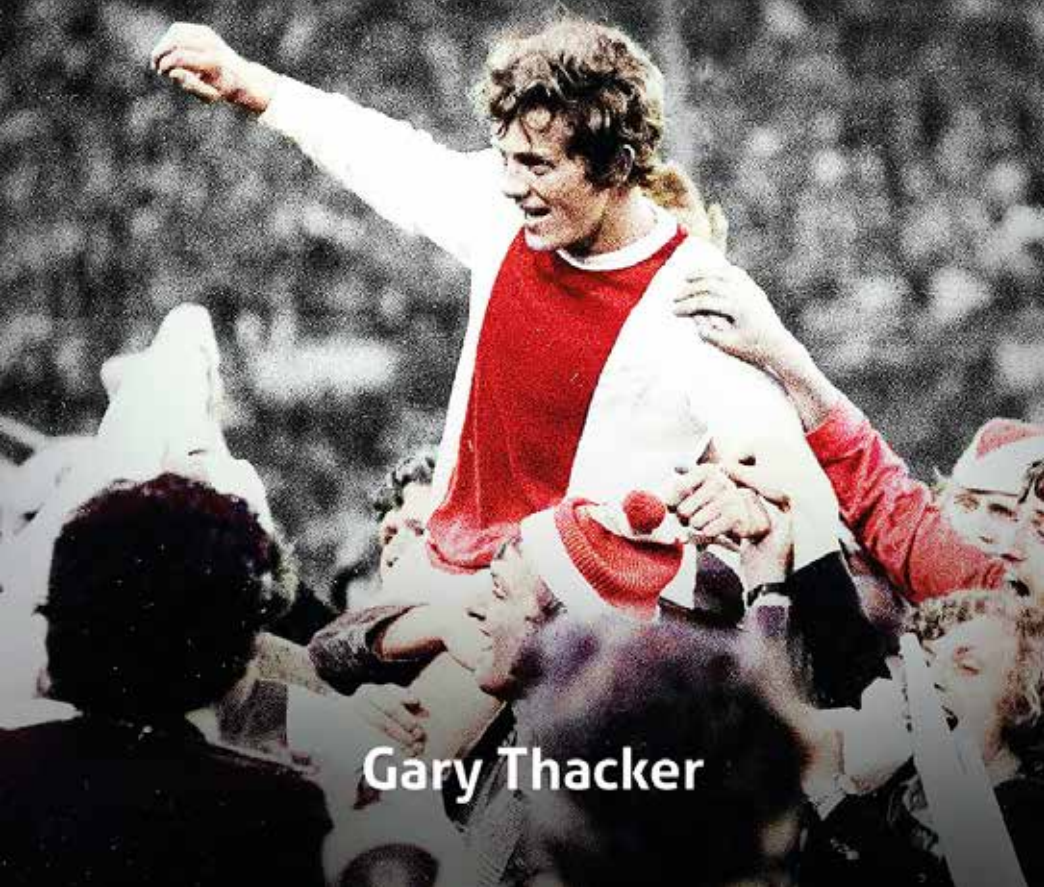


DUTCH

MASTERS

When Ajax's
Totaalvoetbal
Conquered Europe



Gary Thacker

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Part 1: In the beginning

What is *totaalvoetbal*?

Some things simply refuse to be found. The secret of perpetual motion has remained hidden from the greatest scientific minds across the ages. The location of Atlantis is firmly anchored in the realms of myths, legends and the imagination of blockbuster film makers. Dark matter accounts for around 85 per cent of all things in the universe. It is the very glue that holds everything together. It's all around but impossible to see, touch or even define. And then, there's 'Total Football' or, in Dutch, *totaalvoetbal*.

Even the name itself has a whiff of the unknown about it and, when Ajax were scorching the football pitches of Europe with their revolutionary play, no one at the Amsterdam club would have defined their philosophy as being *totaalvoetbal* – not least because the phrase had yet to be coined. The story runs that it was the British journalist Brian Glanville who gifted the description 'Total Football' to the world, using it to describe the patterns of play deployed by the magical *Oranje* team at the 1974 World Cup. At least that's the belief held by some.

Auke Kok is a Dutch author and journalist, and two-time winner of the prestigious Nico Scheepmaker Award for sports books. As well as his work appearing in newspapers and

magazines, and featuring on television and radio, he wrote the famous 1974. *Wij waren de besten* book, a reflection on the 1974 World Cup, among 13 other titles, including his latest work, a biography of Johan Cruyff published in 2019. As such, his theories on such matters demand respect. He considers, ‘The term is older than 1974; Michels already used it halfway through the ’60s and some Dutch journalists used it at the beginning of the ’70s to describe the game of Ajax. There also are some references to the Hungarians in the ’50s but, as a general phrase, it was the English, like Brian Glanville and David Winner, who mentioned it again and again and after that the Dutch and others also did. Michels and the players in 1974 hardly use the term, because they saw their game as something that occurred rather spontaneously on the pitch.’

Credence is added to Kok’s assertion by the long-serving Ajax player Sjaak Swart who – as is mentioned in the pages that follow – recalls Michels using it to him after the new coach arrived at the De Meer Stadion. It’s probably safe to say, however, that at the very least there are still doubts about the origination of the term.

Not too far into the future, first-hand memories of the Ajax teams of the early 1970s will be gone and, like the great club teams of the past, Honvéd and Real Madrid in the 1950s, Benfica and *Il Grande Inter* of the 1960s, the legend will drift into the realms of mythology, where only misty-eyed reflections of images, available through grainy video offerings, can lift the veil of history and offer glances into the past. The football world will be left to wonder how a club from a country consisting of a mere 13 million people became trendsetters for the global game. How they managed to tear up the old established ways and, iconoclasts through and through, eased the existing footballing hierarchy to one side, taking the crown as champions of Europe for themselves.

A new paradigm was established and the *totaalvoetbal* played by the Ajax teams of first Rinus Michels and then Ştefan Kovács achieved Continental hegemony. They did it with their version of *totaalvoetbal*. So what is it?

Ask any football fan old enough to remember, or studious enough to have discovered the Ajax teams of the early 1970s or the magnificently vulnerable ones wearing *Oranje*, bequeathed by the Netherlands sides who lost successive World Cup finals in 1974 and 1978, and they'll nod their heads sagely at the very mention of that magic incantation of *totaalvoetbal*. To know *totaalvoetbal*, to appreciate it, to rejoice in its grandeur, is more a question of faith than one of scientific definition. Like the proverbial Scotch mist, reach out to try and touch it and its essence may simply melt away before your very eyes.

Not convinced? Well, if you think you're in the know, try this little exercise. It was offered to your author on a podcast a while ago. 'So, tell me. What is *totaalvoetbal*?' After the first hesitant seconds, when brimming confidence begins to melt into hapless, blubbering impotence, you realise that perpetual motion, Atlantis and dark matter have another member of their club. You start reaching out for a few well-heeled phrases: it's about players being able to interchange positions and roles; It's about use of space, expanding when in possession, and compacting when the other team have the ball; it's about attacking football; it's about keeping possession and making the ball do the work.

Of course, there are elements of each of those things in *totaalvoetbal*, but could an oblique series of hastily formed concepts reeled rapidly off the tongue capture the real essence of this football credo? Hardly. It's like trying to condense Communism into workers having control of the means of production, or Christianity into the importance of going to church on a Sunday. Having struggled to find a few

sentences that would provide a concise and yet comprehensive description of *totaalvoetbal* – and palpably failed to do so – perhaps canvassing the opinion of others, who have viewed Ajax’s play from various degrees of distance and time, may be more instructive. Maybe they can access *totaalvoetbal*’s very own Rosetta Stone and decipher its encrypted essence. Do they possess the contented understanding of Hals’s *Laughing Cavalier* compared to the naive ignorance of others?

David Winner, author of *Brilliant Orange*, the seminal book on Dutch football, offered his ideas: ‘Total Football was, among other things, a conceptual revolution based on the idea that the size of any football field was flexible and could be altered by a team playing on it.’² He went on to explain that this means when your team is in possession, players should seek to exploit all areas of the field to the maximum extent possible. Conversely, when possession is lost, the team should limit space as much as possible, by compressing the play, hunting the ball aggressively in the other half of the field, and looking to play an offside trap. With Ajax, Cruyff was the high priest of the doctrine, but it was not merely a matter of him alone, as Winner explained: ‘An acute sense of the fluid structure and dimensions of the pitch was shared by everyone.’

The importance of pressing the ball immediately when possession is lost is echoed in the thoughts of Dutch journalist, commentator and former owner and chief editor of the magazine *ELF Voetbal*, Jan-Herman de Bruijn, when he pondered the question. He considered that one of the key elements of *totaalvoetbal* is that ‘ball possession has to be regained within six seconds because the opposition is not organised by then’. He also added that, more importantly, a key element in driving Ajax’s *totaalvoetbal* was: ‘Cruyff’s lack

2 Winner, David, *Brilliant Orange* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

of physique. He understood that he could never function as a central striker in the old-fashioned way. He always wanted to get out of the heat. So, when he was all over the place his team-mates had to do the same. He had the unique talent to organise during the game.’ Necessity as the mother of invention?

Auke Kok’s thoughts have echoes in those offered by De Bruijn in relation to Cruyff: ‘Total football developed from the ’60s: wing defenders running up front to surprise opponents, centre-forwards seeking space in midfield and escaped there from man-markers. Coaches demanding from their attackers to do more defensive things. This happened with Cruyff: also by walking in midfield he had his opponents in front of him, instead of behind his back, which gave him more safety. When he was gone [from the] front line, midfielders would run into the open space and surprise [opposing] defenders. Others then had to take their places, and so on: the carrousel. Therefore, players had to be intelligent and “*totaal*”, had to be able to do the right thing on various places in the field. Much of this happened spontaneously, not by explicit instructions of the coach.’ Kok’s final sentence hints that, once an understanding of *totaalvoetbal* was firmly established in the players’ mindset, the philosophy of it set other things free and allowed the team to dance to the mood music in synchronised movement.

Roberto Pennino is a Dutch lawyer of Italian descent living in the Netherlands. He’s also an author and freelance journalist focusing on Dutch football. He believes that the advent of Ajax’s *totaalvoetbal* was perhaps the final development of the game; a move that took football to a higher level: ‘*Totaalvoetbal* ... to me is a way of footballing that was maybe the last great change of the game. A high level of pressure on the opponent, players who were required to be able to play in all field positions if necessary ... So,

there was no specialisation or holding your position. If a defender decided to go in attack, immediately a midfielder had to take his place. In the heyday that all worked as in an organism: smooth and without the necessity to have to think about it. There was also a maybe underestimated (and unprecedented) side to *totaalvoetbal*: to play on offside. In my humble view those three elements together (pressure, the constantly changing of positions and playing on offside) made it such a success. Not to forget that Michels (and after him Kovács) had the best players in the world to play *totaalvoetbal*.

It's an important point to consider. Could *totaalvoetbal* have conquered Europe with lesser players? As Pennino contends, both Michels and Kovács were blessed with an exceptional squad of players. They possessed both the ability and footballing intelligence to embrace the concept. Pennino continues, 'Apart from Johan Cruyff, a player as Johan Neeskens (the dynamo of the team), John Rep (flamboyant and versatile), Piet Keizer (underestimated but very important on the left wing) and of course Ruud Krol (superb defender and later *libero* with great flair) are all well remembered. But to be fair, naming a handful doesn't do enough justice to the rest of the team, especially someone as Gerrie Mühren, who rivalled Cruyff in technical skills, Arie Haan, etc. They all had their part in one of the finest teams of all time. Especially in [*totaalvoetbal*] terms, all 11 players were equal, although some were more equal than others.'

Journalists, authors and writers of a similar ilk are required to possess an analytical eye as part of the tools of their trade when writing about a particular subject. This is especially so when engaged in the loftier task of writing books, rather than the punchier and necessarily more concise reports and articles in newspapers and magazines. What they gain in perspective observing from a distance, however, they may lose in the detail

truly revealed only to those on the inside. Looking in from the outside may not be the best position from which to fully understand the essence of the *totaalvoetbal* of the 1970s Ajax teams. Players who lived it, breathed it and especially those who prospered because of their understanding and embracing of it, may offer a clearer insight. If that is the case, where better to start than with the thoughts of Johan Cruyff?

In his autobiography, he offered a brief description that chimes with much of the thoughts already proposed: ‘Total Football is, aside from the quality of the players, mostly a question of distance and positioning. That’s the basis of all the tactical thinking. When you’ve got the right distances and the formation right, everything falls into place. It also needs to be very disciplined. You can’t have someone striking out on their own. Then it doesn’t work. Someone will start to pressurise an opposition player and then the whole team has to switch gear.’³

Each player responding to a prompt from another is a theme repeated by other Ajax players of the era, Barry Hulshoff among them. The bearded *libero* played in each of Ajax’s European Cup successes of the early 1970s, and would later coach the club. For Hulshoff, *totaalvoetbal* meant that each player must be able to both defend and attack, even though his prime role must always be his first priority, and after changing, he should seek to return to his position as quickly as possible, because that way the team is stronger.

Sjaak Swart holds the record for the number of appearances for Ajax, playing almost 600 games for the club, scoring 207 goals. He won seven Eredivisie titles, five KNVB Cups, three European Cups, one Intertoto Cup, two European Super Cups, plus an Intercontinental Cup. Although he only

3 Cruyff, Johan, *My Turn* (London: Macmillan, 2016).

played the opening half of the first of those European Cup Final triumphs, and remained on the bench for the other two, few players have spent more time playing under Michels and drinking in the coach's *totaalvoetbal* philosophy. His thoughts have clear echoes with those of Cruyff and Hulshoff, emphasising the coordination and team play necessary to make *totaalvoetbal* function. When right-back Wim Suurbier went forward, as the wide right forward player, Swart knew that he was required to drop back and cover. Soon it became purely instinctive for all the players as the *totaalvoetbal* philosophy was absorbed.

Ruud Krol played more than 500 games for Ajax across a 12-year career with the club, winning two European Cups, two European Super Cups, an Intercontinental Cup, six Eredivisie titles and four KNVB Cups. He also captained the side from 1974 until he left in 1980, later returning as a coach. For him, under Michels, an ability to interchange positions was a key factor: 'Michels made us run less and take over each other's positions, which was revolutionary. It was the first time there was a totally different vision of football. Total Football spread all over the world. It was the only real change in football for almost 40 years. He stunned the world.'⁴

Arie Haan was the half-time replacement for Swart in that first European Cup Final success in 1971, and played a full part in the next two finals. His view was that, as with Cruyff's assertion that to make *totaalvoetbal* work, all 11 players needed to be involved. For him, the philosophy wasn't about formations. It couldn't be compared to 4-4-2, or 4-3-3. It went beyond that, demanding full application by all of the players – and exceptionally talented players at that.

⁴ <https://www.uefa.com/uefachampionsleague/news/0253-0d7ff54908f6-5927d0a16600-1000--the-greatest-teams-of-all-time-ajax-1971-73/>

Everyone was always involved, whether 5 or 60 metres away from the ball.

It wasn't, of course, necessary to be an Ajax player to have experienced *totaalvoetbal* at first hand. While Cruyff, Hulshoff, Swart and Haan were intricate elements in its majestic sorcery, some were compelled to face its glory on the field as opposition players, while others arrived at Ajax after the extraordinary years of the early 1970s but were still blessed by its enduring legacy.

Pierre Vermeulen played for Roda JC, Feyenoord and MVV Maastricht during more than a decade in the Eredivisie, before moving on to continue his career in France. He also played for the *Oranje*. Making his professional debut in 1974, Vermeulen had grown up inspired by Ajax: 'When Feyenoord and later on Ajax dominated in the [European Cup] I was a teenager with only one thing in mind: football. I was, you could say, in that time an Ajax supporter, although later in my career I would play for Feyenoord. But that's another matter. In 1970 Feyenoord won the cup, but when Ajax won it in 1971 it had a greater impact on me, as in the years 1972 and 1973. I loved the way Ajax played: Total Football. It was revolutionary.'

Training with Roda as an aspiring young player, Vermeulen would have a ringside seat of Ajax's triumphs and saw the full flowering of their *totaalvoetbal*, but what did it mean to him? 'The [*totaalvoetbal*] of Ajax was a totally different class, compared to other top clubs in Europe and even in the world. I can't remember that other teams really tried to copy the Ajax way of playing because no other team had the players to play [*totaalvoetbal*] as they could. Rep, Neeskens, Cruyff, all world-class players of course. Individually I was able to copy Keizer ... but no team could copy Ajax as a whole.'

'In 1974 Ajax's reign was over, but I was able to attend two matches of [the] *Oranje* during the World Cup of 1974: against Argentina and against Brazil. It was fascinating to see the combination of Feyenoord and Ajax players that managed to take [*totaalvoetbal*] to another level. I especially remember Cruyff's second goal against Argentina in Gelsenkirchen in the pouring rain. A stroke of brilliance. I will never forget that moment. Later on, I was in Dortmund for the Brazil match. A real fight between the reigning champions and – as we thought – the future world champion. It wasn't to be, but the way [the] *Oranje* played is something that will never be forgotten.'

Jan-Herman de Bruijn agreed: 'The result was seen during World Cup '74 when players schooled by Happel [at Feyenoord] and the Ajax group worked together. Total Football was never played better than during that tournament. Just watch the action of some of those games.'

Playing for Feyenoord would have afforded Vermeulen an opponent's perspective, but Sonny Silooy's experience of appearing in almost 300 games for Ajax in two spells, totalling almost 14 years, put him inside the club, albeit six years after their third European Cup triumph. As well as being a former assistant coach to the Dutch national team and former coach of under-18 and under-19 sides, at the time of writing he is a senior consultant and ambassador at the Ajax Coaching Academy, currently attached to Sharjah FC. He also played under Rinus Michels for the *Oranje*, and offered a concise explanation when asked to explain *totaalvoetbal*. He emphasised the importance of the whole over the individual: 'Organised, individual technique and working together like a team. Michels [was] all about the total thing, the team has to work together. It is still one of the five "core values" of Ajax. Cruyff was more of the

individual player. You can play with 11 good individual players, but Michels made them into a team.'

* * *

Who invented *totaalvoetbal*?

Einstein unveiled the intricate workings of relativity. Livingstone discovered the source of the Nile and Galahad found the Holy Grail. It surely shouldn't therefore be too difficult to trace the beginnings of *totaalvoetbal*. The creator of a system of play that delivered a new paradigm to the game is surely recognised and lauded. Well, you'd think so, wouldn't you? The problem is, that just isn't the case.

Very much like the theories surrounding the origins of Homo sapiens, there seem to be multiple roots reaching back into the history of the game and various locations. In Europe, however, there's a lineage of coaches working in the Netherlands, and particularly with Ajax, that seems to be influential in the very genesis of *totaalvoetbal* in that country.

While the English football establishment polished its perceived glory and preened its feathers as the self-proclaimed leading power of the game, in the earlier and middle years of the 20th century, several coaches, dissenters from the hegemony of long ball, strength and power tactics, sought refuge and open minds among the more liberated attitudes of Continental European clubs. In Britain, they were condemned as traitors and purveyors of an outlandish snake-oil medicine form of football. Not for them the endless weights, exercises and running up and down terracing to heighten fitness, toughness and strength. They championed finesse over fitness, technique over toughness and skill over strength. Had the English game been more open to new ideas, the history of *totaalvoetbal* may well have been very different. Britain is widely regarded as the birthplace of football, and

there's a coherent argument to be made that it also provided the midwives of *totaalvoetbal*. That birth was delivered, and blossomed, in Continental Europe rather than Britain, however, and particularly in the Netherlands

Jimmy Hogan, although shunned by the entrenched attitude of the English FA, is widely considered on the Continent as one of the pioneers of modern coaching. His groundbreaking ideas on tactics and systems of play influenced the development of the game in Austria, Hungary and, among other countries, the Netherlands. The term Total Football would have meant nothing to Hogan, but if the label had yet to be applied, the essence of the system was already in his mind. His coaching ethos was based on what was popularly, at the time, termed as the 'Scottish School' of play. It emphasised the importance of controlling the ball in possession and short accurate passing, rather than driving long balls forward and relying on fitness and strength to triumph over technique.

After a fairly ordinary playing career, beginning in the early years of the 20th century, Hogan took up his first coaching position with FC Dordrecht in the South Holland region of the Netherlands in 1910. He was just 28 years old, but with a firmly established belief in how the game should be played, as Norman Fox explained in his biography of Hogan, 'Versatility was a fundamental part of what he taught. Simply, he expected all of his players except the goalkeeper to change places and, in the modern phrase, be "comfortable on the ball".'⁵ It's surely of little surprise that this ethos was preached in the country of Ajax, Cruyff and Michels. Fox went on to summarise, 'In later years, the philosophy would be called

5 Fox, Norman, *Prophet or Traitor?: The Jimmy Hogan Story* (Manchester: The Parrs Wood Press, 2003).

“Total Football”. He was teaching it more than 20 years before ... Johan Cruyff was born.’

From the Netherlands, Hogan would travel around Europe, preaching his coaching gospel and taking in periods in Hungary, Switzerland, Austria and France. In Austria, he worked alongside Hugo Meisl and contributed to the development the famous *Wunderteam* of Josef Bican, Anton Schall and the ‘Papery Man’, Matthias Sindelar. The ‘Austrian Whirl’ system of play, wherein players would interchange positions dependent on where they found themselves during various scenarios within a game, was a clear forerunner of the system so effectively developed in Amsterdam. The Austrians would dominate European international football in the early years of the 1930s, and were probably the first national team to play a form of *totaalvoetbal*.

Ernst Happel missed the golden generation of Austrian international talent. His professional career didn’t begin until 1942 and, by the time he wore his first Austria national jersey five years later, the *Wunderteam* were more a golden memory than the golden generation. The way they had played, however, had left a legacy and, when Happel later coached at Feyenoord, taking them to the European Cup in 1970, they played his own variation of *totaalvoetbal*. Happel even inadvertently assisted in the development of Ajax’s system and convinced Michels to evolve his tactics after a crucial Eredivisie game shortly before the Austrian took his team to the San Siro in Milan to defeat Celtic and become the first Dutch team to be crowned European champions. That game between Ajax and Feyenoord features later in the story.

During the following decade it was the ‘Magical Magyars’ of Nándor Hidegkuti, Sándor Kocsis, Zoltán Czibor and Ferenc Puskás profiting from the teachings of Hogan. When they travelled to Wembley in 1953, tearing

asunder the isolationist arrogance of English football, they were astonished to discover that Hogan was not an honoured guest at the event. Hogan was in fact at the game, but not as a guest of the FA. By this time he had returned to England and was a relatively unheralded coach working with a youth team from Aston Villa. As *The Guardian* later detailed, ‘Sitting in the stands was a 71-year-old, white-haired little Lancastrian surrounded by athletic-looking young men. His name was Jimmy Hogan and the youths were Aston Villa juniors he was still coaching. If ever there was a prophet without honour in his own country it was Hogan and, poignantly, shortly after the game ended, the president of the Hungarian Football Association, Sándor Barcs, said, “Jimmy Hogan taught us everything we know about football.”’⁶

Very much in the same vein, Gusztáv Sebes, the Hungary coach who had been much influenced by Hogan’s methods, made clear the debt his country’s football owed to the peripatetic visionary Englishman, as he reflected on his team’s destruction of Hogan’s home country: ‘When our football history is told, his name should be written in gold letters.’⁷

The seeds of *totaalvoetbal* planted in the Netherlands, the development of the Austrian *Wunderteam*, and the Magical Magyars all have links to Hogan, but there were other teams that developed similar systems in Continental Europe and, indeed, South America. For example, in Italy, the *Grande Torino* team transformed their fortunes by adopting the more attacking *sistema* form of play, discarding the stifling tactics of *metodo* that relied heavily on defence and striking from counter-attacks, before their burgeoning glory was destroyed

6 ‘How total football inventor was lost to Hungary’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2003.

7 Fox, Norman, *Prophet or Traitor?: The Jimmy Hogan Story* (Manchester: The Parrs Wood Press, 2003).

when their aeroplane crashed against the retaining wall of the Basilica of Superga in 1949.

In South America, the River Plate team of coach José María Minella, with a forward line christened as *La Maquina* – so well synchronised were their movements – were playing their own brand of *totaalvoetbal*. Between 1941 and 1947, they won four Primera Division titles. ‘[By] playing a prototype “Total Football” 30 years ahead of their time. Perhaps the greatest praise for *La Maquina* came from one of its biggest arch-rivals. Ernesto Lazatti, the Boca Juniors star from the 1940s, had this to say, “I play against *La Maquina* with the full intention of beating them, but as a fan of football, I would prefer to sit on the stands and watch them play.”’⁸

Their five forwards, most famously made up of Juan Carlos Muñoz, José Manuel Moreno, Adolfo Pedernera, Ángel Labruna and Félix Loustau, would play without assigned positions, merely going where the pattern of the game took them. Pedernera would often start in a centre-forward slot but then drift back into midfield, pulling the defender marking him out of position and creating openings for his fellow cogs in the machine. In the Magical Magyars team, Hidegkuti would adopt a similar role, although there’s little to reference that this was developed from Pedernera. Despite popular contemporary acclaim to the contrary, the ‘false nine’ concept was not invented in the early years of the 21st century in the Camp Nou with Lionel Messi playing under the guidance of Pep Guardiola, although the latter is truly part of the *totaalvoetbal* legacy.

While football in other countries flirted with their own versions of *totaalvoetbal*, back in the Netherlands, those seeds planted by Hogan took root and were tended by other coaches

8 <https://footballsgratest.weebly.com/river-plate-1941-47.html>

following in his footsteps, until they blossomed. In the same year as Hogan joined FC Dordrecht, Jack Reynolds, another English coach, was taking his first steps into coaching on the Continent, joining Swiss club St Gallen. He would stay in Switzerland for two years, before moving to the Netherlands to take over at Ajax, for what was the first of his stints in charge of the club totalling almost a quarter of a century. During that period, Ajax won eight league titles and Reynolds became one of the most influential coaches in the history of the club. Reflecting on his contribution, Cruyff later described him as ‘the visionary Englishman who had been first team coach in the 1940s and helped lay the foundations that Total Football would later be built on’.⁹

Years later, another innovative British coach, Jesse Carver, would launch his career in the Netherlands at the Rotterdam club, Xerxes. As with Hogan, Carver would later work across several European countries, taking in some of the greatest clubs on the Continent as well as the *Oranje*, but he plied his trade only briefly in his native country. While in Rotterdam, building on the work of Hogan, the legendary Dutch player Faas Wilkes came under Carver’s control. The talented young forward would benefit greatly from the Englishman’s emphasis on training with a ball rather than merely working on fitness. He would go on to play at some of the top clubs in Italy and Spain before returning to the Netherlands.

In an interview with *De Telegraaf*, Tonny Bruins Slot, who worked as a coach under Cruyff at both Barcelona and Ajax, related, ‘Cruyff loved that style: the perception, the vision of play and going past two or three players dribbling. Cruyff’s favourite players, like Faas Wilkes, his idol when he

⁹ Cruyff, Johan, *My Turn* (London: Macmillan, 2016).

was younger, had those qualities.¹⁰ The young boy who would later become the high priest of *totaalvoetbal* was already falling under its persuasive enchantment.

In the Netherlands, land of tulips, the green shoots of Hogan's initial work were beginning to sprout forth and, if the initial spadework had been completed by the pioneering coach, evolution and development would follow as others assured its growth. So, who was it that truly invented *totaalvoetbal* in the Netherlands? Was it Hogan or the men who followed him and worked to make the system blossom into full-flowering beauty of the early 1970s? It's a question that only has opinions masquerading as answers. Surprisingly, those who followed Hogan weren't Dutch. In the main, they were British.

* * *

The British are coming!

Between 1910 when they appointed their first coach, and 1965 when Rinus Michels took control of the club's fortunes, Ajax had made 12 appointments to the post and, in 43 of those 55 years, the man leading the club was British. It was hardly a unique situation across the Continent. Widely acknowledged, and self-promoted, as the premier footballing country in the world, there was a natural tendency for clubs to appoint coaches from England, seeking to adopt the successful ways of English football. As with Hogan, however, many of the young British coaches who sought to ply their trade on the Continent were dissenters from the dominant orthodoxy, renegades and outliers – or at least perceived to be so by the English football establishment.

10 <https://m.allfootballapp.com/news/La-Liga/Cruyff-would-have-enjoyed-De-Jongs-game-enormously/1197788>