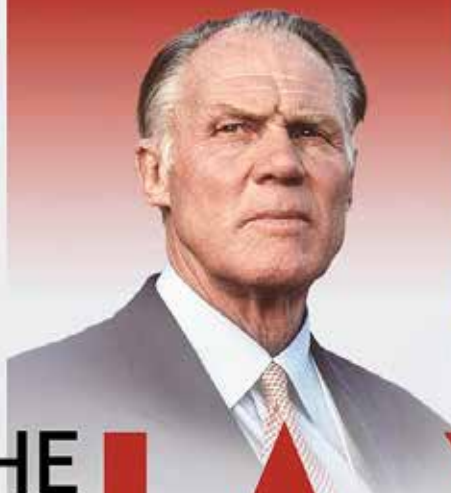


DYLAN
O'CONNELL



THE AJAX WAY



HOW ONE
FOOTBALL CLUB
DEFINES THE
MODERN GAME

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PART ONE

THE RESURRECTION
AND THE LIFE

PRELUDE

A NEVER-ENDING WAR

EVER SINCE the first-ever international football match, the sport has been dominated by different playing styles. There's no definitive answer to the question about winning, there's just a number of historical examples that were 'right' at one particular moment in time.

Scotland, when they faced England in 1872, opted to pass the ball around instead of dribbling like their local rivals. That was the start of it and different paths diverged, new roads opened up as new coaches came on the scene.

The tactical battle made football into a sport of ideas, instead of just being a game of two halves in which a group of footballers try to kick the ball into the goal. Simplicity has now been replaced by the system and with that has come endless discourse that gets more and more complicated with each season.

It never stops, even when it looks like one coach has everything figured out. They might win every trophy during a quick spell and set every record in the process, but one adjustment from an opposition manager and suddenly a whole routine falls apart and opponents know what to do.

Take Antonio Conte and his 3-4-3 formation while at Chelsea during the 2016/17 Premier League season. He stumbled upon that system after seeing his team drop points against Swansea and Liverpool, deciding to stick with it after a game with Arsenal. The Blues ended up winning 13

consecutive matches and they went from eighth place to top of the Premier League, finishing the season as champions. Chelsea also reached the FA Cup Final and they fell short to a resurgent Arsenal team looking for another trophy under Arsène Wenger.

The Blues had everything figured out and had all the right players to play in Conte's system – until other teams started playing 3-4-3 and the formation's strength was made redundant as Chelsea couldn't create overlaps in the final third. Tottenham Hotspur, under Mauricio Pochettino, were the first to figure this out and the cloak of invincibility over Stamford Bridge was torn apart.

Conte is lucky; some coaches don't even get a chance to fully execute their vision at a club, as supporters and owners might not like the way they want to play football. Players will also choose to join a side based on a side's philosophy. There's also managers out there whose sole job is to stop tactics, with their own tactics.

As Sam Allardyce once said: '[José Mourinho] can't take it because we've out-tacticked him, outwitted him.'

Only those with a clear-cut vision stand out and are forever remembered. Arsenal, under Herbert Chapman in the 1930s, were one of the first and they used the WM formation to bring all sorts of silverware to north London. It started with success in the FA Cup against Huddersfield Town and they used that as a springboard to win First Division titles in 1931 and 1933, with a few Charity Shields in between.

Brazil came along in the 1950s and they captured everyone's attention by playing an attacking 4-2-4 during their victorious campaign at the World Cup in Sweden.

As the years went on, an ideological war was starting to form and Italy edged in front by making an early case for catenaccio, a way of playing that involved 'bolting' the

defence shut so the opposition could not score. Nereo Rocco made the world take notice of this as his AC Milan team won the European Cup in 1963 and 1969. He also won the Intercontinental Cup, making his team world club champions.

Helenio Herrera's Inter Milan became its 'most noted practitioners', according to Jonathan Wilson in *Inverting the Pyramid*. They were rewarded for their belief in the system with Serie A titles in 1963, 1965 and 1966, only a play-off defeat to Bologna in 1964 denying them four in a row. Their domestic success led to back-to-back European and Intercontinental Cups in 1964 and 1965. They got to one other European Cup Final, in 1967, but were undone by an all-out Celtic attack in Lisbon.

Italy then won the 1968 edition of the European Championship and five of the starting XI that beat Yugoslavia in a final replay were with one of the two Milan giants. Two others, Giovanni Lodetti and Pierino Prati, played in the initial 1-1 draw. Herrera worked with the national team from 1966-67 and that further reinforced the strength of Italian football, with a straight line existing between success with club and country.

Italy's antithesis were Brazil and the two met in the final of the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. That summer immortalised the Brazilian way of playing football, with Pelé the star as he won his third and final World Cup winner's medal.

In a FIFA documentary on the 1970 Brazilian team, Wenger described them as 'individual artists working in unison creating a masterpiece that teams would be compared to for the next 50 years'. They showed the world samba football and how beautiful the game could be as they won their third World Cup in 12 years.

Argentina had a similar brand of football known as 'La Nuestra', but that was plunged into crisis following a 6-1

loss to Czechoslovakia at the 1958 World Cup. The sense of pragmatism which followed turned into 'anti-fútbol', with the emphasis placed on winning at all costs. The team who fully embraced this were Estudiantes de La Plata and they used it to win three straight Copa Libertadores titles from 1968–1970 and the Intercontinental Cup in 1968.

Their world club championship success was achieved against Manchester United at a time when English football was riding high following the nation's World Cup triumph in 1966. The United team beaten by Estudiantes de La Plata featured Nobby Stiles and Bobby Charlton, both key players in Alf Ramsey's 1966 team, which featured no traditional wingers and lined up in an early version of 4-4-2. In 1972, Ramsey's England received a reality check against West Germany in the quarter-finals of the European Championship when, looking to avenge their 3-2 defeat at the 1970 World Cup, they lost 3-1 on aggregate, all the goals coming in a chastening first-leg defeat at Wembley.

The defeat was a devastating blow for Ramsey and the tactical approach which had served him so well. Jon Spurling, in his history of 1970s football, *Get It On*, commented: 'Ramsey's England perished as he stuck doggedly to a prehistoric formula.'

What had worked just six years previously was redundant as the wider game rapidly evolved. A new decade had begun and the game was taking another step closer to the football we know today.

The team that drew a line between two generations arrived in 1971, just two years after they lost the European Cup Final to AC Milan. They were the second team from the Netherlands to win the trophy, after Feyenoord in 1970. That didn't matter too much; what was important was the way the cup was won.

THE AJAX WAY

Ajax played a brand of football that revolutionised the sport. They announced themselves with a 2-0 victory over Panathinaikos at Wembley and that was the start. Fifty years later, that way of playing underpins the modern game and it has helped form the way of thinking at Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester City, Liverpool and Manchester United. A new version of AC Milan even used parts of the Ajax philosophy to reinvent themselves in the 1990s and, by doing so, the glory days returned to the San Siro.

All of this can be traced back to one club: Ajax, the one that taught the world how to play football.

CHAPTER 1

THE END OF AN ERA

IT JUST happened.

Plenty of teams had attempted it; to stop this version of Real Madrid from progressing in the Champions League. Every one of them failed and it added to the myth of Los Blancos' 'threepeat'. The stakes were raised with each passing year and still they made it through.

They passed every test, with the only real wobble being against Juventus in the 2018 quarter-finals. It was a rematch of the previous year's final, which Real Madrid won 3-1 in Cardiff. The first leg in Turin finished 3-0 to the Spanish club and the visitors to the Santiago Bernabéu retaliated by scoring three times in an hour. The tie was level and it seemed the impossible was about to happen; a team was going to overturn a three-goal deficit away from home in the Champions League.

Real Madrid simply did what they had been doing for two years. They kept their cool, winning an injury-time penalty which Cristiano Ronaldo converted to send them through to play Bayern Munich in the semi-finals. Once they beat the Bavarians, Liverpool were disposed of in Kyiv on a night that saw Gareth Bale score one of the greatest goals in the history of European football.

That made them the first team since Bayern Munich in the 1970s to win the tournament three times in a row. The immediate thoughts early in the 2018/19 season were

of four, something done only once in the competition's history.

Further incentive was provided by the transfer of Ronaldo to Juventus, as the team seemed to thrive when their credentials were questioned. With their talismanic goalscorer gone, disaster struck during the rebuild under new coach Julen Lopetegui when his team were beaten by Atlético Madrid in the UEFA Super Cup.

Real Madrid struggled in the autumn and the coach was relieved of his duties after a 5-1 hammering by Barcelona at the Camp Nou. The team reacted by topping their group in the Champions League and losing just twice between the end of October and the first leg of the round of 16 in mid-February. That set up new coach Santiago Solari and his players for a push to win a 14th star and Ajax were seen as one of the softest draws they could have got.

The Dutch side were back in the Champions League after losing in the play-off round of the 2017/18 Europa League to Rosenborg. That brought everyone back down to earth in Amsterdam after the Dutch side reached the competition's final during the previous season and lost to a Manchester United team managed by José Mourinho.

The Ajax coach that season was Erik ten Hag, a relative unknown when pitted against the European elite, but a character who knew how football operated at the highest level. The Haaksbergen native had once worked as Pep Guardiola's assistant at Bayern Munich and he was a student of Ajax's history and philosophy.

'Louis van Gaal, Rinus Michels and Johan Cruyff, they are the big inspirers' was how he described it in an article on the Manchester United website. 'They have the greatest influence at Ajax, but their importance transcends the club. They have influenced football in the world. The three are

keys to the philosophy I also follow: attacking football that inspires. I see myself in their tradition.'

The principles of this are possession, movement, vertical attacking patterns and pressing. It's what worked in the 1970s and the system had been reinvented for the modern game under the coach who was installed at the Amsterdam ArenA in 2017. Some things remained the same, like the need to experiment and try new things, such as Ten Hag trialling a 3-5-2 formation during his first season in charge. He eventually settled on 4-2-3-1, in the same way Michels opted for 4-3-3 after previously using 4-2-4.

By the spring of 2019, Ajax were a fine-tuned outfit with a settled starting XI. Dušan Tadić was the focal point of the attack, with the striker signed in the summer of 2018 from Southampton. Frenkie de Jong and Donny van de Beek were the engines in the middle of the park. André Onana was the goalkeeper who could pass the ball out and start attacks from inside their own penalty area.

After qualifying for the Champions League proper, Ajax's fluency helped them emerge from a group featuring Benfica, Bayern Munich and AEK Athens. It was an impressive achievement, but other teams had done that in recent seasons and faded once they entered the business end of the competition. Celtic, for example, followed that exact route in 2012 and leapfrogged Benfica to reach the round of 16. That's where the Scottish giants' run stopped, Juventus sweeping them aside over two legs.

This Real Madrid team were adept at wrecking Champions League dreams. Wolfsburg learned it the hard way as they won 2-0 at home in Germany, only to lose 3-0 at the Santiago Bernabéu during the 2015/16 season. PSG thought they had a chance in 2018 after they brought in Neymar from Barcelona, yet the Parisians were hammered 5-2 over two legs.

Ajax went under the radar that spring and many observers expected Real Madrid to make light work of them, even though they had drawn twice with Bayern Munich during the group stage.

Ten Hag's squad were going through a renaissance domestically; they were in pursuit of their first league title since 2014 and goals were plentiful at the Amsterdam ArenA. But that was in the Eredivisie, which is not considered one of the big five leagues in Europe. Real Madrid, on the other hand, had not lost to a Dutch team since 1995.

Los Blancos went to Amsterdam for the first leg in February and Karim Benzema made it 1-0 in the 59th minute. After Hakim Ziyech equalised for the home side, Marco Asensio guided in a low cross and the first leg finished 2-1 to the holders. The game had played out exactly the way people imagined it would.

The only cause for concern for Real Madrid going into the return leg was that Sergio Ramos was suspended. They still had two away goals, which it was felt would more than make up for the defender's absence.

Ten Hag knew his players were up against it when they arrived in the Spanish capital; he admitted as much when speaking to the media.

'We're going to have to produce a big performance and work as a team for the 90 minutes,' he said. 'We're here to try and progress in the competition. It'll be a great game and let's hope that we achieve our target.'

That target was a distant dream when their campaign began, not in the group stages but in the second qualifying round against Austrian side Sturm Graz. Ajax navigated the qualifiers with ease and made a return to the Champions League proper for the first time since 2014. A lot had happened since then and it only heightened the sense of occasion for the visit to the Santiago Bernabéu.

Under the lights, the kids were all right as they matched the home side and scored four goals. This wasn't a snatch and grab win with a low block; Ten Hag's players made a statement that radiated across the continent.

It started in the seventh minute, when the team broke after surviving a period of prolonged pressure and Tadić pulled the ball back inside the area. Ziyech sidefooted home with his first touch and it was 2-2 on aggregate.

Ajax remained disciplined in their push for a second goal and the players made sure everything counted. Their main outlet was quick transitions and one of these created the ideal conditions for David Neres to hit the back of the net in the 17th minute.

Suddenly, it was Real Madrid who needed to score but Ajax kept going, regardless of their newfound advantage and Ziyech twice threatened before half-time with a shot which was comfortably stopped by goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and a dangerous cross.

Ajax didn't slow down once the game restarted and continued to create chances. The first fell to Ziyech and an attempt from distance by the winger went narrowly wide before Van de Beek forced a low save from Courtois. Real Madrid tried to get back into the game but offered little threat and were stunned when Tadić collected a pass and steadied himself inside the area before rolling the ball in.

The home team regained some composure and Asensio pulled one back. Then Tadić was brought down and, from the resulting free kick, Lasse Schöne curled it into the net from a wide position on the left.

It finished 4-1 on the night, 5-2 on aggregate, and Ajax were through to the Champions League quarter-finals. The *Daily Telegraph* called it the 'end of an era' and *The Guardian* proclaimed: 'Real Madrid's reign is over.'

Yet, despite all the praise for Ajax, almost everyone knew this wasn't the start of something truly special for the Amsterdam club. The continent's big spenders were watching on and already weighing up which of these Ajax players they wanted to sign in the summer. The discussion was of an inevitable breakup, even though Ajax were fighting for an historic treble.