



Exclusive interview: The football first growth vision of Marseille's residential prodigy

- Marseille's 36-year-old president Pablo Longoria has enjoyed a meteoric rise through some of Europe's leading clubs. Now he has the task of restoring OM to Europe's elite.
- Longoria presents a refreshing take on running a football club, talking about harnessing passion as the key to success on and off the pitch.
- **Why it matters:** Marseille are traditionally France's biggest club in terms of fanbase and success, but in the past decade have slipped behind rich PSG and fallen victim to French domestic football's economic malaise.
- **The perspective:** Longoria says that building a successful team and leveraging its passionate local fanbase are the most important steps in building a global fanbase.

By James Corbett, Senior Correspondent, corbett@offthepitch.com

In the beginning was the boy, a ball and a dream.

But if the story of the late-1990s adolescence of Olympique Marseille president Pablo Longoria in Asturias – the rugged and mountainous region in the north west of Spain – sounds like thousands of others working in football, there is a significance difference.

For as well as the boy and the ball, there were also box after box of blank VHS tapes: 20 of them bought each week by his dutiful mother, on which the teenage Pablo would record football games from all over Europe, and spend all his waking hours analysing.

"In Spain, we were lucky to have a TV broadcaster showing all the matches from all the countries," he says. "I spent all my afternoons and even nights watching football. I started to watch every game to know all the players and analyse all the leagues. As a child and then as a teenager, I had notebooks and binders: I used to write down the formations of all the teams in Europe."

Longoria knew, inherently, what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

To work in the industry he lived and breathed.

Stunning rise

His ascent has been dramatic. From a scout at Newcastle whilst still in his early twenties, he took on increasingly more important roles: Director of Recruitment at Huelva at the age of 22; Recruiter at Atlanta, where he taught himself Italian; Director of Recruitment at Sassuolo when they entered Serie A for the first time. Then came the big jobs: Director of Recruitment at Juventus, Sporting Director at Valencia, then Marseille.

In February 2021, aged 34, he became president of Marseille. For someone to rise so high, so young is almost unprecedented anyway. But when they don't have a playing record or blood relationship with the club owner or silver spoon in their mouth, it seems impossible.

So what was behind the rise and rise of Pablo Longoria?

Two things: "Dedication and loving this sport," he says. "It's about loving this game and having the dream of working in the industry and doing everything that was necessary to arrive, trying to challenge myself all the time."

If he sounds like an athlete in terms of his unrelenting focus, face to face he wears it lightly. He seems unassuming, lacking ego, more like a geeky student with an obsession with self-improvement and being top of the class, than a leader in European football.

He always wanted to be the best scout, the best chief scout, the best sporting director, and now the best president.

"Day by day this continues: knowledge processing, formation and trying to beat all my goals, all my expectations. Trying to be day by day a little bit better."

Learning journey

Which of the clubs did he learn most from?

Juventus, he says, was "like a university."

He adds: "I learned how a football club must work: with values, with morality, rules, structure, mentality – because Juventus is about mentality and values as an organisation."

Valencia, he says, was where all these principles were implemented. "I needed to put something concrete in place," he says. Here he came under the mentorship of the General Manager, Mateu Alemany – since 2021 Barcelona's sporting director – whom he describes as "the greatest football manager in Europe."

"Right now in my position, I'm trying to take all the different experiences I have and in a continuous way to try to reinvent myself and develop the transformational process of this club."

Local welcome

Even still, making the transition from identifying and signing players, to running the entire apparatus of a football club is quite a leap – never mind one so multifaceted and deeply steeped in regional identity as Marseille. The club are a symbol of a complex city, and he is now a symbol of the club. How do the responsibilities sit with him? How did locals take to a young outsider?

"For me, we need to analyse our context," he says. "We are a very particular brand that maybe out of the club is difficult to understand. [We have] a very passionate fan base and very popular fan base in a city that is made by immigrants. So, as a foreigner, I was adopted since the first day that I arrived here in Marseille. It was easy because you need to kneel with the local community."

Identity-led growth

The club is owned by the US businessman, Frank McCourt, who has previously owned a string of US sport franchises, including the LA Dodgers. McCourt has been at Marseille since 2016, so precedes the recent influx of US owners in European football. What does McCourt want from the club? What mandate has he given the Spaniard?

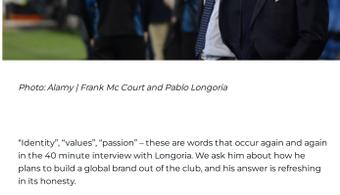


Photo: Alamy | Frank McCourt and Pablo Longoria

"Identity", "values", "passion" – these are words that occur again and again in the 40 minute interview with Longoria. We ask him about how he plans to build a global brand out of the club, and his answer is refreshing in its honesty.

There are no publicly stated ambitions to have millions of Asian or American fans by next year, no monologue on why the future is with crypto or NFTs.

Instead, Longoria says that he and McCourt share a "concrete vision" of building on "football principles". Without results and a long-term identity built locally and nationally they can't look in a serious way beyond France.

"Local community, regular community partners, national community," he says, counting the priorities off on his hand as he speaks. "It's about having that vision of developing an international club with big goals through the sporting results. That is the base of our project."

It goes far beyond "good short-term results", he says. "To build a long-term project, especially in a club with passionate fans, you must adopt the values that have defined it," he says. "I think it is important to strengthen the identity to the club and to make the supporters feel that they are part of this project."

In parallel, he adds, he is keen to tie up a strong OM brand to key strategic partners, who can benefit from their association with the club and can also help Marseille grow beyond its traditional hinterland.

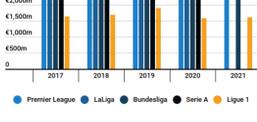
Growth challenges

Selling those values beyond France is nevertheless strewn with challenges. How do you make OM stick out from the rest? If, for example, a kid in India or a casual fan in the US happens to tune into a Ligue 1 match between PSG and OM (and it's a big if in the first instance, because the other big five leagues are more widely watched overseas), they're going to naturally gravitate towards the Parisian team, with its megastar frontlines.

Longoria says there is power in being an underdog, in "fighting for your badge", through having a defined way of playing.

"This is our power. This is the idea we believe, because it's a global objective for this club to create value through this football style being sustainable."

Ligue 1 has the lowest broadcast income of big five leagues



Source: Off The Pitch Football Finance Tool

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Sustainable football

Sustainability is a big challenge for French football. Swollen by Gulf oil money and vast sponsorship deals, PSG have a massive financial advantage over the rest of the competition – its revenues are around four times that of OM, and sometimes vastly more than that of its rivals. Trying to be the best of the rest and with wages inflated due to the PSG effect, wages-to-turnover ratios are huge at Marseille and across Ligue 1.

Longoria says he believes in "sustainable football", a football made with the rules of economic control" and that the loss-making needs to be addressed. It is something he is hopeful for as a period of calm descends on the French game after the disasters of Covid, an abandoned season and the collapse of pay-TV broadcaster MediaPro.

As for the gaping financial disparities? "For us, it's a challenge," he says. "I think we need to understand the context is not only PSG, we need to analyse all the context of the French league in my opinion. We are facing a lot of disadvantage against the other Big Five leagues in Europe. And this is our real challenge on how to reduce this gap from French football to the other leagues."

Olympique Marseille have the second-largest turnover in France



Source: Off The Pitch Football Finance Tool

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- Tonight, they travel north for 'O Clássico' where FC Porto will attempt to snatch pole position in Liga Portugal from Benfica with a win.
- Ahead of the clash, both clubs have released their financial report for 2021/22. Strikingly, FC Porto is surpassed by Benfica in terms of both transfer and wage spendings.
- Benfica shows a loss on the bottom line whereas FC Porto turns a profit for the second consecutive year. Still, FC Porto still struggles with a massive net debt from previous years.

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