Edward Couzens-Lake

MAPPING THE PITCH

Football Formations Through the Ages

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

EDWARD COUZENS-LAKE, the author of *Fantasy Football* and *Gossy: The Autobiography of Jeremy Goss*, also contributes as a feature writer and weekly blogger to a number of both print and digital publications as well as several high profile websites. These include lifestyle and music magazines as well as both sport and business websites.

Mapping the Pitch

Dedicated to Jimmy Hogan

Coaching Visionary

'HE USED TO SAY FOOTBALL WAS LIKE A VIENNESE WALTZ, A RHAPSODY. ONE-TWO-THREE, ONE-TWO-THREE, PASS-MOVE-PASS, PASS-MOVE-PASS. WE WERE SAT THERE, GLUED TO OUR SEATS, BECAUSE WE WERE SO KEEN TO LEARN.'

Tommy Docherty

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Mapping the Pitch – Football Formations Through the Ages
Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2015

Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Hägendorf, Hong Kong,
Indianapolis, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna
Member of the World Sport Publishers' Association (WSPA)
ISBN: 978-1-78255-726-5
E-Mail: info@m-m-sports.com
www.m-m-sports.com

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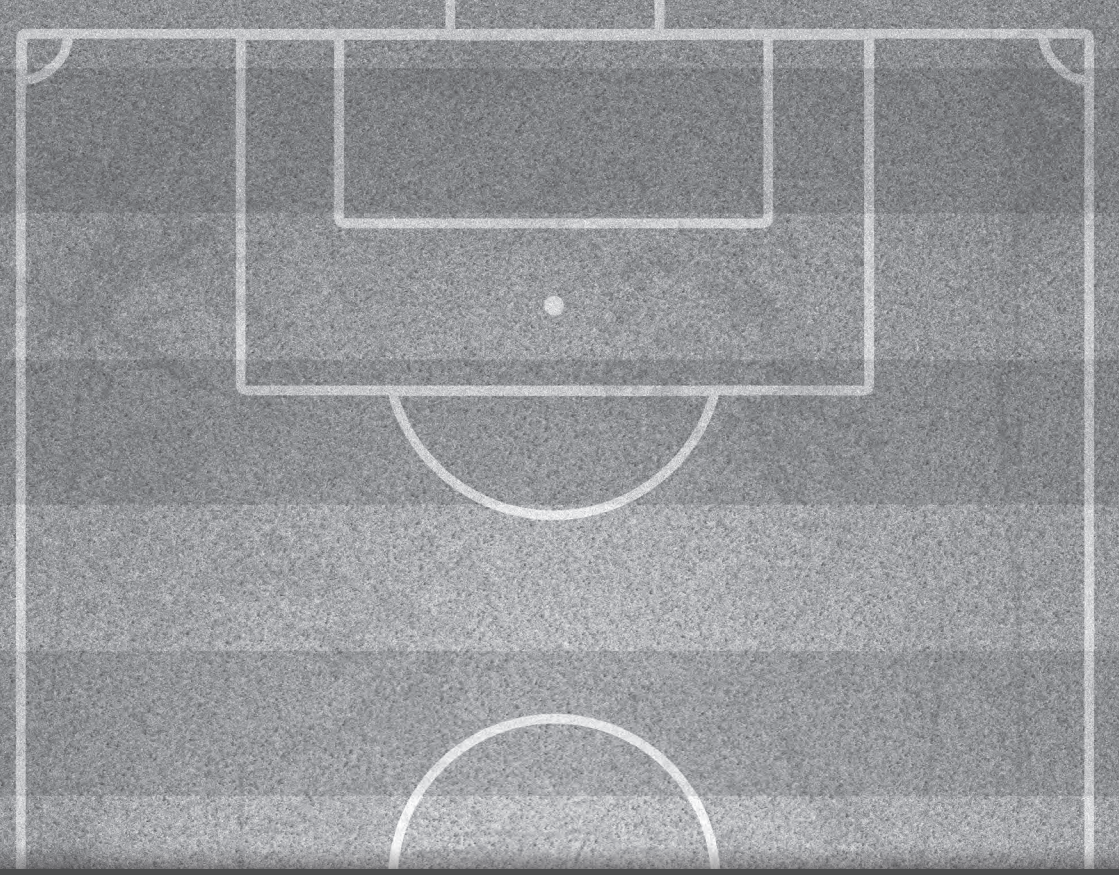

PROLOGUE

The Romans were, of course, famous for the military formation known as the Testudo*, or Tortoise, one that Giovanni Trapattoni, a master of organisation and discipline, would have been proud to call his own.*

Football, like so many things in life, beloved or not, was invented by the English.

Alas, also like so many things in life, it almost certainly wasn't. What they did do for the game was burden it with its very first set of rules and regulations, applying bureaucracy to a game in much the same way they had done to the countries in their Empire.

Countries, cultures and societies that exercise a claim to *inventing* the world's greatest game (probably) and its second greatest obsession (possibly) are numerous. A game that involved using the feet in kicking, and propelling an object of sorts has certainly been recorded in both Ancient Greek and Roman history, with the Roman version, known as *hapastum* thought to have been a bastardised variant of the even earlier Greek version. Who knows, perhaps the Romans, style and form ever to the forefront even on the battlefield, included the first on-field *trequartista* in their noble ranks – an early Andrea Pirlo, resplendent in toga and sandals?

The Romans were, of course, famous for the military formation known as the *Testudo*, or Tortoise, one that Giovanni Trapattoni, a master of organisation and discipline, would have been proud to call his own. Testudo involved a group of around 36 Roman legionaries advancing into battle in such a manner that they were completely protected by their shields. The soldiers at the front held their shields in front of them whilst those at the sides held them outwards and those in the middle of the advancing rectangle would hold their shields over their heads. The result of this was effectively a mobile metal box that contained all of the men safely within its protective confines.

Not particularly pretty, not particularly fast or exciting, but very effective. Italian pragmatism in the mould of some of their national

football teams. Nobody can say they weren't forewarned. And, as far as any and all opposing armies were concerned, they couldn't say they weren't warned. Because it's what the Romans did. In every battle. Time and time again. Predictable? Yes. Effective? Certainly. They had a battle plan, and by Mars, they were going to use it.

After all, once you've found a battle plan that works, you're hardly going to deviate for as long as remains the case.

Thus, on rather more literal fields of physical combat, the leaders of fighting men continue to redefine warfare. Rome had, with its highly trained soldiers and tightly disciplined *Testudo,* turned the art of battle into a science. Long gone were the days when hordes of fighting men and women would simply form into two large and unorganised groups and simply run into one another, pell-mell, a blur of axes, swords and assorted blunt instruments with no one really sure of what they are doing or who they are bludgeoning to death. It was bloody anarchy.

Rome helped change all that.

People raved about Testudo. It was the tiki-taka of its day, reliant on close movement and finding space in the most effective manner. Cassius Dio, a 1st century Roman consul, historian and forerunner of the modern day studio pundit ('Well Cassius, the ancient Britons are getting a mauling in this battle, can you see any way back into it for them?') followed the campaign of Roman general Marc Antony, a very fond advocate of Testudo and, whilst observing Antony's disciplined soldiers in combat, described both its formation and effectiveness with no little excitement:

'This Testudo and the way in which it is formed are as follows. The Baggage animals, the light-armed troops and the cavalry are placed in the centre of the army. The heavy-armed troops who use the oblong,

curved and cylindrical shields are drawn up around the outside, making a rectangular figure, and, facing outward and holding their arms at the ready, they enclose the rest.

The others who have flat shields, form a compact body in the centre and raise their shields over the heads of all the others, so that nothing but shields can be seen in every part of the phalanx alike and all the men by the density of the formation are under shelter from missiles. Indeed, it is so marvellously strong that men can walk upon it and whenever they come to a narrow ravine, even horses and vehicles can be driven over it.'[1]

Few opponents could live with Testudo when the Romans were fighting to the very best of their abilities. It was a remarkably successful, effective and, as far as the enemy was concerned, psychologically frightening sight to come across. And no wonder. If your best defence was nothing more than a few layers of animal skins and a pointed stick, you're really not going to fancy your chances when you come up against it. In many ways, the battle was lost even before it had really begun.

What Testudo was, of course, and its relevance to our story here is a very early example of pre-battle tactics being planned and passed on to the proverbial foot soldiers just before battle. It was an action plan that was devised and passed on by the watching generals, which ensured that, if followed correctly and the orders of the battalion captain obeyed to the letter, they and their armies had the very best chance possible of departing that field of battle as the victorious army.

The Testudo action plan is rather like pre-match tactics being planned and passed on to the professional footballers just before a match – an action plan devised and passed on by the watching managers and coaches,

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1 *Plutarch. 2008.* Roman Lives: A Selection of Eight Lives*. Ed. P. Stadter. Translated by R. Waterfield. Oxford Paperbacks.*

which ensures that, if followed correctly and the orders of the team captain obeyed to the letter, they and their team have the very best chance possible of departing that football field as the victorious team.

Bloody battle and sporting battle. United in their use of pre-battle and pre-match tactics and on-field formations.

The word *tactics* is said to have originated from the 17th century Latin *tactica*, meaning the 'science of arranging military forces for combat, which is exactly what Marc Antony and his legionaries were doing with their established, trusted and much feared Testudo.

And eaxctly what Joachim Löw and his formidable and much feared Germany side were doing with their very own version of Testudo two thousand years later as they swept up a world conquest all of their own in winning the 2014 World Cup. Löw's 4-2-3-1 formation was based on the same basic principles as Testudo was: a solid defensive foundation at its most vulnerable point allied with an attacking zeal that swiftly switched from defence to offense, designed to catch opposing teams when they have over exposed themselves.

The Germans may not have had the benefit of curved wooden shields to help repel attacking forces, yet, with a world-class goalkeeper in Manuel Neuer supported by the likes of Philipp Lahm, Jerome Boateng, Mats Hummels and Benedikt Howedes, they didn't need them. After all, a defence that concedes just four goals in seven games hardly needs any additional assistance, shields included.

Marc Antony and Joachim Löw. Brothers-in-arms separated by two millennia yet united in their mastery of effective on-field formation and tactics.

I'm sure they'd find they had a lot in common were they ever to get together over a bottle of the finest Sassicaia. Or Riesling, come to that. They'd both be lost in a world of their own: dining implements, glasses and condiments moving in an ever-quickening blur over the brilliant white tablecloth as they swapped ideas and theories on formations and tactics regarding the battles they'd have fought in heart and mind. Antony, no doubt, would be pleased – yet hardly surprised – to learn that Rome, in the guise of modern-day Italy has conquered the world a further four times, even if it had been in football rather than war and conquest.

The old and the new. Both tactical masters.

It may have come to pass, therefore, that the great Barcelona side that was coached so ably by Pep Guardiola from 2008 to 2012 was the one that, in footballing terms, waked many of the sports devotees up to the science and appreciation of football tactics and on-field formations with their perceived application (since rubbished by Guardiola himself) of the now famous tiki-taka style of play. The phrase itself sounds almost as sexy as the type of football it portrays: short passing and movement whilst constantly maintaining possession. Everyone loved it, the world fell in love with Pep and his team and, with it, both the footballing cognescenti and its rank and file became enamoured, enraptured by football tactics.

It was as if no one had ever considered, talked about or even applied tactics to football before. Yet here we were, eulogising Guardiola, fawning over Barca, Messi and tiki-taka.

Coaching became the new playing.

Yet of course, as far as football is concerned, the application of formations and tactics in the game has always been part of it, and as integral to the successes of Blackburn Olympic, the winners of the FA Cup in 1883 as they were to Löw's all-conquering German side 131 years later.

Plus any and all points in between.

Like the great Austrian side of the 1930s and the work of Englishman Jimmy Hogan who coached with some success and no little distinction on the continent at that time, including in Austria, but also in Hungary, Switzerland and Germany.

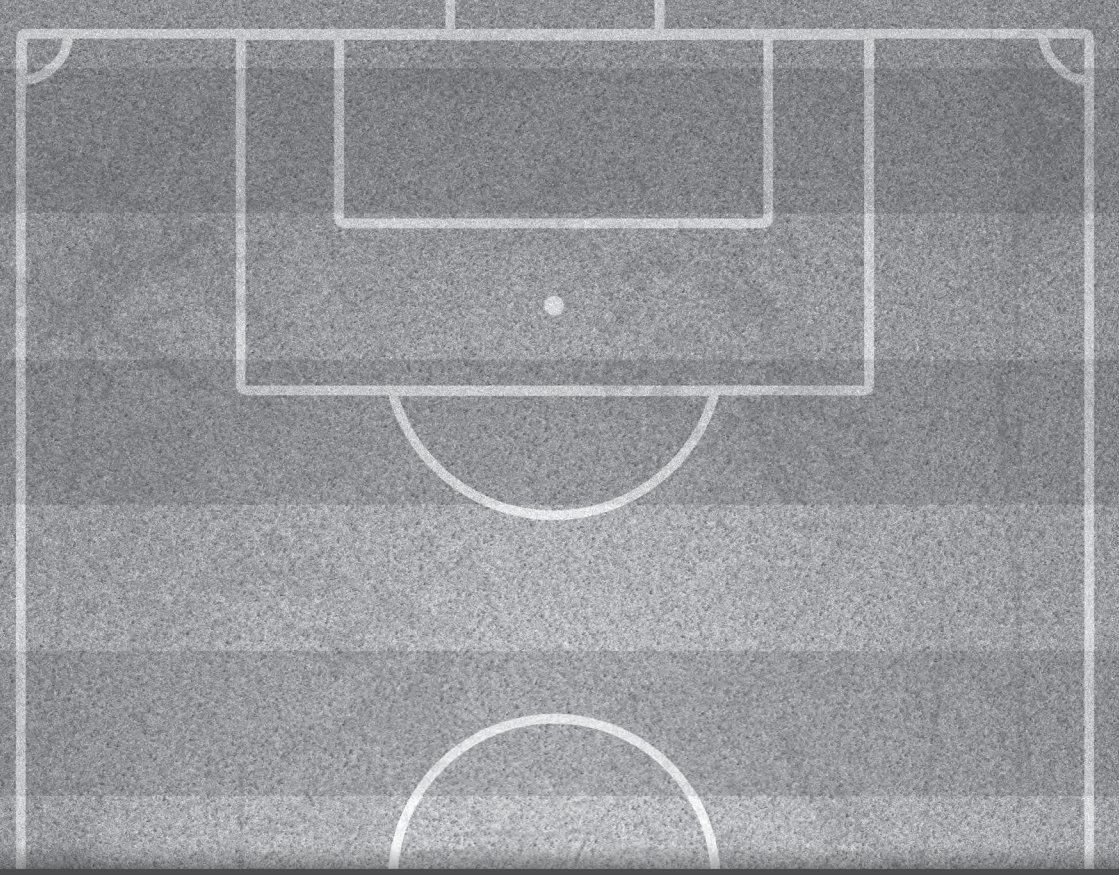
And Vittorio Pozzo who coached the Italian national side to victory in the 1934 and 1938 World Cups, the man credited with creating the Metodo tactical formation, and, to this day, still the only person to have won two World Cups as a coach.

The great Hungarian side of the 1950s, Sir Alf Ramsay's 'wingless wonders' who won a World Cup for England in 1966, and the great, possibly the greatest of all time, the magical, mercurial Brazil of 1958 who redefined the way the game was played, setting a benchmark as they did so, which people still look to today as one that has rarely been matched and certainly never surpassed.

Mapping the Pitch explores the history and development of the game and some of its most influential and successful teams, players and coaches but with specific reference to and exploration of the way in which they played the game and how they were coached and set up; the on-field formations they established and championed as well as the tactics introduced and practiced by their coaches.

The strategic placing of salt and pepper pots throughout the footballing ages, in fact.

Let us play.



INTRODUCTION

Be yourselves. You need to dig into your own DNA. I hate tiki-taka. Tiki-taka means passing the ball for the sake of it, with no clear intention. And it's pointless.

Pep Guardiola is held in the same venerated esteem amongst football players, supporters and his fellow coaches that Michelangelo is amidst the throngs of self-appointed experts and devotees of Renaissance art.

The urbane man from Santpedor enjoyed a highly respectable playing career, one that peaked with around 300 games for Barcelona from 1990 to 2001. His role as a defensive midfielder in Johan Cruyff's revitalised side resulted in La Liga and European Cup winners medals by the time he was 20.

A prodigy no less.

Yet it is for his coaching skills and the reputation that Guardiola earnt for himself as a master of the tiki-taka style of play rather than any of the accomplishments he achieved as a player that raised him into the footballing stratosphere. Guardiola is not the creator of the tiki-taka, nor is, or was he ever, the sole advocate of its method on planet football. Yet he has been lauded as a man whose work as Barcelona coach gave football its very own renaissance and introduced its finer arts to an audience whose hitherto understanding of the game might have been as basic as the tactics of the teams they were watching.

Tiki-taka is not, it is worth repeating, a footballing philosophy that was developed and implemented by Guardiola during his time as Barcelona coach. Yet its place in the footballing lexicon is a fairly contemporary one; its use, if not all of the theory behind it, being widely credited to the respected Spanish sportswriter and commentator Andrés González. As football commentators go, he was a flamboyant and extrovert antidote to many of his anodyne peers throughout the game, particularly in Europe where excitement and passion is demanded on the pitch but not so in the TV gantry. González was different. His liberal and occasionally florid style of commentary saw him beget to the phrase tiki-taka, it's

onomatopoeic quality perfectly reflecting the sounds of a football being repeatedly and swiftly passed from one player to another and henceforth to another and another.

Short, sharp and swift. Tiki-taka-tiki-taka-tiki-taka. And repeat.

The BBC's Kenneth Wolstenholme and his breathless conclusion of the 1966 World Cup Final ('...and here comes Hurst, he's got... some people are on the pitch, they think it's all over...it is now, it's four') went into sporting commentary folklore[2] – at least in England. With tiki-taka, Andrés González coined a phrase that reverberates around the footballing world, one that has been lovingly applied to the Barcelona side coached by Guardiola from 2008 to 2012. But the man himself would be the last to say that he was only committed to one type of football, that his coaching manual started and finished with the phrase tiki-taka. It could be argued that the Barca side coached by Guardiola's predecessor, Frank Rijkaard was a more entertaining, even more flamboyant, side to watch. Built around the extraordinary abilities of Ronaldinho, Rijkaard preferred a 4-3-3 formation with the Brazilian talisman acting as a hub for the entire team, every attacking move and declaration of intent going through and by him as the entire team swept forward as an offensive force, the verve and joy in their play being rewarded with two consecutive La Liga titles and a Champions League.

But no one spoke of Rijkaard and a specific game plan or formation; no critic or sportswriter mentioned him and his preferred 4-4-3 formation in the same sentence. He was simply identified as a good coach who had a great time and played, more often than not, some exquisite football.

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2 Hurst's goal, his third and the fourth in England's 4-2 win over West Germany, was about as far removed, footballing style-wise, from tiki-taka as it is possible to be, the ball travelling from the England penalty area into the West German goal in around three seconds and two kicks later!

So why can't the name of his successor be spoken with relation to his time at the Camp Nou without someone, somewhere, inserting the, presumably tiresome, reference to tiki-taka?

Guardiola did, of course, receive a lot of praise for the manner and spirit in which his side played. But the credit all too often seemed to go to the perceived system of play his team adhered to rather than to the versatility and capability of the coach alone.

Imagine a road race between two Ferrari cars. One has a V12 engine, the other a V6.

If the V12 won, everyone would nod knowingly and heap praise upon the car. Yet if the V6 triumphed, all of the praise and adulation would be on the drivers.

Guardiola had the V12. Yes, they were good, they were great. Unbeatable at times. But, well, you know. They were Barcelona. They had the system, the players; they had the tiki-taka. Rijkaard, on the contrary, had fine-tuned the V6. They were good; he made them better. With added Ronaldinho.

No wonder Guardiola eventually snapped when he was asked about tiki-taka. Wouldn't, couldn't, someone, for once, credit him for his capabilities as a coach rather than a system coined by a pundit and adopted by the watching masses? Guardiola claims he left Barcelona because he could no longer motivate his players or himself. But you also have to speculate as to whether he was also weary of how he and his team had been labelled and that he wanted to get away from all of that and redefine himself as a coach with a brand new team in a different country, which he has done, very successfully, at Bayern Munich where no one mentions tiki-taka. Except in passing reference to the Spaniard

and his former club. For his part, Guardiola did his best to shatter the myth about it with a quote he is attributed to have made to a group of journalists following defeat for his new team at the hands of local rivals Nürnberg, saying:

'I loathe all that passing for the sake of it, all that tiki-taka. It's so much rubbish and has no purpose. You have to pass the ball with a clear intention, with the aim of making it into the opposition's goal. It's not about passing for the sake of it.

Be yourselves. You need to dig into your own DNA. I hate tiki-taka. Tiki-taka means passing the ball for the sake of it, with no clear intention. And it's pointless.'[3]

The man shatters the myth. Barca were not all about tiki-taka and neither, by definition, was Guardiola. It was a strong statement, a surprising one. But it came from a man desperate to be identified for more than one way of playing, a way that, Guardiola added, was 'pointless'.

No redeeming features at all then?

His point made, Guardiola moved on. He speaks of a future, post-Bayern where, perhaps one day, he coaches Manchester United. And if that were to ever happen, then his connection with tiki-taka would surely be at an end, dead, buried and gone forever. Think about it. Tiki-taka in the Premier League?

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3 From the Daily Telegraph *(online article), Oct 16th 2014; Peranau, Marti. 2014.* Pep Confidential: Inside Guardiola's First Season at Bayern Munich*. Arena Sport.*

Impossible.

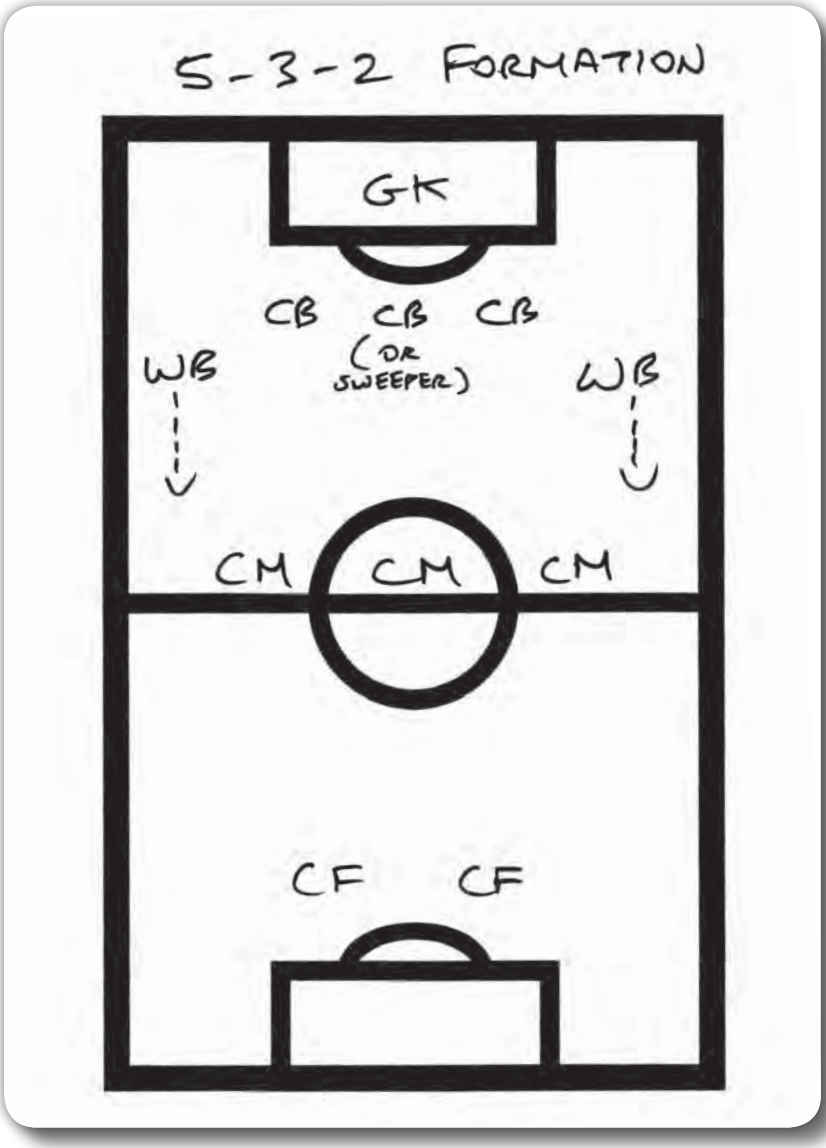
Which just might be why Guardiola hopes to have the chance to coach there one day, so he can escape the system and the association once and for all.

But Guardiola's association with tiki-taka is hardly new, at least not in terms of teams, coaches and even individual players being eagerly and, in some cases, complacently identified as either the originator of or a sworn disciple of a specific manner of play, formation or position.

Indeed, it's something that has been happening since the earliest days of the professional game.

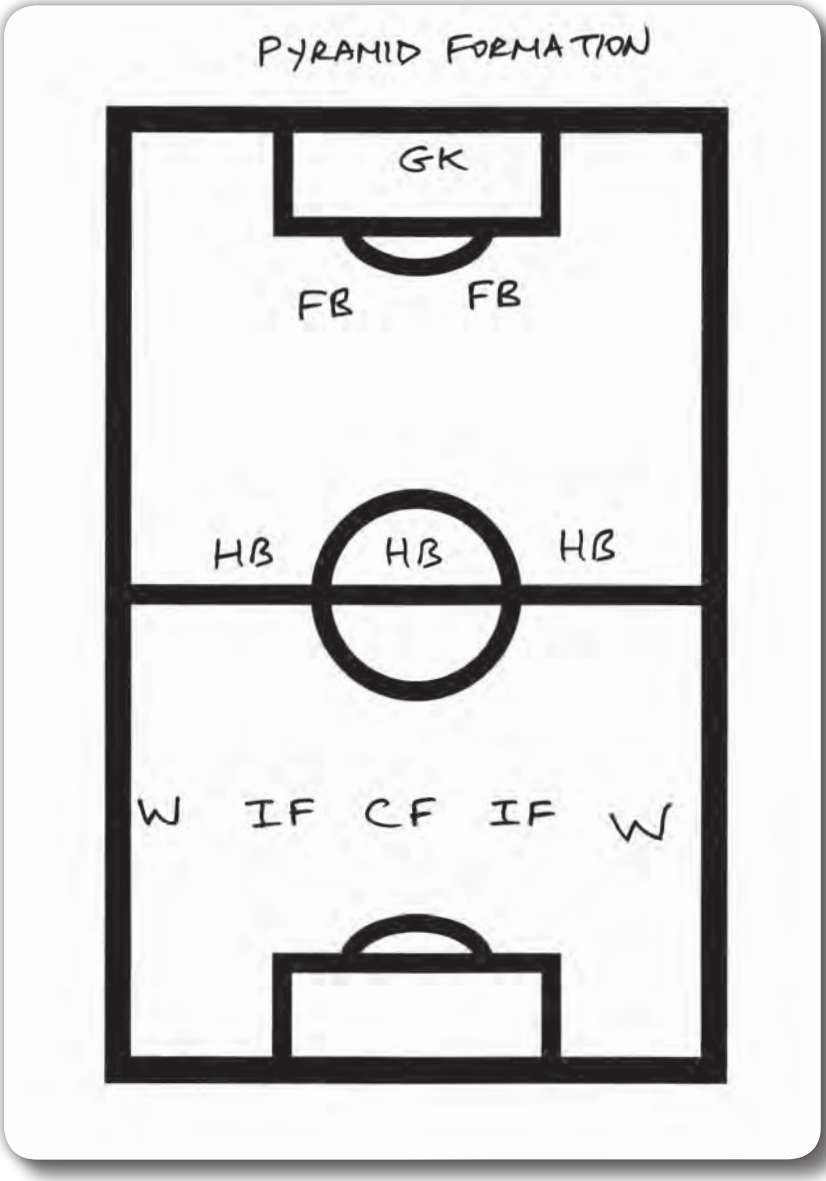
Everyone, of course, has heard of Guardiola and tiki-taka and made the assumption that you can't have one without the other.

But how many judges of the game are aware of the Danubian School of football from the 1920s? Or the Metodo, a derivation of the Danubian School that evolved around a decade later?


5-3-2 FORMATION
GK
CB
CB
CB
(OR SWEEPER)
WB
WB
CM
CM
CM
CF
CF

The 5-3-2 formation, also known as the Pyramid, was favoured by England manager Glenn Hoddle from 1996 to 1999. Five defenders, two attacking full-backs behind three central midfielders and two attackers. There were lots of options with three central defenders, one who could play as a sweeper, allowing the full-backs to maraud forward as members of the team's attack. These roles were perfected by Brazilians Cafu and Roberto Carlos and adopted for England during Hoddle's time in charge by, amongst others, David Beckham on the right side of the pitch and Graeme La Saux on the left. As far as one of the Brazilians was concerned, his attacking role in the Brazilian side that played with that formation in the 2002 World Cup finals has now gone down into footballing folklore, and any full-back since with an attacking bent to his game now is compared, style-wise, to him. For example, the Norwich City right back Russell Martin, a competent but hardly stellar member of the English side from 2010 onwards, is affectionately referred to as the 'Norfolk Cafu', because he liked to abandon staid defensive duties in order to make an attacking run down the right side of the pitch.

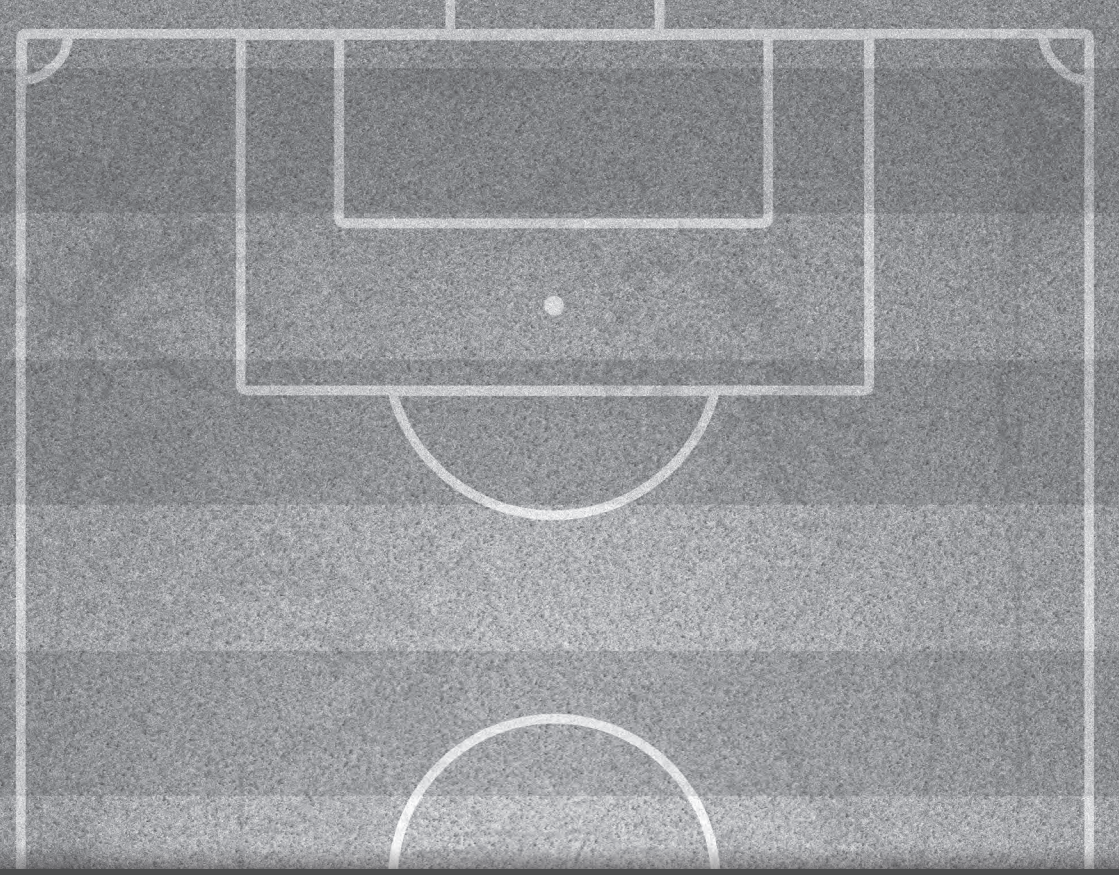
Hoddle's adoption of 5-3-2 was, and still is, regarded in English footballing circles as revolutionary, brave, daring. Even a little crazy. Yet there is nothing that is really new under the footballing sun, and the method that Hoddle had chosen to follow was a mirror image of the original Pyramid formation, a 2-3-5 line-up which was in vogue throughout Great Britain from the latter decades of the 19th century.


PYRAMID FORMATION
GK
FB
FB
HB
HB
HB
W
IF
CF
IF
W

Same shape, differing priorities. In 1890 both Cafu and Russell Martin would have been wingers who occasionally defended rather than defenders who occasionally attacked. That 2-3-5 formation, the original footballing pyramid, is seen as a progenitor of much that was to follow in the game as we know it today – contrasts and departures, modifications, variations and return visits.

Yet it was positively negative compared to some of the earliest formations of the modern game which were best exemplified by the very first international games to be played, specifically those between the greatest and most bitter rivals in the sport: England and Scotland.

It's November 1872. And everyone wants to be the centre forward.



CHAPTER ONE: MOB FOOTBALL

Whenever a player from either side got the ball, he had but one objective in mind: put his head down, take on an expression of grim countenance and attempt, at all costs, to dribble both himself and the ball up the field and into the opponent's goal.

1872. Let's set the scene in a general, historical sense before we focus on the football to get a sense of perspective.

In the US, Republican Ulysses S. Grant is the incumbent president. The country's flag, not yet the venerable Stars and Stripes, has just 37 stars, 13 short of its current total, a sign of a young and growing nation. But the nation is already making its fair share of world headlines, one of which was the discovery by the British ship *Dei Gratia* of the deserted and seemingly abandoned US vessel *Mary Celeste* that December.

In what is now the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV has been crowned as Emperor whilst in Australia, the Australian Overland Telegraph Line has been completed, the two separate lines having been joined at Frew Ponds in South Australia.

The Great War, that terrible conflagration that claimed 37 million casualties, was still 42 years into the future, a generation away.

Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electric telegraph dies. As does the man considered one of Mexico's greatest heroes, Benito Juárez.

Amongst those historical figures who were born in 1872 are future US president Calvin Coolidge, the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell and the first man to reach the South Pole, Roald Amundsen.

Another significant birth that occurred that year was that of international football.

It was contested between Scotland and England in Partick close to the north bank of the River Clyde in Glasgow and took place at, of all places, the West of Scotland Cricket Club's ground in front of just 4,000 curious, yet, you suspect, suitably fervent supporters demanding a drop

or two of English blood, just as rather more had been dropped, nay, poured at Bannockburn in the 14th century.

It wasn't the first time the two nations had met in a football match, though. They'd already played a series of unofficial games, all arranged at the behest of the top hats and toffs at the Football Association who saw the Scots as malleable opponents there for the proverbial taking. It could also be, of course, that no one else wanted to play England or have anything to do with the FA who, a little under a decade earlier, had devised and introduced the first formalised rules of the game, one advantage of that of course being (and don't let anyone convince you otherwise) that if you make up the rules then you own the game.

It was, after all, what the English had already been doing for several centuries, a combination of fighting spirit and an altogether rather too fond love of rules, regulation and bureaucracy, making them, in their eyes, the perfect nation to own and regulate a game that looked set to conquer the world just as they had set out to do.

Thus both the rules of the game and the manner in which it was first played reflected the nation that had taken ownership of the same with both on-field formations and tactics reflecting the zeal of the soldiers and sailors that had set out with orders to take over the world.

In other words: attack, attack, attack.

Anyone who was at that first Scotland versus England game would therefore have witnessed the spectacle of 22 men repeatedly running, en masse, at each other, carrying the ball with them as if it was a battle standard with the mission objective very clear and simple: plant that standard (the ball) behind enemy lines as swiftly and effectively as possible. And if someone gets in the way, take them out.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a small outbreak of war on the banks of the Clyde, albeit one that was played out in a spirit of good sportsmanship allied with a reportedly 'firm but fair' performance from the Scottish referee (this was in Great Britain after all).

Formations, such as they were, typified the 'up and at 'em' approach of both sides with England opting for a 1-1-8 formation – that is, with eight forwards in their side, or, in contemporary parlance, two inside and outside rights, two inside and outside lefts and four centre forwards. Scotland, on the other hand, opted for the relatively more cautious 2-2-6 formation, a decision that, no doubt, provoked howls of protest from the Scottish support, aghast at their sides decision to offer such a negative response to the front eight of the opposition.

Twenty-two players, 14 of which were attackers – that's nearly 65% of all the players on show. Compare that, say, to today's game where the away side might choose to counter the home teams tried and trusted 4-4-2 formation with a 5-4-1, opting for that little extra security at the back. It's still 22 players, but only three of that 22 are now attacking players, or just 14% of all the players on show. Put it another way, nine of them are defenders; that's nine in total from *both* teams, just one more than all of the attacking players who represented England alone on that dim and distant day in 1872.

Twenty-two players, 14 attackers. It sounds like footballing heaven. All either side could do was attack. And attack they both did. For 90 minutes. There were no back passes; in fact, there were hardly any passes that went backwards at all. Whenever a player from either side got the ball, he had but one objective in mind: put his head down, take on an expression of grim countenance and attempt, at all costs, to dribble both himself and the ball up the field and into the opponent's goal. Whilst he was attempting to do this, his nine outfield teammates would be in close

proximity to him, all eager to have a chance of their own to get their head down and run like hell whilst the opposition did everything they could, including body checks, in order to dispossess him and regain possession.

And then one of their own players would get his head down, take on that same determined expression and...well, you get the picture. And that's how it was for the entire game. First one group of players collectively swept forward. Then the other. And repeat. It really was end-to-end stuff; in fact, it was the very definition of that oft expressed footballing quotation.

In his book *Don't Mention The Score*,[4] Simon Briggs imagines viewing the game from above, observing that, to the aerial observer, the '...shapeless bustle must have resembled particles in Brownian motion.'[5] With such a commitment to attacking football from both sides, there could, of course, only be one consequence as far as the final score was concerned.

A 0-0 draw.

Quite how both sides managed to throw so many of their players into attacking mode only for the game to end as a 0-0 draw defies footballing logic. You could perhaps understand it if the game had been played in a mirror universe with England's sterile 8-1-1 coming up against the similarly dank 6-2-2 of the Scots. But not this way, not the way the teams had been set up to play the game – in other words, to get as many goals as they could. But 0-0? To even the casual observer, it would have

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4 *Briggs, Simon. 2007.* Don't Mention the Score*. Quereus. 13.*

5 *An apt description of the frantic, frenetic movement of the players in question, Brownian motion describes the highly random motion of particles suspended in a fluid which results from their collision with rapidly moving atoms or molecules in that gas or liquid-in other words, lots and lots of tiny little objects all randomly scurrying around with no perceived plan or purpose.*