

# ROBERTO MARTINEZ

*Currently the manager of the FIFA ranked number one Belgium team, Roberto Martinez is a coach that by reputation thinks outside of the box. Over his career he has offered unrivalled insight on the issues and trends in sport science and nutrition required to manage first-class football team.*

*Prior to his high-profile coaching career, Roberto was a professional football player in Spain and England. He was a leader in the application of sport science to his own physical preparation and recovery, an approach which helped changed the behaviour and attitudes of fellow team mates. Here, the manager of the Belgium National Football Team tells Daniel Kings about his extensive experience in sport science and nutrition in football.*



*At the beginning of your sports career, you were a professional football player. How did the sport science help your performance?* Having completed a physiotherapy degree, I had an understanding on the importance of following my heart rate and my workload in training, so I was always keen to find information about those two aspects. While I could not speak for all my team mates, for me personally, sports science gave me psychological confidence going into the game that I had done everything I could do. This included nutrition. I would say it affected the psychological approach to my performances more than knowing the specific impact of the science data itself.

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2020** Belgium National Team ranked FIFA number 1 team
- 2018** Belgium National Team took 3rd place at Russia World Cup 2018
- 2013** Wigan Athletic won FA Cup for the first time in the club's history
- 2012** Awarded his first Premier League Manager of the Month Award for April
- 2008** Awarded the League One Manager of the Year Award for leading Swansea to the title of League One Champion
- 2007** League One Manager of the Month Award for October

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### *How has your previous knowledge in sports science shaped your coach philosophy?*

It's been an evolution over 15 years. In the early years I was trying to affect the fitness levels of a group. Since 2012 we have moved away from just team fitness to focus more on individual fitness, and more recently recovery and injury prevention. This shift reflects the fact that the fitness of players now is so high, that they are athletes playing football rather than football players. Those athletes need more focus on nutrition, recovery and injury prevention. Sports science allows us to measure our method of "global training" – that is everything involving a ball or match related situations, to make

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sure it is hitting the parameters we need that allow us to maintain and/or improve individual players fitness. It has also allowed us to individualise our approaches week by week from understanding more about our players. For example, we know that some players recover in 24 hours, others take longer, and some cannot play 3 games per week. Sports Science helps us in that understanding for the benefit of the team and individual player well-being.

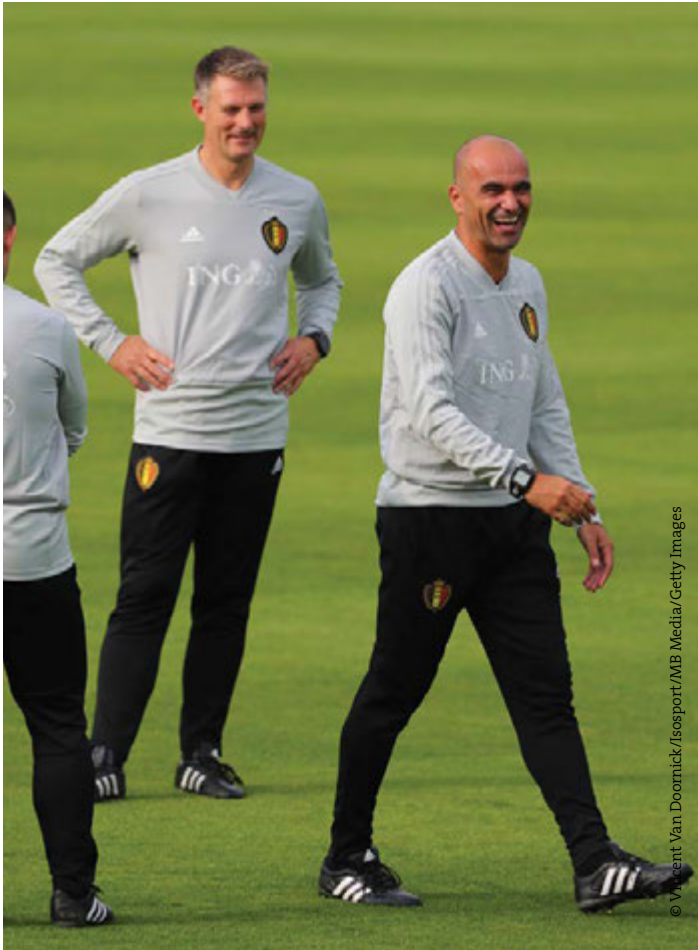
### *Have you seen attitudes to sport science and nutrition change over your coaching career?*

For sure. When I was playing, it was hard for staff just to get players to wear heart rate belts. Today, they are very familiar with science from the culture built in youth academies. Habits are being formed from a young age. The culture is now the players want that information to ensure they have fulfilled what is required in training. Sometimes this attitude is directly or indirectly from being around other players who are doing it. The physicality of the game now means that football is bigger than just talent. Talent will get you so far but unlike 20 years ago, it will not guarantee you a place on the team anymore. There is such a physicality in the leagues today, players have to have specific physical parameters to be part of the team which now requires a conscious effort for the player.

### *What are the biggest impacting changes you have seen in sports science that have benefited your players in recent years?*

Technology has been the real game changer. In the earlier years the amount of data capture was incredible. Perhaps the biggest impact for me over the last five years is the interpretation of that data. Specifically, individualization through data analytics that combine physical metrics and technical parameters for the different playing field positions to create performance related targets. The definition of physical and technical parameters are specifically important for how we need to work in the week ahead. Of equal importance, what





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parameters need to be hit during a game so that win lose or draw. Emotion is taken out of our review on that performance and we can focus on objective data. We can say that we have moved from a position of using training and game data to describe performance, to now being so in tune with the data we use it to prescribe training activities. This is now very far removed from the time when data was used to help players to just get through a training session.

***Having worked with many top clubs in English Premier League, as well as with Belgium National Team, how much of an important part is nutrition for you?***

Nutrition is a very interesting one. I realized that if you tell a player to try and eat the right thing, if they don't believe it or try to force it, it doesn't give them any benefit. Over the years, interest has changed to the current scenarios of players asking for better education and opportunities to eat better. Ultimately, talent is what brings the player to that level and what you have by the age of 24 or 25. Physically, it is fascinating for me to see what a difference good nutrition can make in a player to help them improve and meet the physical demands of the game. This ranges from positive changes in stamina, body shape, alertness, and less soft tissue injuries. As a coach, your primary goal and that of many clubs years ago, was to try to get the right thing for the team at the training ground. However, that only equated to 25% of what they ate across the day. Now, almost all players have a specific routine and plan to support an aspect of performance which they want to work on during the week. Changes in daily nutrition to reflect physically more demanding days, or nutritional intake 1 day before a game for increased recovery/preparation focus are now well-established

**Image above:** Roberto Martinez, and Richard Evans during a Belgium training session at the Belgian National Football Center, 2018.

**Image right:** Martinez celebrates with Everton players during the Barclays Premier League match between Newcastle United and Everton, 2015.



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**Image:** Training session of the Belgian National Football team prior to the Euro 2020 qualification games against Kazakhstan and Scotland, June 2019.

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routines in high performing players. We also see clubs investing in high levels of nutrition at training grounds with their own vegetable patches and using fresh local produce which is excellent. Years ago this was not happening.

***Getting player “buy-in” to change/improve nutritional habits has always been a challenge. How have you overcome this?***

For me, getting buy-in is really about understanding if players come from a culture of eating and enjoying food, or from one which focuses on “just getting fed”. For example, in some nations like here in Belgium or Spain, players are passionate about food. They read about it, they search for different ingredients or ideas, and it’s a part of their everyday chat. With these players, you have to sit down and explain the benefits of food and their performance to achieve effective and detailed nutritional interventions. Other nationalities where food is not so important, requires in many cases not so much detail but just an understanding that what they eat will affect their performance. To help players embrace better nutrition you also have to be aware of some opportunities when they occur. When players need help it can be the ideal chance to get greater buy-in. For example, when players experience repeated soft tissue injuries, or are struggling to recover well enough they may be more open to advice on how to use nutrition to improve their situation. Usually this is the time when they can they see real results from changing and embracing appropriate nutritional habits.

***In your opinion, what is the difference now compared years ago on attitudes and behaviors towards nutrition in football?***

Twenty years ago, surviving on your talent alone was seen as the cool thing. If you were tired, you were told you were doing



**Image:** Roberto Martinez and Kevin De Bruyne pictured during a trainings session of the Belgian National Football team, June 2019.

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too much gym work or training too much. Before using anything else than talent was seen as a sign of weakness. Today, we have moved on from turning up, getting the boots on and just showing you are the best player. We are in a culture where you would be stupid not make use of nutrition and science to get more from your performance and prolong your career.

Social media means that modern day players at the highest level are a brand not just footballers. Looking good is a big part of that. As a player, looking good makes you feel good, and gives you confidence. Eating consistently well and paying attention to nutrition across the season, not just in preseason is an important part of that. Players are now investing in themselves heavily off the field to support their performance, prolong their careers and enhance their 'brand'. It's not unusual for us to see players with their own sports chefs and in many cases, nutrition plans worked on by nutrition and science teams around match day minus one, two three, individualized to their needs to support performance for a match and/or recovery in between matches. You only have to see real life examples for this. In our sport these include Serge Ramos, Ronaldo and Ibrahimovic and in other sports, like American Football, Tom Brady. These players are contagious to the younger

player generation and have really helped change the mentality and attitudes towards nutrition.

***For the next generation coaches, what simple advice would you give to help get the most out of sports science and also nutrition?***

There are many aspects in football you cannot control, but science gives you more information about the things you can control e.g. analysis of the opposition, how they play, the referees etc. My advice is to use science to give players the opportunity to reach their full potential. From a coaching perspective, science also allows you to back up your football instinct or something you have seen and then provide the right answer/solution. It should not be the other way around, as sometimes having too much data can get in the way of making a good decision or assessing the real issue. Improvements in nutrition, sleep, recovery can not only offer marginal gains but perhaps more importantly can minimize losses.

When it comes to nutrition, helping players to develop a passion and interest about food can be a great start.

*Daniel Kings*



**Image:** Roberto Martinez, celebrates with Belgium assistant coach, Thierry Henry after their sides first goal during the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia Quarter Final match between Brazil and Belgium at Kazan Arena on July 6, 2018 in Kazan, Russia.

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