

Family fortunes: Lage happy to have brother assist Wolves' rise

A strong backroom team – including the manager's younger sibling Luis Nascimento – has been crucial to a successful season, writes *Paul Doyle*

Look at Wolves go. They are this season's most unlikely contenders for a top-four finish and could boost their chances today by winning at home to Leicester. Bruno Lage deserves high praise. So does the manager's little brother.

Luis Nascimento, at 42 three years younger than his more prominent sibling, was one of the six backroom staff members brought to Molineux after Lage's appointment in June. Lage had collaborated with each of them before but had never worked directly with his brother, whose career has largely mirrored his own.

Nascimento's official title is Wolves' senior professional development coach but he is nicknamed "Il Capitano" after Capitano Nascimento, the lead character of the 2007 Brazilian movie *Tropa de Elite*, about a no-nonsense policeman tasked with cleaning Rio de Janeiro of drug gangs before a visit by the pope.

"He is different to me, he is more serious," says the jovial Lage, explaining the tag was coined by Carlos Carvalho, under whom they served as assistant manager. Lage at Swansea and Sheffield Wednesday between 2015 and 2018 and then, in 2019, Nascimento at Rio Ave in Portugal.

"He has had the same pathway as me," says Lage about his brother. "I went to Benfica in 2004, he went in 2005. We worked together but not in the same teams. When I was at the under-15s, he was working with the under-11s. But the good thing is we shared experiences between us. Then, after I went to Dubai [in 2012], and then also with Carlos, if I was doing something new – a new exercise or

why I invited them to be here with me. There are too many things to know, I need top guys with me to be a better manager."

Nascimento's role is to prepare training sessions. "This is the big responsibility he has," says Lage. "To try to look at all the information on the opponent. Like how can Leicester play against us with three or two midfielders. We try to create scenarios and prepare those things. It's teamwork. I'm just one of them. I'm the manager, I have the big salary but they are the same level as me."

Leicester beat Wolves 1-0 on the opening day of the season but the teams have gone in opposite directions since then. That is partly because of injuries – Leicester will be without their entire first-choice defence again today whereas Wolves will be at full strength for the first time this season. But it is also because Wolves have grown slicker and tighter.

They still need to improve their finishing but they could hardly defend better, since only Manchester City have conceded fewer goals in the Premier League this season. When opponents have managed to pierce Wolves' defence, they usually been thwarted by José Sá, who has the best shots-to-save ratio of any goalkeeper who has played regularly in the league this season. Again, Lage is quick to hail the people who work with him.

"In modern football the goalkeeper has a massive influence and José gives us that," he says. "When you start buildups from the back, you need to take the best decisions with where you pass the ball. Also, when you want to try to press more high it's important that the keeper comes out of the box to control the space behind the defenders. The way Tony Roberts works with him is improving those skills. I've known José since he was 16-17 and he has the same mentality. His career is about steps and he conquers with the right work. He is in a good moment and he needs to continue."

That is the message Lage keeps drumming into the whole squad with talk of a top-four challenge. "My ambition is for the team to play in the next 15 games with the character we played against Tottenham," he says of last Sunday's 2-0 win. "I want that solid personality. That's the only thing we can control. Don't relax with what we have."

'All my staff, not just Luis, have the freedom to do their work ... so I can take the best decisions'
Bruno Lage

● Bruno Lage, (right) and his brother Luis Nascimento: 'He is different to me, he's more serious'

CK THOMAS/WOLVES VIA GETTY IMAGES

ON OTHER PAGES

Leicester have plenty of reasons to stick with Rodgers
Jonathan Wilson, P20

Interview

Frenkie de Jong: 'I expected more trophies but I am very happy'

A surprise text from Busquets, life without Messi and how Xavi is helping his game: the Dutch midfielder tells *Arthur Renard* how he is making strides at Barcelona

Shortly after Frenkie de Jong signed for Barcelona, he received a text message. It was Sergio Busquets welcoming him to the club and inviting him to get in touch if he had any questions or wanted any advice. Coming from the Spanish midfielder, it was not only a thoughtful gesture but, for two reasons, a remarkable one.

First, although De Jong's transfer was announced in January 2019 he was not leaving Ajax until the summer. Also, he was reported to have been bought to replace Busquets in the team – maybe not immediately but certainly at some point. The club legend could have been forgiven for feeling uncomfortable about the £65m deal. That point was underlined by a Marca headline after De Jong's debut in a friendly against Chelsea: "Busquets has a problem called De Jong".

Busquets clearly did not see it

that way. "He was like: 'Great you're coming and if you need something I'm always there to help,'" De Jong says. "And when I arrived in Barcelona, he recommended a restaurant and made a reservation for me and my girlfriend, Milky. He had also informed the owner that we were coming so that everything was well arranged for us."

The anecdote symbolises the atmosphere at Barcelona, according to De Jong, where rivalry is not an issue despite the high stakes for every player. Three years later, Busquets and De Jong are regular midfielder partners in a team whose fortunes have improved under Xavi Hernández and who hope to retain their grip on fourth place before the weekend's fixtures when they visit Valencia today.

"I never got that feeling 'a new midfielder is coming which might mean I won't play,'" says a cheerful De Jong before training. "Everyone really wants to help you. It's like the best are playing and you can only influence that yourself. It's not like someone else is to blame if you're not playing. And I get the sense everyone feels that way."

'I don't have one position where I want to play, but I think I'm at my best where I often touch the ball'
Frenkie de Jong

De Jong made things easier for himself by starting Spanish lessons at Ajax, allowing him to interact more easily with his new teammates on arrival. "My Spanish was not fluent, but I could make myself clear and understand the other guys," he says. "So despite the fact I was living abroad for the first time in my life, the transition was not so big."

What may have helped, too, was that he knew his surroundings a bit. As a young boy, he spent several summer holidays with his family on a campsite near L'Escala, in Catalonia, where other guests got a first glimpse of De Jong playing football on Spanish soil. Occasional visits to the Camp Nou meant his dream destination was set.

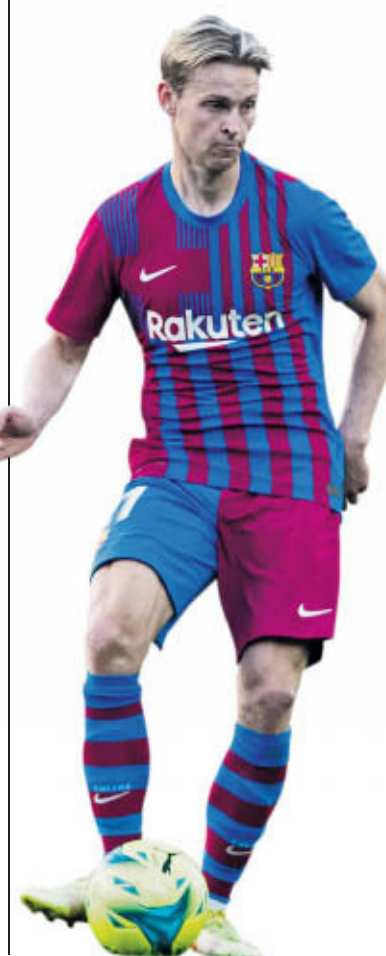
When he got the chance to join the club at the age of 21, he seized it, even though Pep Guardiola and Thomas Tuchel were keen to bring him to Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain, respectively.

After two and a half years as a regular at the Camp Nou, De Jong has a feeling of satisfaction but also of unfulfilment. "I'm very happy I'm at Barcelona: from a young age I've wanted to be here, so in that way it has been a dream come true. But I would have liked to win more trophies than we did in my first two years. I expected more in that sense, let's put it that way. But other than that, I'm very happy here and hopefully for many more years."

De Jong explains that training under Xavi differs in certain elements from that under Ronald Koeman, who was sacked in late October with the team ninth,

● Frenkie de Jong has spent two years at the Camp Nou after signing from Ajax for £65m

SARA GORDON/
THE OBSERVER



● De Jong receives instruction from Xavi: 'Every coach has his own details'

ERIC ALONSO/
GETTY IMAGES

but he can see a blueprint of attacking football that is constant. "Quite a few things are the same, because at Barcelona you always play in a certain style which doesn't depend on the manager," he says. "But every coach has his own details."

Xavi is adding dimensions to De Jong's game. The Netherlands international is happy to call on the advice of one of Barcelona's greatest players. "We're both midfielders, roughly in the same position, so in that regard he can teach me a lot. Sometimes we meet in his office and he shows me video clips of my games, where he explains how he sees it and what I can do to improve. We watch clips of how you position yourself and what you can do best in certain situations."

De Jong has played in a variety of positions for Barcelona and was even deployed by Koeman for some time as a centre-half – where he did well. But his best role is in midfield with licence to drop deep and build up the play, overcoming the first line of press and unbalancing the opponent's formation, while connecting his team's defence and midfield. De Jong says he enjoys any setting in which he can fully express himself.

"I don't necessarily have one position where I really want to play, but I think I'm at my best if I'm in a role where I can often touch the ball," he says. That was exemplified in the 4-2 win over Atlético Madrid two Sundays ago that was arguably Barça's best performance of the season. De Jong started in midfield but dropped deep to help in the buildup and to cover for the

Why De Jong likes to wear No 21

Since breaking through at Ajax, Frenkie de Jong has always played with the 21 on his shirt. It is a homage to his late grandfather. "When I became part of the Ajax squad I had to choose a number," he says. "I opted for 21, as my grandfather was born on the 21st of April. When you are new you can usually choose between some high numbers and 21 was one of them. Playing with that number feels good and I've done so ever since."

wing-back Jordi Alba while also being involved in attacking areas. That was illustrated by his one-two with Gavi for the teenager to set up Dani Alves for the team's fourth goal.

The match against Atlético was memorable for many reasons, including the Camp Nou attendance topping 70,000 for only the third time since early March 2020. "We played for such a long time in empty stadiums that it became kind of normal," De Jong says. "When there is less atmosphere you notice it, with the adrenaline not being at the same level."

Although the fans are back after a season without them, Barcelona are having to adjust to an altogether different absence: that of Lionel Messi. "First of all I thought it wasn't true," De Jong says of the moment last August when he heard the Argentinian was on his way out. "I was collecting my dad and brother from the airport. Then I got a message: 'Messi is leaving Barcelona.' A bit later we got indications it was really happening. At first, you just can't believe it, even though there were rumours throughout the summer. But I never took it into serious consideration so when it happened it was a shock."

Not only was the team's best player departing, it also exposed Barcelona's difficult financial state. "He was the face of the club, so when he left – after everything he has done for the club – it was a heavy blow for everyone," De Jong says. "We still miss him. If someone like him is not at the club any more, then things are suddenly very different."

Koeman has explained how Messi had made everything look glossier with his extraordinary qualities. De Jong has had to get used to Messi not being next to him on the pitch. "If you have such a player in your team, you just try to find him as much as possible – so the game is adjusted to him, which is logical," he says. "When he leaves you have to adjust to it as a player and team."

Messi had been a key component of the group that made De Jong feel welcome from the word go. The 24-year-old explains what made Messi so special. "He is the best in pretty much all aspects of football. Whether we did finishing drills, positioning plays or other training games: he was the best. No praise about him is exaggerated. For me, he is the best ever."