

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Inverting the Pyramid

A History of Football Tactics

Written by Jonathan Wilson

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Inverting the Pyramid

A HISTORY OF FOOTBALL TACTICS

Jonathan Wilson



Copyright © Jonathan Wilson 2008

The right of Jonathan Wilson to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2008 by
Orion Books
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette Livre UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this
publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form, or by
any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of
reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the
Copyright Licensing Agency.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 0 7528 8995 5

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

Every effort has been made to fulfil requirements with regard to reproducing
copyright material. The author and publisher will be glad to rectify any omissions
at the earliest opportunity.

www.orionbooks.co.uk



Prologue

△▽ A tapas bar in the Bairro Alto in Lisbon, the evening after England beat Switzerland 3-0 in Euro 2004. The rioja had been flowing, and a multi-national group of journalists was discussing whether Sven-Göran Eriksson had been right to stick with an orthodox 4-4-2, or if, as it had been suggested he would, he should have switched to a midfield diamond. Had player-power, a late-night delegation of midfielders, forced the unexpected reversion to the flat four in midfield?

‘Oh, what’s the difference?’ an English colleague protested. ‘They’re the same players. The formation isn’t important. It’s not worth writing about.’

There was a splutter of indignation. As I raised a drunken finger to jab home my belief that people like him shouldn’t be allowed to watch football, let alone talk about it, an Argentinian, probably wisely, pulled my arm down. ‘The formation is the only thing that’s important,’ she said. ‘It’s not worth writing about anything else.’

And there, in a moment, was laid bare the prime deficiency of the English game. Football is not about players, or at least not just about players; it is about shape and about space, about the intelligent deployment of players, and their movement within that deployment. (I should, perhaps, make clear that by ‘tactics’ I mean a combination of formation and style: one 4-4-2 can be as different from another as Steve Stone from Ronaldinho). The Argentinian was, I hope, exaggerating for effect, for heart, soul, effort, desire, strength, power, speed, passion and skill all play their parts, but, for all that, there is also a theoretical dimension, and, as in other disciplines, the English have, on the whole, proved themselves

unwilling to grapple with the abstract.

That is a failing, and it is something that frustrates me, but this is not a polemic about the failure of English football. Apart from anything else, unless we are making comparisons with the inter-war era, I'm not convinced that English football *is* failing. Sven-Göran Eriksson was derided by the end, but only Alf Ramsey had previously guided England to the quarter-finals of three successive international tournaments. Whether Steve McClaren's failure to get England through a Euro 2008 qualifying group that was far tougher than the xenophobes imagined represents a blip or the beginning of a prolonged slide only history will tell, but it seems perverse to start arranging the wake when England would have qualified had Steven Gerrard converted a simple chance four minutes after half-time in Moscow.

Look at Uruguay, look at Austria: that is decline. Look at Scotland, still punching heroically above their weight despite the restrictions imposed by a population of only five million. Look, most of all, at Hungary, the team who, in November 1953, rang the death knell for English dreams of superiority. By the time Ferenc Puskás, the greatest player of that most glorious of teams, died in November 2006, Hungary had slumped so far that they were struggling to remain in the top 100 of the Fifa world rankings. *That* is decline.

Nonetheless, for English football, the 6-3 defeat to Hungary at Wembley stands as the watershed. It was England's first defeat at home to continental opposition, and, more than that, the manner in which they were outplayed annihilated the idea that England still ruled the world. 'The story of British football and the foreign challenge,' wrote Brian Glanville in *Soccer Nemesis*, his reaction to that defeat, 'is the story of a vast superiority, sacrificed through stupidity, short-sightedness, and wanton insularity. It is a story of shamefully wasted talent, extraordinary complacency and infinite self-deception.' And so it was.

And yet, thirteen years later, England became world champions. The vast superiority may have been squandered, but England were evidently still among the elite. In the past half century, I'm not sure that much has changed. Yes, perhaps we do have a tendency to get carried away before major tournaments, which makes a quarter-final exit sting rather more than it probably ought, but England remain one of the eight or ten sides who have a realistic

chance of winning a World Cup or European Championship (freakish champions like Denmark or Greece notwithstanding). The question then is why that opportunity has not been taken. Perhaps a more coherent structure of youth coaching, an increased focus on technique and tactical discipline, limits on the number of foreign players in the Premiership, snapping players out of their complacent bubbles, or any of the other hundred panaceas that have been suggested, would improve England's chances, but success is a nebulous quarry. Luck retains its place in football, and success can never be guaranteed, particularly not over the six- or seven-game span of an international tournament.

A theory has grown up that winning the World Cup in 1966 was the worst thing that could have happened to English football. Rob Steen, in *The Mavericks*, and David Downing in his books on England's rivalries with Argentina and Germany have argued that that success set England back because it established deep in the English footballing consciousness the notion that the functionality of Alf Ramsey's side was the only way to achieve success. I don't fundamentally disagree with either – although the trait predates Ramsey – but it seems to me that the real problem is not so much the way Ramsey's England played as the fact that, in the minds of generations of fans and coaches in England, it laid out a 'right' way of playing. Just because something was correct in a particular circumstance, with particular players and at a particular stage of football's development, does not mean it will always be effective. If England in 1966 had tried to play like Brazilians, they would have ended up like Brazil: kicked out of the tournament in the group stage by physically more aggressive opponents – in fact they would have been worse off, for they had few, if any, players with the technical attributes of the Brazilians. If there is one thing that distinguishes the coaches who have had success over a prolonged period – Sir Alex Ferguson, Valeriy Lobanovskiy, Bill Shankly, Boris Arkadiev – it is that they have always been able to evolve. Their teams played the game in very different ways, but what they all shared was the clarity of vision to successfully recognise when the time was right to abandon a winning formula and the courage to implement a new one.

What I want to make clear is that I don't believe there is a 'correct' way to play. Yes, from an emotional and aesthetic point of view, I warm more to the passing of Arsène Wenger's Arsenal than

to the pragmatism of José Mourinho's Chelsea, but that is a personal preference; it is not to say one is right and one is wrong. I am well aware, equally, that compromises have to be made between theory and practice. On a theoretical level, I respond to Lobanovskyi's Dynamo Kyiv or the AC Milan of Fabio Capello. Yet on the pitch, when at university I had for two years the chance to influence the style of my college side (well, the seconds and thirds at least), we played highly functional football. Admittedly, we weren't very good and we probably got the best out of the players available, but I suspect we could have played more aesthetically pleasing football than we did. Amid the beer-soaked celebrations that followed a title each year, I'm not sure anybody was too bothered.

It is not even so simple, though, as to say that the 'correct' way of playing is the one that wins most often, for only the dourest of Gradgrinds would claim that success is measured merely in points and trophies; there must also be room for romance. That tension – between beauty and cynicism, between what Brazilians call *futebol d'arte* and *futebol de resultados* – is a constant, perhaps because it is so fundamental, not merely to sport, but also to life: to win, or to play the game well? It is hard to think of any significant actions that are not in some way a negotiation between the two extremes of pragmatism and idealism.

The difficulty, then, is in isolating of what that extra quality comprises. Glory is not measured in absolutes, and what constitutes it changes with circumstance and time. British crowds soon grow tired of patient build-up, but in, for instance, Capello's first spell at Real Madrid, crowds booed when Fernando Hierro hit long accurate passes for Roberto Carlos to run onto. To the modern sensibility, it is baffling that the early amateur footballers thought passing unmanly, and yet it may be in time to come – as indeed it already is in certain cultures – that the present-day British distaste for diving seems just as naively irrelevant.

Even acknowledging that football is about more than simply winning, though, it would be ludicrous to deny the importance of victory. Wenger can be frustratingly quixotic at times but, as his negative tactics in the 2005 FA Cup final showed, even he at times acknowledges the need to win. To condemn Ramsey, when he brought the only international success England has known is a luxury English fans cannot afford; to accuse him of ruining

English football rather than saluting his tactical acuity seems wilfully perverse.

I'm not saying we should discount them entirely, but it is dangerous, anyway, to read too much into performances at the major international tournaments. It is rare that there is one outstanding side in the world, rarer still that they actually win the World Cup. The example of Brazil in 2002, casually brushing aside the opposition, is almost unique, and even then, particularly given their lethargic qualifying campaign, it seemed almost supremacy by default as the other contenders, weakened by various combinations of injury, fatigue and ill-discipline, capitulated in the heat. France probably were the best side in the 1998 tournament, but they only really showed that in the final. Two years later, they were significantly the best side at Euro 2000, and yet were within a minute of losing the final to Italy.

In fact, two of the greatest sides of all time, the Hungarians of 1954 and the Dutch of 1974, lost in the final – both to West Germany, which may or may not be coincidence. A third, the Brazil of 1982, didn't even get that far. 1966 aside, England's best performance in a World Cup came in 1990, a tournament so beloved for Gazza's tears and an England penalty shoot-out defeat – a trope that would become tediously familiar, but which, back then, carried the resonance of tragic failure – that it helped kickstart the 1990s boom. Yet England's preparation for that tournament was awful: they scraped through qualifying; their manager Bobby Robson was pilloried in the press on an almost daily basis, the media was expelled from the training camp after revelations about the relationship between various players and a local PR rep, and the whole thing was played out in the shadow of hooliganism. Against the Republic of Ireland and Egypt, England were dire, and against Belgium and Cameroon they were lucky; only against Holland and West Germany, neither of which games they won, did they play well. In fact, the only team England beat in ninety minutes was Egypt. And this, somehow, led to football's middle-class revolution.

Over the course of a league season, luck, momentum, injuries, errors by players and errors by referees even themselves out – if not absolutely, then certainly far, far more than they do over seven games in a summer. That England have gone over forty years without winning a trophy is annoying, and for that various

managers, players, officials and opponents bear a degree of responsibility, but it does not equate to a fundamental decline. It is possible that there is a fundamental flaw in the way England play the game, and an almost self-conscious Luddism hasn't helped, but it would be hard to make a serious case for a root-and-branch overhaul of the English game on the basis of results in major tournaments alone.

Globalisation is blurring national styles, but tradition, perpetuated by coaches, players, pundits and fans, is strong enough that they remain distinguishable. What became apparent in the writing of this book is that every nation came fairly quickly to recognise its strengths, and that no nation seems quite to trust them. Brazilian football is all about flair and improvisation, but it looks yearningly at the defensive organisation of the Italians. Italian football is about cynicism and tactical intelligence, but it admires and fears the physical courage of the English. English football is about tenacity and energy, but it feels it ought to ape the technique of the Brazilians.

The history of tactics, it seems, is the history of two interlinked tensions: aesthetics versus results on the one side and technique versus physique on the other. What confuses the issue is that those who grow up in a technical culture tend to see a more robust approach as a way of getting results, while those from a physical culture see pragmatism in technique; and beauty – or at least what fans prefer to watch – remains very much in the eye of the beholder. British fans may admire (although most seemed not to) the cerebral jousting of, say, the 2003 Champions League final between AC Milan and Juventus, but what they actually want to see is the crash-bang-wallop of the Premiership. That is not entirely fair, for Premiership football is far more skilful now than it was even ten years ago, but it remains quicker and less possession-driven than any other major league. Judging by the figure paid for overseas television rights – a three-year deal worth £650million was agreed in 2007 – the rest of the world thinks it has found a happy balance.

The mid-fifties saw the publication of a rash of books that tried to come to terms with England's declining status. Glanville's was probably the angriest, but just as revealing is *Soccer Revolution* by Willy Meisl, the younger brother of the great Austrian coach Hugo Meisl. As staunchly Anglophile as only an immigrant can be, his

work is more of a lament. For them, blaming the unapologetic conservatism of the English game made sense and, with the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen as part of a more general cultural attack on an establishment that had overseen the end of Empire but was yet to find an appropriate role. England's blinkeredness was at fault for the loss of footballing superiority. Yes, the rest of the world would have caught up at some stage, for, as Glanville wearily notes, pupils have a habit of overcoming their masters, but these masters, through their arrogance and insularity, were complicit in their own downfall.

That, though, was then. England's fall from her pedestal is no longer news. In that, by tracing the tactical evolution of the game, it attempts to explain how we got to where we are now, this book belongs to the same family as *Soccer Nemesis* and *Soccer Revolution*, but it sets out from a very different present, with England failing to rise rather than falling. It is, anyway, a history, not a polemic.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In Britain, the term 'centre-half' is regularly used to describe a central defender. There are historical reasons for this, which are explained at the beginning of Chapter Four, but, for the sake of clarity, I have used 'centre-half' specifically to describe the central midfielder in the 2-3-5 formation. Hopefully all other terms to designate positions are self-explanatory.

Chapter One



From Genesis to the Pyramid

Δ▽ In the beginning there was chaos, and football was without form. Then came the Victorians, who codified it, and after them the theorists, who analysed it. It wasn't until the late 1920s that tactics in anything resembling a modern sense came to be recognised or discussed, but as early as the 1870s there was an acknowledgement that the arrangement of players on the pitch made a significant difference to the way the game was played. In its earliest form, though, football knew nothing of such sophistication.

Various cultures can point to games that involved kicking a ball, but, for all the claims of Rome, Greece, Egypt, the Caribbean, Mexico, China or Japan to be the home of football, the modern sport has its roots in the mob game of medieval Britain. Rules – in as much as they existed at all – varied from place to place, but the game essentially involved two teams each trying to force a roughly spherical object to a target at opposite ends of a notional pitch. It was violent, unruly and anarchic, and it was repeatedly outlawed. Only in the early nineteenth century, when the public schools, their thinking shaped by advocates of muscular Christianity, decided that sport could be harnessed for the moral edification of their pupils, did anything approaching what we would today recognise as football emerge. Before there could be tactics, though, there had, first of all, to be a coherent set of rules.

Even by the end of the nineteenth century, when the earliest formations began to emerge, it was rare to subject them to too much thought. In football's earliest days, the notion of abstract consideration of tactics, of charts with crosses and arrows, would have been all but inconceivable, and yet the development of the

game is instructive in what it reveals of the mindset of football, the unseen, often unacknowledged hard-wiring from which stemmed British conceptions of how it should be played (and, for forty years after the rules were first drawn up, there was nothing but a British conception).

The boom came in the early Victorian era and, as David Winner demonstrates in *Those Feet*, was rooted in the idea – bizarre as it may seem in hindsight – that the Empire was in decline and that moral turpitude was somehow to blame. Team sports, it was thought, were to be promoted, because they discouraged solipsism, and solipsism allowed masturbation to flourish, and there could be nothing more debilitating than that. The Reverend Edward Thring, headmaster of Uppingham School, for instance, insisted in a sermon that it would lead to ‘early and dishonoured graves’. Football was seen as the perfect antidote, because, as E.A.C. Thompson would write in *The Boys’ Champion Story Paper* in 1901, ‘There is no more manly sport than football. It is so peculiarly and typically British, demanding pluck, coolness and endurance.’ There are very good politico-economic reasons for the coincidence, but there is also a neat symbolism in the fact that, after football had been used to shore up the Empire, Britain’s ultimate decline as an imperial power coincided with the erosion of the footballing superiority of the home nations.

Football soared in popularity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but in those early days rules varied from school to school, largely according to conditions. At Cheltenham and Rugby, for instance, with their wide, open fields, the game differed little from the mob game. A player could fall on the ground, be fallen upon by a great many of his fellows and emerge from the mud relatively unscathed. On the cloisters of Charterhouse and Westminster, though, such rough-and-tumble would have led to broken bones, and so it was there that the dribbling game developed. That outlawed – or at least restricted – handling of the ball, but the game still differed radically from modern football. Formations were unheard of, while the length of the game and even the numbers of players on each side were still to be established. Essentially prefects or older pupils would run with the ball at their feet, their team-mates lined up behind them (‘backing up’) in case the ball bounced loose in a tackle, while the opposition players – or, at certain schools, fags (that is, younger



pupils who were effectively their servants) – would try to stop them.

Interplay among forwards, if it happened at all, was rudimentary; and from that sprouted certain fundamentals that would shape the course of early English football: the game was all about dribbling; passing, cooperation and defending were perceived as somehow inferior. Head-down charging, certainly, was to be preferred to thinking, a manifestation, some would say, of the English attitude to life in general. In the public schools, thinking tended to be frowned upon as a matter of course (as late as 1946, the Hungarian comic writer George Mikes could write of how, when he had first arrived in Britain, he had been proud when a woman called him ‘clever’, only to realise later the loadedness of the term and the connotations of untrustworthiness it carried).

The differing sets of rules frustrated efforts to establish football at universities until, in 1848, H.C. Malden of Godalming, Surrey, convened a meeting in his rooms at Cambridge with representatives of Harrow, Eton, Rugby, Winchester and Shrewsbury – and, remarkably, two non-public schoolboys – at which were collated what might be considered the first unified Laws of the Game. ‘The new rules were printed as the “Cambridge Rules”,’ Malden wrote. ‘Copies were distributed and pasted up on Parker’s Piece [an area of open grassland in the centre of the city], and very satisfactorily they worked, for it is right to add that they were loyally kept and I never heard of any public school man who gave up playing for not liking the rules.’

Fourteen years later the southern version of the game took another step towards uniformity as J.C. Thring – the younger brother of Edward, the Uppingham headmaster – having been thwarted in an earlier attempt to draw up a set of unified rules at Cambridge, brought out a set of ten laws entitled ‘The Simplest Game’. The following October, another variant, the ‘Cambridge University Football Rules’, was published. Crucially, a month later, the Football Association was formed, and immediately set about trying to determine a definitive set of Laws of the Game, intending still to combine the best elements of both the dribbling and the handling game.

It failed. The debate was long and furious but, after a fifth meeting at the Freemason’s Tavern in Lincoln’s Inn Fields in London, at 7pm on 8 December 1863, carrying the ball by hand

was outlawed, and football and rugby went their separate ways. The dispute, strangely, was not over the use of the hand, but over hacking – that is, whether kicking opponents in the shins should be allowed. F.W. Campbell of Blackheath was very much in favour. ‘If you do away with [hacking],’ he said, ‘you will do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and I will be bound to bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week’s practice.’ Sport, he appears to have felt, was about pain, brutality and manliness; without that, if it actually came down to *skill*, any old foreigner might be able to win. A joke it may have been, but that his words were part of a serious debate is indicative of the general ethos, even if Blackheath did end up resigning from the association when hacking was eventually outlawed.

The dribbling game prevailed, largely because of Law Six, the forerunner of the offside law: ‘When a player has kicked the ball, anyone of the same side who is nearer to the opponent’s goal-line is out of play, and may not touch the ball himself, nor in any way whatever prevent any other player from doing so, until he is in play...’ In other words, passes had to be either lateral or backwards; for Englishmen convinced that anything other than charging directly at a target was suspiciously subtle and unmanly, that would clearly never do.

Dribbling itself, it should be said, was rather different to modern conceptions of the art. In his history of the FA Cup, Geoffrey Green, the late football correspondent of *The Times*, quotes an unnamed writer of the 1870s: ‘A really first-class player ... will never lose sight of the ball, at the same time keeping his attention employed in the spying out of any gaps in the enemy’s ranks, or any weak points in the defence, which may give him a favourable chance of arriving at the coveted goal. To see some players guide and steer a ball through a circle of opposing legs, turning and twisting as the occasion requires, is a sight not to be forgotten... Skill in dribbling ... necessitates something more than a go-ahead, fearless, headlong onslaught of the enemy’s citadel; it requires an eye quick at discovering a weak point, and *nous* to calculate and decide the chances of a successful passage.’ In terms of shape, it sounds rather like an elementary form of modern rugby union, only without any handling.

Tactics – if that is not too grand a word in the circumstances – were similarly basic, even after the number of players had been

fixed at eleven. Teams simply chased the ball. It wasn't even until the 1870s that the goalkeeper became a recognised and universally accepted position; not until 1909 that he began to wear a different coloured shirt to the rest of his team; and not until 1912 that he was restricted to handling the ball only in his own box – a rule change implemented to thwart the Sunderland goalkeeper Leigh Richmond Roose's habit of carrying the ball to the halfway line. If there were a formation at all in those earliest days, it would probably have been classified as two or three backs, with nine or eight forwards.

Even when Law Six was changed in 1866, following Eton's convention and permitting a forward pass provided there were at least three members of the defensive team between the player and the opponent's goal when the ball was played (that is, one more than the modern offside law), it seems to have made little difference to those brought up on the dribbling game. As late as the 1870s, Charles W. Alcock, a leading early player and administrator, was writing evangelically of 'the grand and essential principle of backing up. By "backing up", of course, I shall be understood to mean the following closely on a fellow-player to assist him, if required, or to take on the ball in the case of his being attacked, or otherwise prevented from continuing his onward course.' In other words, even a decade after the establishment of the FA, one of the founding fathers of the game felt it necessary to explain to others that if one of their team-mates were charging head-down at goal, it might be an idea to go and help him – although expecting to receive the ball from him volitionally seems to have been a step too far.

That, at least, is how it was in the south. The north was making its own advances, particularly in south Yorkshire, where a combination of Old Harrovian teachers at Sheffield College and the traditional folk games of Holmfirth and Penistone led to the establishment of the Sheffield Club on 24 October 1857, initially as a way for cricketers to stay fit during the winter. On Boxing Day that year, the world's first inter-club match was played as they beat Hallam FC 2-0. The sport grew rapidly: within five years crowds of several hundred were common, and fifteen clubs had been established in the area. The Sheffield Club drew up their own set of rules, published in 1862, which, significantly, while showing the influence of Harrow, Rugby and Winchester, made no mention of offside.

There appears, though, to have been some regulation, for when Sheffield's secretary William Chesterman wrote to the newly-founded Football Association on 30 November 1863, submitting the club's subscription and his contribution to the debate over laws, he noted: 'We have no printed rule at all like your No. 6, but I have written in the book a rule, which is always played by us.' Exactly what that was remains unclear. Sheffield's formal acceptance of offside came only in 1865, as part of horse-trading over rules ahead of a game against Notts County, and even then required only one defensive player to be goal-side of the forward when the ball was played for him to be onside. That, clearly, made passing far more viable, although it is debatable to what extent the opportunities it provided were taken up.

The FA failed to respond to Sheffield's overtures, and so for several years two codes – or rather, two basic codes, for there were also variations in Nottingham and other cities – existed. They met for the first time in 1866, with a match between London and Sheffield in Battersea Park on 31 March 1866. London won 2-0, with contemporary reports suggesting they had been the more skilful side, but had been unsettled by Sheffield's physicality.

After much to-ing and fro-ing over whose regulations to play by, Alcock brought a London team to Sheffield in December 1871. Playing under Sheffield rules, the home team won 3-1, their victory generally being put down to the fact that they had an organised formation. That, taken in conjunction with their more liberal offside law, might suggest a passing game, but it seems Sheffield were rather more rooted in dribbling even than London. According to Percy M. Young in *Football in Sheffield*, the Sheffield players found 'the dribbling skill of Alcock quite outside their range of experience. Moreover, Alcock was alive to the virtues of the well-placed pass (the local players adopted the simpler and more direct method of ignoring their own colleagues and making straight for goal on every possible occasion) and the delicate combination between himself and Chenery was a revelation to 2,000 delighted spectators'. There would be eighteen further meetings before Sheffield finally came into the FA fold in 1878.

There may not have been a culture of passing in Sheffield, but it does seem they would punt the ball long to clear their lines. In *The World Game*, Geoffrey Green notes that when Sheffield players arrived in London for an exhibition match in 1875 and began

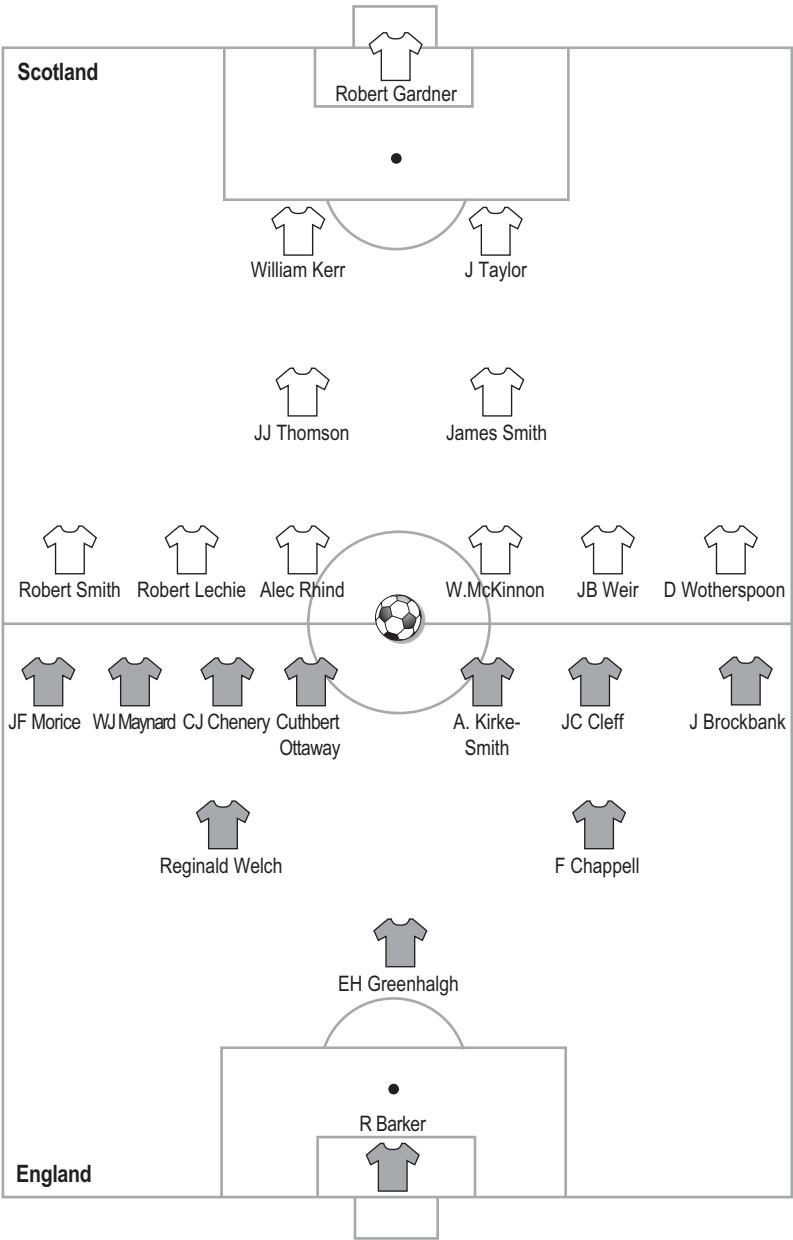
'butting the ball with their heads', the crowd regarded it as 'something for amusement rather than admiration'. In a pure dribbling game, of course, there would have been no need for the ball ever to leave the ground, other – perhaps – than to lift it over a challenging foot. Only if the ball were played a significant distance in the air would heading have been necessary.

The Scottish Football Association annual's report of an 1877 match between Glasgow and Sheffield makes the point clearly: 'That the game was a very well contested one, and victory has rested with the best side, no one will deny; but that it was a pretty game, abounding in fine displays of combined dribbling, which has frequently distinguished a Scottish team above all others, few will admit... The fact cannot be hidden ... that the tactics pursued by the Sheffield team on Saturday were partially responsible for this inasmuch as they play a different set of rules from those of the English and Scottish Associations, and to them our "off-side" rule is next to a dead letter. In this manner, long kicking was largely indulged in on Saturday on their side; and in order to meet the same style of play, the Glasgow men actually lost that united action which had led them on to victory in many a harder fought field.'

The spread of passing itself – that 'united action' – can be traced back to one game, football's first international, played between England and Scotland at Hampden Park, Glasgow, in 1872. England's line-up comprised a 'goal', a 'three-quarter back', a 'half-back', a 'fly-kick', four players listed simply as 'middle', two as 'left side' and one as 'right side', which, to try to apply modern notation, sounds like something approximating to a lop-sided 1-2-7. 'The formation of a team as a rule...' Alcock noted, 'was to provide for seven forwards, and only four players to constitute the three lines of defence. The last line was, of course, the goalkeeper, and in front of him was only one full-back, who had again before him but two forwards, to check the rushes of the opposing forwards.'

Scotland were represented by the Queen's Park club, which, until the foundation of the Scottish FA in 1873, governed the Scottish game – functioning much like the MCC in cricket or the Royal and Ancient in golf. Crucially, they were over a stone per man lighter than England. It is indicative of the physicality of early football that most pundits seemed to have expected that weight advantage would give England a comfortable victory, but what it

First International: Scotland 0 England 0, 30 November 1872, Partick



actually did was to stimulate the imagination. Although direct evidence is sketchy, it seems probable that, as Richard McBrearty of the Scottish Football Museum argues, Queen's Park decided they had to try to pass the ball around England rather than engage in a more direct man-to-man contest in which they were likely to be out-muscled, and their formation was very definitely a 2-2-6. The ploy paid off. England, with a more established tradition and a far larger pool of players from which to select, were firm favourites, but were held to a goalless draw. 'The Englishmen,' the report in the *Glasgow Herald* said, 'had all the advantage in respect of weight, their average being about two stones heavier than the Scotchmen [a slight exaggeration], and they also had the advantage in pace. The strong point with the home club was that they played excellently well together.'

That success may have confirmed the notion of passing as superior to dribbling – north of the border at least – but it could never have worked had passing not been part of the game in Scotland almost from the start. When the Queen's Park club was established in 1867, the version of the offside law they adopted held that a player was infringing only if he were both beyond the penultimate man and in the final 15 yards of the pitch. That, clearly, was legislation far more conducive to passing than either the FA's first offside law or its 1866 revision. Queen's Park accepted the three-man variant when they joined the FA on 9 November 1870, but by then the idea of passing was already implanted. In Scotland the ball was there to be kicked, not merely dribbled, as H.N. Smith's poem celebrating Queen's Park's victory over Hamilton Gymnasium in 1869 suggests:

The men are picked – the ball is kicked,
High in the air it bounds;
O'er many a head the ball is sped...

Equally, it was the prevalence of dribbling upon which Robert Smith, a Queen's Park member and Scotland's right-winger in that first international, remarked after playing in the first of the four matches Alcock arranged between England and a team of London-based Scots that were the forerunners to proper internationals. 'While the ball was in play,' he wrote in a letter back to his club, 'the practice was to run or dribble the ball with the feet, instead of indulging in high or long balls.'

One of Queen's Park's motivations in joining the English association was to try to alleviate the difficulties they were having finding opponents who would agree to play by a standard set of rules. In the months leading up to their acceptance into the FA, they played games of ten-, fourteen-, fifteen- and sixteen-a-side, and in 1871–72, they managed just three games. 'The club, however,' Richard Robinson wrote in his 1920 history of Queen's Park, 'never neglected practice.' Their isolation and regular matches among themselves meant that idiosyncrasies became more pronounced – as they would for Argentina in the thirties – and so the passing game was effectively hot-housed, free from the irksome obstacle of *bone fide* opponents.

'In these [practice] games', Robinson went on, 'the dribbling and passing,' 'which raised the Scottish game to the level of fine art, were developed. Dribbling was a characteristic of English play, and it was not until very much later that the Southerners came to see that the principles laid down in the Queen's Park method of transference of the ball, accompanied by strong backing up, were those that got the most out of the team. Combination was the chief characteristic of the Queen's Park's play. These essentials struck Mr C.W. Alcock and in one of his earlier Football Annuals formed the keynote for a eulogium on Scottish players, accompanied by earnest dissertations advocating the immediate adoption by English players of the methods which had brought the game to such a high state of proficiency north of the Tweed.'

Alcock, in fact, was nowhere near as convinced as that. Although he professed himself intrigued by the 'combination game' – and for all the prowess he had shown at Sheffield – he expressed doubt in that annual of 1879 as to whether 'a wholesale system of passing pays'. Passing, he evidently felt, was all very well as an option, but should never be allowed to supplant the dribbling game.

Nonetheless, it quickly spread, particularly in Scotland, where the influence of Queen's Park was all-encompassing, leading ultimately to the highly romanticised 'pattern-weaving' approach, characterised by strings of short passes zigzagging between the forward- and half-lines. Queen's Park organised the Scotland side for the first two internationals, and even after the foundation of the Scottish Football Association remained a powerful voice in shaping the sport. They acted as evangelists, travelling across the

country to play exhibition games. Records of a match against Vale of Leven, who became one of the early powerhouses of Scottish football, describe the game being stopped at regular intervals so the rules and playing methods could be described, while a game in Edinburgh in 1873 kick-started football in the capital. It is perhaps indicative of the impact of those matches that the Borders remain a rugby stronghold: a missionary game Queen's Park were scheduled to play there had to be cancelled because of FA Cup commitments, so football's seeds were never sown. As McBrearty points out, Scotland's demographics, with the majority of the population living in the central belt between the Glasgow and Edinburgh conurbations, made it far easier for one particular style to take hold than it was in England, where each region had its own idea of how the game should be played.

Queen's Park's tactics in the first international raised eyebrows in England, but the southward spread of the passing game can be attributed largely to two men: Henry Renny-Tailyour and John Blackburn, who played for Scotland in their victory over England in the second international. Both were lieutenants in the army, and both played their club football for the Royal Engineers, carrying the Scottish style with them to Kent. 'The Royal Engineers were the first football team to introduce the "combination" style of play,' W.E. Clegg, a former Sheffield player, wrote in the *Sheffield Independent* in 1930. 'Formerly the matches Sheffield played with them were won by us, but we were very much surprised that between one season and another they had considered "military football tactics" with the result that Sheffield was badly beaten by the new conditions of play.'

The passing approach was implanted in schools football by the Reverend Spencer Walker, as he returned as a master to Lancing College, where he had been a pupil, and set about turning 'a mere bally-rag into a well-ordered team'. 'The first thing I fell upon,' he wrote, 'was the crowding of all the forwards on the leading forward. They crowded round him wherever they went. So I made Rule 1: Fixed places for all the forwards, with passing the ball from one to the other. You should have seen the faces of our first opponents, a sort of "Where do we come in?" look.'

For all Alcock's scepticism, it gradually became apparent that passing was the future. The Old Carthusians side that beat the Old Etonians 3-0 in the 1881 FA Cup final was noted for its

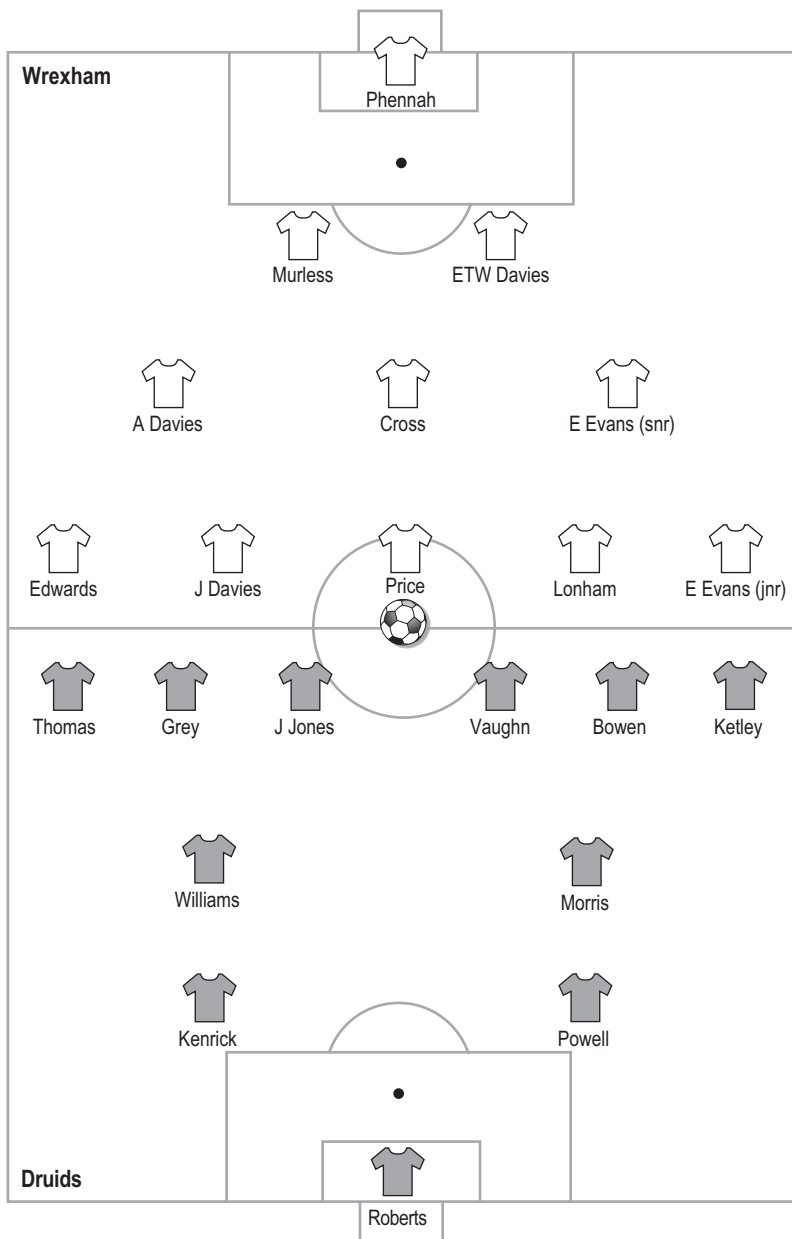
combinations, particularly those between E.M.F. Prinsep and E.H. Parry, while the following year the Old Etonian goal that saw off Blackburn Rovers, the first northern side to reach the final, stemmed, Green wrote in his history of the FA Cup, from 'a long dribble and cross-pass' from A.T.B. Dunn that laid in W.H. Anderson. Still, the Etonians were essentially a dribbling side.

The final flourish of the dribbling game came in 1883. For the first time the Cup received more entries from outside London than within, and for the first time the Cup went north as Blackburn Olympic beat Old Etonians in the final. The amateur era – at least in terms of mindset – was over; something acknowledged two years later when the FA legalised professionalism.

All the Olympic side had full-time jobs, and it caused something of a stir when their half-back and *de facto* manager, Jack Hunter, took them to Blackpool for a training camp before the final. This was very evidently not the effortless superiority to which the amateurs aspired. Early in the game, injury reduced the Etonians to ten men, but it is doubtful anyway whether they would have been able to cope with Olympic's unfamiliar tactic of hitting long sweeping passes from wing to wing. The winning goal, scored deep in extra-time, was characteristic of the game as a whole: a cross-field ball from Tommy Dewhurst (a weaver) on the right found Jimmy Costley (a spinner) advancing in space on the left, and he had the composure to beat J.F.P. Rawlinson in the Etonian goal.

In Scotland, the superiority of passing was old news. 'Take any club that has come to the front,' the columnist 'Silas Marner' wrote in the *Scottish Umpire* in August 1884, 'and the onward strides will be found to date from the hour when the rough and tumble gave place to swift accurate passing and attending to the leather rather than the degraded desire merely to coup an opponent.' Not that everybody was convinced. Two months later, after Jamestown Athletics had been beaten 4-1 in the Scottish Cup by Vale of Leven, 'Olympian' was scathing of their combination game in his 'On the Wing' column in the *Umpire*. "Divide and Conquer" was a favourite dictum of the great Machiavelli when teaching princes how to govern.... What shall I say of the Jamestown's attempt to, I suppose, verify the truth of the aphorism. Their premises were right, but then they went sadly wrong with the conclusion. They made the grave mistake of dividing *themselves* instead of their opponents and so paid the penalty. And what a penalty! Tell it not in Gath. Publish

Wrexham 1 Druids 0, Welsh Cup final, Acton, 30 March 1878



it not in Askelon. Strategy can never take the place of eleven good pairs of nimble legs.'

Well, it can, and it did and, to the consternation of traditionalists in both England and Scotland, it meant one of the two centre-forwards – who, it was found, tended to replicate each other's role in a passing game – slipping back into a deeper position, eventually becoming, over the course of the 1880s, a centre-half in a 2-3-5 formation: the Pyramid. There is a widespread belief as expressed by, for instance, the Hungarian coach Árpád Csanádi in his immense and influential coaching manual *Soccer*, that the 2-3-5 was first played by Cambridge University in 1883, but there is evidence to suggest they may have been using the system as much as six years before that. Nottingham Forest, equally, were enthusiastic advocates of the system by the late 1870s, inspired in their experiments by their captain Sam Widdowson, who also invented the shinpad.

Certainly Wrexham were employing a centre-half when they faced Druids in the Welsh Cup final in 1878; their captain and full-back Charles Murless, a local estate agent, deciding to withdraw E.A. Cross from the forward line, seemingly because he felt that the pace of the centre-forward who remained, John Price, was sufficient to cover for any resulting shortfall in attack. He was vindicated as James Davies settled a tight game with the only goal two minutes from time.

The gradual spread of the 2-3-5 meant that the centre-half soon became the fulcrum of the team, a figure far removed from the dour stopper he would become. He was a multi-skilled all-rounder, defender and attacker, leader and instigator, goal-scorer and destroyer. He was, as the great Austrian football writer Willy Meisl put it, 'the most important man on the field'.

Intriguingly, the *Sheffield Independent*, in its report on the first floodlit game – an exhibition between the 'Reds' and the 'Blues' played in October 1878 – listed each team with four backs, a half, and five forwards. There is, though, no other evidence of any side playing with any more than two defenders for another three decades, so it seems probable that what is actually being described is a 2-3-5, with the wing-halves, whose job it would become to pick up the opposing inside-forwards, listed not as halves but as backs.

A sense of the outrage prompted by even the idea of defending is given by a piece in the *Scottish Athletic Journal* of November 1882



condemning the habit of ‘certain country clubs’ of keeping two men back 20 yards from their own goal, there merely, the writer tartly suggests, ‘to keep the goalkeeper in chat’. Similarly, Lugar Boswell Thistle, a club from Ayrshire, were deplored for attacking with a mere nine men. The reactionaries, though, were fighting a losing battle, and it was with a 2-3-5 that Dumbarton beat Vale of Leven in the Scottish Cup final in 1883.

It was the success of Preston North End in the 1880s that confirmed the pre-eminence of the 2-3-5. Initially a cricket and rugby club, they played a ‘one-off’ game under association rules against Eagley in 1878. No positions were recorded for that game, but in November the following year, they met Halliwell, with a team listed in the classic 2-2-6: that is, with two full-backs, two half-backs, two right-wingers, two left-wingers and two centre-forwards. Preston joined the Lancashire Football Association for the 1880–81 season and, although they initially struggled, the arrival of a host of Scottish players – professionals in all but name – transformed the club. By 1883 the team-sheets were for the first time showing Preston lining up in a 2-3-5 system. Exactly whose idea that was is unclear, but it is known that James Gledhill, a teacher and doctor from Glasgow, gave a series of lectures ‘showing by blackboard what might be done by a team of selected experts’, as David Hunt put it in his history of the club. It was with that system that Preston went on to win the first two Football League titles, the first of them, in 1887–88, without losing a game.

England played a 2-3-5 for the first time against Scotland in 1884 and, by October that year, the system was common enough that when Notts County went north for a friendly against Renfrewshire, the *Umpire* listed their team in 2-3-5 formation without comment. The Scotland national side first used a pyramid in 1887, prompting much grumbling about their aping of what was initially an English tactic. The tone of a profile of Celtic’s James Kelly, published in the *Scottish Referee* in 1889, though, makes clear that by the end of the decade the debate was over. ‘There are many people who believe that when Scotland adopted the centre half-back position she sacrificed much of her power in the game,’ it read. ‘We do not share altogether this opinion, and if the players who fill this space in our clubs were men of Mr Kelly’s calibre there would be no difference of opinion on the matter, nor would we have any cause to regret having followed England in this matter.’



The pyramid would remain the global default until the change in the offside law in 1925 led to the development, in England, of the W-M. Just as the dribbling game and all-out attack had once been the 'right' – the only – way to play, so 2-3-5 became the touchstone.