good tournament team with a great amount of team spirit. The team comes first, then the individual players. The home field advantage will make it possible to repeat again if the fans get and remain behind us throughout the tournament. We also have some great veterans who will play a major role in 2011.

You were one of the marquee players in our first attempt at a women's pro league (WUSA). After folding due to financial problems, the league is back again (WPS). What's your take on U.S. professional women's soccer?

My time in the United States was the best experience I ever had. Being a pro player with so much support, such a positive environment and such good coaches, it was the first time in my life where I really thought I was good. I didn't have any real weaknesses in my game at that time. The tremendous team spirit we had is something you don't see often. We also did a lot of social work in our neighborhoods, helping out families in different ways. For the other girls, this was something normal. For me it was something special and I miss it today in Germany. I try to get the younger German players to engage in things like this. It's slow, but we're getting there. I felt bad the way the league just came out of nowhere and then just as quickly vanished. That's something that simply shouldn't happen. I like the approach better in Germany. We take a step-by-step, secure approach, which builds things to last. I hope this will be the case with the new WPS.

How would you compare your U.S. coaches with those you had in Germany?

I find the U.S. coach very motivating. We worked real hard in our training sessions when I was there. Our coaches always pushed us to the limit, but did so in a way that wasn't annoying. You wanted to work hard and give everything you had. In Germany, we're more focused on in-depth subject knowledge and competence. They don't get loud or emotional too often during practice. But as I said earlier, you need a little bit of everything.

What's next for Steffi Jones after 2011?

I want to be a coach. That's why I did my licenses. I'm open to everything, both here and abroad.

Another distinguishing feature is Villarreal's youth system. During your time at the club, players such as Cazrola, Hector Font, Arzo, Marcos and Bruno, virtually one a season, have come through.

I think it's very important to prioritize youth development. Training players is very important for the club and luckily for the coaching staff; players have emerged who strengthen the club's work and commitment.

Your compatriot Matias Fernandez is a future prospect. However, the fact is he is 21. He has a lot of quality and is a promising player, but needs to be looked after, or, to be more precise, polished. This detracts from his image quite a lot.

Yes, polish is the word. He has many qualities, but in Chile, people thought that he would be a great success despite his youth. He arrived here and encountered a different type of football and a heavy playing schedule. I knew that he would need time to get used to everything. He has realized that he needs to be calm.

Could the pressure on the player have been an obstacle?

Possibly. People criticize his performances, and he is surrounded by a great deal of expectation. It is up to the coaching staff to assess his work. He is a work in progress; he has the ability to be successful. But I don't think that the praise affects his performance; you can tell it hasn't gone to his head. He is very serious in that regard.

Speaking of Chile, do you intend to coach the Chilean National Team one day?

I would love to. If the opportunity arose, if both parties were amenable, I would like to finish my career coaching the national team, but both parties would have to be willing. Right now, my mind is on Villarreal.

There has been speculation that this may happen when your contract with Villarreal expires.

It coincides with 2010, but I live in the present, not the future. We'll see what happens.



Cogran Sports offers a fully integrated online registration and club management system.

Cogran Sports enables you to streamline your club processes with:

- Player/volunteer/tournament registration
- League management
- Team formation
- Website with team pages
- Financial control
- Integrated email system
- State reporting

This saves your volunteers and administrators time to enjoy the sport.

Cogran Sports system and support is provided by a stable organization of over 30 years.

For more information or to see a web demo please visit our website at www.cogransports.com, call toll free 800-940-6736 or email us at info@cogran.com.

PS: Also if you know somebody interested in a part-time opportunity introducing Cogran Sports to local clubs, we would like to hear from you.