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# 1992

## The Birth of Modern Football

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# 1

# A Changing Landscape: How did we get here?

FOOTBALL WAS not invented in 1992. No, football changed in 1992 and paved the way for the game we see today. A perfect storm of political, cultural and economic factors made structural changes that opened up the game. Free movement, heavy investment from rich owners and the proliferation of football on television created a truly global game.

Before this monumental shift, football had been in a decline during the 1980s. Since its post-war heyday, attendances were starting to decline, the quality of football had decreased and there was violence on the terraces. In England, especially, football was criticised by the government and the press, with the *Sunday Times* stating that football was 'in crisis: a slum sport

played in slum stadiums and increasingly watched by slum people'. Hooliganism was an epidemic and the tragedies that occurred in the decade, accompanied by some horrendous reporting, created an image of a dangerous game for the average fan.

Before then, in the 1960s and 70s heyday for the sport, mercurial talents ruled the game. The likes of Stanley Matthews, Duncan Edwards, Alfredo Di Stéfano, László Kubala, Francisco Gento and more blossomed in their domestic leagues and had the opportunity to showcase their talents to a global audience during the World Cup. The attacking play shown by those teams enraptured spectators and if their games were shown today, journalists and commentators would marvel at the spectacle.

Pele emerged as a teenage prodigy at the 1958 World Cup and the Brazilian became a superstar at home and abroad. Unlike today, he didn't make the move from his home country to the richer leagues in Europe. He stayed pretty much a one-club man until the bright lights of New York came calling.

These players were like ethereal figures. Creating art on the pitch with their innovative playing styles amid ever-developing systems put in place by coaches

who wanted to win and entertain. For the first time, these players were seen on television rather than just the sports pages. Globalisation of the game was well underway. The revolution, as they say, was televised.

Development continued into the 1960s with the World Cup at the home of football, Wembley. It brought a nation together and further increased the exposure of the World Cup as FIFA moved to become a more commercial organisation in the 1970s.

Individual players, as ever, were worth the entry fee to these games, with the likes of Johan Cruyff, Franz Beckenbauer, Gerd Muller, George Best, Kenny Dalglish and Kevin Keegan emerging during the 60s and 70s to become poster stars for the game. Merchandising deals became much more common and players supplemented their income off the pitch. There was, of course, no huge backlash to this as there is now because football still mattered, and they weren't all millionaires to begin with.

Off the pitch, managers started to increase their levels of fame too. In England, the likes of Bill Shankly, Brian Clough and Don Revie provided sound bites that were a broadcaster's dream. Coupled with that, they had success to back up their many

opinions, becoming successful at home and abroad. That success began in Europe in the 1960s when Manchester United, Liverpool, Leeds and more brought home continental trophies.

During the 70s and into the 80s, English teams truly had a monopoly on the European Cup and dominated the game on the continent. The tactical organisation and quality throughout the teams was too much for others to handle. It was also a decade of relative parity across Europe, as a whole range of teams contested finals, from Hamburg to Malmo.

Before then, multiple clubs had won multiple titles in Europe's premier competition. Real Madrid in the 1950s, Benfica in the 60s and Ajax at the start of the 70s: these clubs had superb individuals but it was not a representation of the league's strength. For the most part, they were triumphant at home, which continued to ensure they were represented in Europe's premier competition.

Down the years, clubs like Manchester United, Liverpool, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Juventus, Inter, Milan, Bayern Munich and Ajax have been the forces that swept aside any challenger. And if a challenger

did come into view these big clubs would simply retool and strengthen their squads.

League football always had these dominant clubs that defined eras. They were the big names in each domestic league, fighting for every trophy and developing (or buying) the best players. Often, they provided the spine of the national teams. It allowed these individuals to develop as a collective and experience more success. With success comes the desire to stay at the top and as the game expanded, more clubs wanted a piece of the success on offer.

Football was successful the world over, with huge participation numbers and high viewing figures on television. Domestic games were now becoming part of TV schedules and in England the FA Cup was known the world over for its competitive games and shock results. This appetite for football allowed the game to continue to spread at a rapid rate with World Cups now becoming huge television events, offering host countries the chance to benefit.

The World Cup in Mexico in 1970 presented a game in full technicolour glory. Vibrant kits, crowds and the lush green pitches made the game glow. The truly superb individuals and teams playing during

this time are some of the best the world has ever seen. There aren't many decades where a team that did not win any honours on the international stage are remembered more than the winners; hello the Netherlands and Total Football.

After those first few decades of post-war football and the advent of the European Cup in 1955, football reached a crossroads in the 1980s. As is so often the case, sport follows the political and cultural movements of the world it occupies. So, with the Cold War in full flow, there was a real sense of tribalism in the separation between nations. It was also the start of a period that prioritised the individual. Success would not be measured by the collective spirit or achievements of people, but by their individual status and wealth. This, in truth, was a driver for change in the late 80s and early 90s.

Changes had already started to happen across Europe as the 70s became the 80s. For one, Italy had begun the process of allowing foreign-born players to come into the league. This meant that their league became much stronger technically and tactically as a range of coaches and some of the world's best players arrived: players like Michel Platini, Diego Maradona,

Michael Laudrup and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge to name a few of the stars. Italy also attracted many UK-based players to sunnier climes. Liam Brady, Trevor Francis, Graeme Souness, Luther Blissett, Ray Wilkins and more left the British game to test themselves against the best. At this point, they were also being handsomely rewarded for their work. Money was flowing through the Italian game thanks to families like the Agnellis at Juventus and their Fiat empire. These star players were expected to provide the moments that would win a game, as Serie A was notoriously defensive, more so than any other league, and the football was brutal.

The Italian game had been focused around *catenaccio* which is a defence-first tactical system, credited to Karl Rappan in Switzerland. In his comprehensive history of Italian football, *Calcio*, author John Foot notes its most simple principle: take away an attacker and add a defender. Italian football up to the late 1980s was built on this foundation. Hector Herrera's Inter were the purveyors of this style, achieving huge success in the 1960s which Foot describes as an adaptation of the traditional style that had been used in the decades prior.

As you can imagine, games were low-scoring and defensive expertise was prioritised over attacking freedom.

The cynicism and 'boring' nature of the tactics made enemies of the system, especially when you had international teams like Brazil playing a much more aggressive, attacking style of football. Herrera and the Inter faithful did not care too much as their trophy cabinet bulged during this period.

Italian teams also became known for their fearsome defensive stoppers, combative players who used the rules as flexibly as referees would allow. Their attitude towards the dark arts of defence was one of ultimate commitment and professionalism. The emergence of players like Paolo Maldini and Ciro Ferrara in the 1980s in Serie A provided the template for many a defender as the game became more attack-focused in the 1990s.

This is not to say that Italian football didn't have its creative players. There is a long list of players down the years that provided their supporters with incredible moments. The use of the *regista*, the midfield director, allowed players like Gianni Rivera to excel. Andrea Pirlo in the modern era played the *regista* role superbly

as demonstrated by his array of titles won at Milan and Juventus.

The late 1960s, and the understanding that *catenaccio* was not unbeatable, brought a newer, faster-paced brand of football and the proponents of that style who achieved huge success were Rinus Michels' Ajax. He was a disciplinarian who brought a professionalism to the club, so that players would be able to cope with his advanced technical and tactical training regime.

Jonathan Wilson notes in his book *Inverting the Pyramid* that the Ajax players had developed the ability to interchange positions rapidly amidst Michels' constant adaptations to his attacking formula. He notes that their pressing was what really set their team apart from the others of that era. On leaving Ajax, Michels took his ideas and principles to Barcelona, and when joined by Cruyff, won La Liga in 1973/74. His shadow would loom large over some of the developments and successes in the modern era from players to coaches.

If the 1960s belonged to *catenaccio* in Milan and Total Football (*totaalvoetbal*) defined the majority of the 1970s, it would be English teams who dominated

the European game as the 1970s became the 80s. Of course, Jock Stein's Celtic and Matt Busby's Manchester United had lifted the biggest honour in European football, but no team had dominated. Since the inception of the European Cup in 1955 there were only three teams who were not multiple winners: Celtic, United and Feyenoord.

Bob Paisley and Brian Clough changed that as their sides were part of an unbroken six-year run of European Cup winners from England. It may be telling that five of those six wins were 1-0, which just seems like a typical English result.

Before then, English clubs had lagged behind their European counterparts in the post-war era, as often players and coaches sought to develop elsewhere. Throughout the previous decades the likes of Jimmy Hogan, Jack Reynolds and Vic Buckingham had innovated tactically on the continent, creating successful disciples to carry on their work. Players such as John Charles and Jimmy Greaves had left for Serie A, where restrictions on maximum wages did not apply.

After the huge tactical changes that had swept through football since the 1950s, managers had started

to develop their own style and way of playing. They would pick different elements of other systems and not all were wedded to the famous W-M formation, which was dying out thanks to the systems developed by Rocco, Herrera, Michels etc.

Bob Paisley was part of the 'boot room' created under Bill Shankly's leadership at Liverpool as they rose from the Second Division in the late 60s and built a team and philosophy that dominated the 70s and 80s. Shankly realised that, after European Cup disappointments, building play from the back was the only way to play. Shankly, not a renowned tactician – that was Paisley's area of expertise – identified with the ideas set out by Jimmy Hogan decades earlier. Jonathan Wilson notes that Shankly 'had a belief in control almost as profound as Hogan's'. He certainly developed a side that was possession-based and would not look out of place in today's game.

All of these tactical developments and the implementation of ideas like pressing and playing out from the back were creating a much more cosmopolitan game. Clubs were facing each other on the European stage in three major competitions: the European Cup, UEFA Cup and Cup Winners' Cup.

These challenges were embraced by teams that wanted to succeed. Utilising new techniques and adapting old tactics, with foundations of a national identity, made the club game so rich and diverse.

As the 1990s approached, football had been beset by widespread problems of violence across the main leagues in Europe. Football was changing, and especially in England, hooligan culture had taken over the terraces. Matches were marred by violence. The tragedies at Heysel, Bradford and Hillsborough provided examples of varying degrees of administrative incompetence, violence and political interference and cover-up. There would be changes and these would be far-reaching.

The Taylor Report was the first domino to fall in England. Published in 1990 after the tragedy at Hillsborough, the inquiry was commissioned by Margaret Thatcher's government to find out what had caused 97 football fans to lose their lives. Taylor laid blame at the door of the police, but the scale of the tragedy would not be revealed until many years later, after much persistence and campaigning from the survivors' families and the whole city of Liverpool.

One of the recommendations to arise from the report was the need to improve the quality of stadiums across the country. A large portion of the nation's football grounds were no longer fit for purpose and additional safety measures would be required. The removal of standing areas from all professional grounds was the key strand running through the recommendations, but the government eventually reduced this in 1992, to exclude the lowest two leagues in England.

A move to all-seater stadiums was an effort to improve conditions at football matches. Too often, fans had feared for their safety in huge explosions of violence that really did plague the game in the 1980s. It would come to change the audience who watched football and provide huge growth for the sport in the 90s.

During this period, a different breed of owner was emerging and they could see the potential in football. They were desperate for change. The voices in football were no longer the local boys done good; the men in the boardrooms wanted to sell their product and make money. David Dein (Arsenal), Martin Edwards (Manchester United), Irving Scholar (Tottenham

Hotspur), Phil Carter (Everton) and Noel White (Liverpool) were looking to modernise the English game. They loved football and wanted to make their forays into their favourite sport successful.

These men wanted to change the way the game was run. They wanted entertainment at the forefront, keeping supporters happy by putting a better product on the pitch. It was a time of difficulty for people financially and this often spilled out on to the terraces. All the chairmen could see what was happening in the biggest television market for sports: the USA. It gave them the idea that things could change for the better. They just needed a better sales pitch.

The turning point at the end of decades of change, tactical development and creation of many football superstars was Italia 90. The impact of this tournament was seismic, nowhere more so than on English football.

The new stadiums and the intense and fanatical support in Italy that summer, couldn't hide the fact that the football on show was, at times, dull and dreary. A collection of the world's best players was not supposed to produce football that did not excite fans. The personalities were still there, the talent was

still there, but the game was in danger of becoming less of a spectacle. For football administrators, owners and broadcasters, this was not what they wanted.

Italia 90 is still held up for many as the tournament that they remember the most. They remember the kits, the players and the madcap moments involving Roger Milla or Gazza. The reality was a tournament that produced the least number of goals per game of any World Cup. But football is about narrative as well as what happens on the pitch. If anything, the modern game has morphed into a narrative-driven sport, rather than sport that drives the narrative. Whether this is better, or worse, is probably the subject of another book.

One nation that benefited more than most from Italia 90 was England. For a country whose game had been taken over by hooliganism in the 1980s, as well as an alarming decline in attendances, a positive showing in the biggest sporting event in the world was essential. The problem was, there was no real hope that this would happen. Not according to most of the English press and fans, anyway.

When Bobby Robson arrived in the England dugout, his Ipswich side had just won the UEFA

Cup, which cemented English football as the most dominant in Europe. Domestic football was booming, but changes in the boardrooms of the biggest clubs altered the drive and ambition of clubs at the highest level to generate success off the pitch as well as on it.

After a poor Euro 88, Robson's stock was low going into the 1990 competition. Never a good sign for a manager. When information leaked about Robson leaving after Italia 90, and having that next job lined up, the press (and some fans) were incredulous. How could Robson do this to England? Why not remove him from the team now? Questions that needed to be answered, but instead, the England team were galvanised by the noise and battened down the hatches.

The treatment of Robson and subsequent England managers by the press has been a huge issue. Obviously, journalists know what sells newspapers, but for the players and staff involved with these tournaments it can hardly be easy to prepare with so much distraction. Robson certainly felt this pressure throughout this tenure, and it would amplify even further for his successor, paving the way for the current modern obsession of 24-hour news, fake Sheikhs and even phone hacking.

Once the tournament came around, and despite the usual injury concerns, the squad looked strong. England were blessed with some excellent forward players from the top clubs who were much more committed to playing football rather than the kick-and-rush tactics advocated by Charles Hughes. He was the FA technical director in the 1980s and early 90s who endorsed a direct approach to football. Fewer than five passes was the most desirable passage of play, which he put down to research based on top-level games. The research was flimsy, limited and far too selective for any true conclusions to be made. Unfortunately, his ideas permeated the English game despite the talent at some of the top clubs.

John Barnes, Gary Lineker, Paul Gascoigne, Peter Beardsley, David Platt and Chris Waddle were all coming to the peak of their powers. On paper, it looked like England would do well. Integrating such quality into a coherent unit would prove difficult, but Robson had to find a solution somehow. There are, I'm sure, many modern managers who would be able to fashion a system that worked for all these players, with today's focus on positionless and role-driven players. Imagine Pep Guardiola with Barnes and Waddle hugging the

touchline, providing the ammunition for Lineker and Beardsley with Gascoigne and Platt working behind them in midfield.

Back to the real world and, in truth, the tournament certainly exceeded expectations for Robson's men. Initially, performances in the group stages stuttered, but England became stronger as the weeks wore on. After initial difficulties, Robson settled on a move to three at the back, which meant some tactical tweaks further forward. It is still one of the best groups of English players to have appeared at a football tournament.

England's performances in the knockout games showed their resilience and determination, with enough flair to secure a win. At home, the country was gripped. Pictures beamed back of England players around the pool in Italy looking relaxed really cemented this group as fan favourites.

*World in Motion* by New Order was making its way up the charts and football had taken over the nation. It was a heady mix of dance culture and rave scene that was bleeding into the national consciousness. The ghastly excesses of the 80s were slowly seeping away and youth culture boomed. And one thing that

the kids loved was football. Here we were as a nation with a team that was about to come within a couple of penalties of a World Cup final.

World Cups make players. This tournament was no different. Stars have emerged to have careers off the back of these events. One player that shone brighter than most was in the England team and on the brink of superstardom: Paul Gascoigne. His life changed forever in the summer of 1990. He would also be one of the main characters in the main storylines of 1992.

Gazza, as he had become, was a fan favourite. His displays for Newcastle and then Tottenham got fans excited about football. A player who had the flair of someone born in South America with the attitude of the kid playing football in the park with his friends. His cheeky persona enraptured viewers and his performances in the tournament were nothing short of outstanding. It was a career-making turn and for the England team, losing in the semi-final did not bring ridicule and scorn but praise and joy.

The team were welcomed back on home soil by what seemed like the whole population. People were falling over themselves to sign up players for commercial sponsorship deals and Gazza was at the

forefront. The next 12 months was a whirlwind. Everyone wanted a piece of him and he gave what he could. His form didn't suffer either, continuing to excel under Terry Venables at Spurs.

Football was transformed in England. The country that invented the game had come out of the doldrums. In the wake of the Heysel disaster, English teams had been banned from European competition, which meant the national game suffered while others thrived. That ban was about to be lifted, and now English fans remembered what it was like to experience success against their continental rivals. The game was certainly not in rude health domestically, but this new groundswell of public interest was about to be capitalised on in a way that would transform not only the domestic game but change the outlook of the sport.

This is 1992, the birth of modern football.