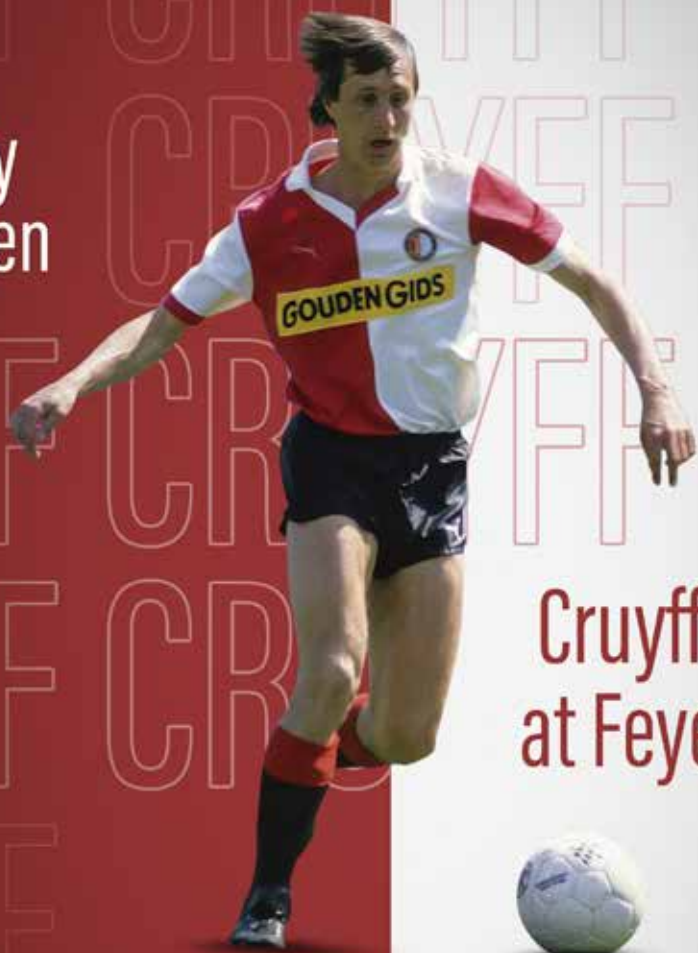


Andy
Bollen



Cruyff's Year
at Feyenoord



FIERCE GENIUS

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Chapter 1

Even in his Youth ... Love of Ajax

THE VERY notion of someone born, bred and growing up in the shadow of a club and dreaming of playing for his team seems so alien now. Football, and with it, wider society has changed. Yet few words get real fans more excited than hearing 'one of our own' is coming through the youth setup. The very concept of a player showing so much promise being guided through the ranks, coming through every age group, who not only lived around the corner from the club but was steeped in the very fabric of it, knew and loved its history and tradition, whose mum was a cleaner there. To know the deep love and passion Johan Cruyff felt for his only team serves to magnify his decision to sign for Feyenoord. This love of Ajax was more than a professional arrangement; this was his team. This was a football club encrypted in his DNA. As soon as he could walk, then kick a ball, it was Ajax he wanted to play for. The club meant everything to him.

As a child, youth and adult, Ajax nurtured, raised and developed the player into a football superstar. Cruyff joined the club on his tenth birthday, in 1957, and stayed until 1973,

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returning in 1981 until 1983. It's difficult to contemplate the depth of Cruyff's emotional bond to the club, and makes more astonishing their decision, to discard him, in 1983. It's difficult to imagine the emotional distress and hurt this would have caused the player, who had won three consecutive European Cups for the side.

It is arguable that Ajax president Ton Harmsen and the board possibly made one of the worst decisions in Dutch football when they decided not to continue with Cruyff's gate-deal pension fund arrangement for another year. To them, he had served his purpose. It was time for a sweeping change. Fans love a gesture; a strong president and board putting the club legend in his place. Cruyff was yesterday's man, a washed-up has-been. He was 36, but equally, he'd played a major part in securing the Eredivisie and the Dutch Cup for Ajax, so the decision came as a surprise, particularly to Cruyff.

Seldom in football has a club let an asset go only to see the decision rebound so spectacularly. Perhaps AC Milan's bizarre decision to let Andrea Pirlo run his contract down and then dump the playmaker, aged 32, after a decade, is comparable. Pirlo, deemed surplus to requirements by Massimiliano Allegri, went on to join Juventus and became a pivotal part of Antonio Conte's project to rouse the sleeping giant and help them win the league for the first time in nine years.

As a child, Cruyff grew up in the shadows of the Ajax De Meer Stadion, and his parents owned a greengrocer's shop in Betondorp. This was a working-class region, built after the First World War, and like many similar projects in cities across Europe, it was a social housing area. The Dutch had run out

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of bricks so started experimenting with low-cost pouring techniques with various types of concrete. Thus came the name Betondorp, which means '*Concrete Village*', an architectural style best described on those BBC4 shows, as 'brutalist'.

Cruyff rarely complained though, and like most of his generation was allowed, even encouraged to play outside for hours on end. One of Cruyff's favourite mantras was 'turning a disadvantage into an advantage'. He claimed the concrete surroundings did not hinder his game but helped develop it. He would use the speed and strange angles the ball deflected off concrete surfaces, kerbs and walls to develop, turn and react to control it. He added, with the most profound logic, that playing on the concrete streets of Betondorp helped his balance on the ball, allowing him to stay on his feet as much as possible as it hurt when he fell on concrete.

When an Ajax player was out either injured or sick and unable to play and so receive a bonus (they were semi-professional and it was the 1950s), a young Johan would help his dad, who ran a fruit and veg stall, deliver baskets of fruit and vegetables to the stadium for the players. The staff at the club got to know Joppie, the 'delivery boy'. His dad's best friend, 'Uncle Henke', who worked at the club, allowed him to do odd jobs around the stadium.

One of Cruyff's earliest Ajax memories as a youngster was an evening match when he was on the pitch, under floodlights, in front of a full crowd. It wasn't to play though. Henke had arranged for him to help aerate the goal area at half-time with a pitchfork. Later, when Cruyff set up his foundation, he claimed this night had a lasting impact on him. It made him realise the

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importance of everyone involved at a football club, from the first team to the tea lady, to the cleaners, to the kit man, to the groundsmen who took such a pride in their roles. He would demand these high standards as a coach, pushing everyone to do their best, no matter the task.

One of Cruyff's heroes growing up was Dutch player Servaas 'Fass' Wilkes. When you watch grainy footage of Wilkes it's clear why. His game was based around creativity, dribbling, attacking and of course, scoring goals; a style of game very similar to Cruyff's. They both used individual skill, taking the ball around people with ease, and if there were any problems both had a great sprint to get away from tackles. Then there were the goals. Wilkes even had a habit of entertaining the crowds by keeping the ball when a simple pass was on. He appeared to skip and dodge tackles and like Cruyff, was an agile, elegant forward who could hold on to the ball under great pressure. The similarities are uncanny.

Wilkes signed for his local Rotterdam side, Xerxes, in 1940. His scoring exploits and attacking flair eventually earned a call-up to the Netherlands squad in 1946. On his debut, he scored four against Luxembourg, then scored a hat-trick against Belgium. Professional sides wanted to sign him but were blocked by the KNVB (Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbalbond), the Royal Netherlands Football Association, for breaking its strictly amateur code. Wilkes remained determined to become professional. He eventually signed for Inter Milan in the summer of 1949. The KNVB was enraged and its chairman, Karel Lotsy, determined to preserve the amateur status of the game, imposed a five-year ban on Wilkes. You can see why

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Cruyff described him as his idol, clearly not only for his skill as a player but someone strong-willed, who knew his mind and stood up to officialdom. Even back then the Dutch authorities clipped the wings of their best player. Maybe they didn't like anyone getting above their station?

It seems ludicrous that the KNVB would be so keen to impose and push these officious rules, to stop players like Wilkes from playing football for the national side, rather than trying to change the rules to allow him to appear. Before Cruyff, Wilkes was by far the best footballer the Dutch had ever produced; he earned 39 caps and scored 35 goals despite six years between 1949 and 1955 when he brought no end of disgrace on the KNVB by playing for Inter Milan and Torino in Italy, then in Spain with Valencia.

Young Johan had been hanging around and in and out of the De Meer Stadion from the age of five. So, by 15 November 1964, aged 17, when he made his debut for Ajax, nothing phased him. He scored in a 3-1 defeat to GVAV (the club became FC Groningen in 1971). His Ajax team-mates were more experienced and some had known him since he was a kid. They were able to keep his feet on the ground when he started getting mouthy. 'They were older. They would just guide me in the good things and the bad things and by the time I got to the first team, I wasn't nervous. It was all so natural, so automatic,' Cruyff once said.

The following season he scored his first hat-trick, 25 goals, and Ajax won the Eredivisie. When Cruyff had made his debut, Ajax weren't even the best side in Amsterdam. DWS (Door Wilskracht Sterk), who played home games at the Olympic

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Stadium (Olympisch Stadion in Dutch), won the league that year. Until this point, Ajax were inefficiently run. Things would soon change when Jaap van Praag became president in 1964 and the following year, they hired Rinus Michels as coach.

Van Praag was an Ajax fan who started out working in his father's musical business but sensed there was future potential in the gramophone and record side, so branched out to open his own shop, called His Master's Voice. After the war, he continued to work in the music business. In the early 1960s, he presented a talent show, *Onbekend Talent* (Unknown Talent), a Dutch version of *Britain's Got Talent* for youngsters.

A lifelong Ajax fan, he became chairman in 1964. The club had been toiling, so along with financial help from his close friend, lifelong fan and investor Maup Caransa, a real estate developer, the club started to turn around. Then there was Leo Horn, a Dutch Jew who survived the German occupation. Horn was a textile factory owner who also hid Jews during the war and ambushed Nazi convoys. He had also invested in the club for years as well as providing paid work for Ajax players, who were still amateur before the Eredivisie came into play in the mid-1950s.

Van Praag spent most of the Second World War hiding above a photography shop in fear of persecution and being sent to the concentration camps. He made it through the war, but his family didn't. They were killed in Auschwitz. Van Praag's major backing and funding would come from an unexpected source, the brothers Freek and Wim Van der Meijden. The Van der Meijdens were building contractors and, during the war, their family business worked for the Germans, building

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barracks and gun positions during the Nazi occupation. They were Ajax fans and, wealthy from their previous enterprises, hoped by bankrolling the club they would be forgiven and win some influence. If you think that's a little weird, to add to the confusion, they would be joined on the board by Jaap Hordijk, who had played football for the Third Reich. It was strange but in the crazy world of football, it seemed to work. They backed Jaap van Praag, helping him achieve his lifelong ambition of becoming president, and provided the cash to bring in former Ajax striker Rinus Michels as a full-time coach, from Amsterdamesche FC.

When Michels, who by day was a PE teacher for deaf children, arrived in his battered Skoda in 1965, Ajax had just narrowly avoided relegation. When he strode into De Meer to replace Englishman Vic Buckingham, he had big plans for the ailing club. There was no fanfare and he was met with quiet indifference but Cruyff liked him. He immediately got the coach. He understood and shared his football philosophy and, surprisingly, despite disliking cross-country running, enjoyed his strict training and coaching regime, fitness and football tactics, and focus on technique and shape. They got on well and when Cruyff listened, he quickly realised he had someone who shared his football vision. Within six years, Michels and Cruyff would win the European Cup.

Ajax had been allowed to slide into mediocrity. They hadn't won a title since 1959/60, so when they started to get results under Michels, they were still regarded as whipper-snappers from east Amsterdam. They were in transition though. Van Praag moved the club away from one which was

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effectively run by people in their spare time and kept afloat by millionaire benefactors who would underwrite transfer fees and provide players with part-time jobs, to a more professional, forward-looking club. Before he arrived, most of the team worked, would train in the evenings and play at the weekend. Piet Keizer and Johan Cruyff were the only two full-time professionals.

Michels changed the approach, channelling the funding into a professional, well-run football club. Firstly, he cleared out the older players, then he trained the players hard, with shorter spells, more intense double shifts, sometimes twice a day. He then brought in a range of innovative ideas, well ahead of their time (at least for 1965) with advanced training equipment, and maintained a high level of discipline in the shape and attacking intent of the side.

Fitness was imperative but there would be more focus on technique and working with the ball. Piet Keizer, the wonderful left-footed winger, summed up Michels perfectly: 'When Michels took over, he changed the playing staff considerably, and changed the training even more. His was the hardest physical preparation I ever had. We sometimes had four sessions a day. He also introduced the Italian system of taking the players away for a period of concentrated training before a big match. We would start work in the morning and carry on until the evening.'

The players had to get used to a higher level of professionalism. Michels was a contradiction in terms. Here was a coach who believed in modern techniques with an innovative approach but was also resolute with time-honoured, established principles,

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like discipline and fitness. Most crucially though, he had a plan, and if the players did what was asked, collectively, they might carry it off.

He would attain results by maintaining a ruthless level of discipline. Keizer continued, 'He was by no means a miserable man, but he was very strict with the players and there were lots of arguments about discipline. The message was pretty clear; those who did not like it would have to leave.'

This football style was a boom time for Ajax and Cruyff, who could play anywhere and instantly understood what his coach required of him. They won the title in 1965/66 and did so again the following season, with Cruyff top scorer in the country, netting 33 goals. Another eight years would pass before their style of play would be christened, and given the name 'Total Football'.

Ajax and Netherlands legend Ruud Krol, who played for the club from 1968 to 1980, accurately explained what it meant as a defender to play this system: 'Michels made us run less and take over each other's positions, which was revolutionary. It was the first time there was a 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.'

In the European Cup campaign of 1966/67, Ajax announced themselves on the European stage when they defeated Liverpool. The first leg of this second-round tie was played in the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam, on 7 December 1966. The game was perilously close to being called off because the fog was so bad – what's Dutch for pea-souper? The match was so bad it was given the title 'De Mistwedstrijd', 'the Fog Match'.

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Ajax hammered Liverpool 5-1. They clearly could see through the thick fog, with their passing and moving, which was better than Liverpool's. Ajax passed and moved faster, and more accurately. Context is everything as Ajax then were an unknown quantity, Liverpool and Shankly were famous. In the previous year's competition, Liverpool had reached the semi-finals, beaten by eventual winners Inter Milan. This wasn't a David versus Goliath situation, this was a serious miscalculation from the normally canny Scot. Shankly had failed to prepare and grossly under-estimated the opposition. He had even quipped to the press, asking, 'Who are Ajax anyway? Are they named after a popular British cleaning product?' No doubt it was accompanied by much guffaws and hilarity from those waiting for a killer line for the following day's papers. After the first leg shocker, Shankly remained flippant, telling the press Liverpool would win the home leg 7-0. Many across the football world still believed they would. In the first encounter it was Ajax who had cleaned up.

In the build-up to that game, if proof were needed that football had moved on significantly in terms of sports science and organisation, Sjaak Swart's car broke down and Cruyff, Swaart and Barry Hulshoff had to get out and push it to make it in time for kick-off. Later, they would admit during the game, they spoke about how knackered they were because of the impromptu shove. They still won.

During the second leg, Cruyff confessed to loving the unique atmosphere of English football when playing in Liverpool. The atmosphere inside Anfield had a lasting effect on him. He scored twice in a 2-2 draw to put Ajax through.

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Ajax had enthralled those present at Anfield – even Shankly was impressed – and after the game, the Scot visited the Ajax dressing room to congratulate the team on their win. Rinus Michels wasn't one to get carried away by the result. He could see where the weaknesses lay and would be proven correct. In the quarter-finals, his side were beaten by Dukla Prague. The problem? There was no case for the defence.

Cruyff had a special relationship with Michels. He was allowed more leeway, time to learn; football was a game of mistakes. You learn from eradicating those errors. Michels recognised Cruyff immediately understood his vision of how the game should be read and played. Football was primarily a game of space, shape and angles. It was vital for Michels to have someone like Cruyff on the pitch instructing and guiding the side. He was often referred to as his on-field lieutenant, able to quickly shape and organise his side. One of the features of Cruyff's game, apart from his ability, was his constant pointing and controlling of players on their positioning during the match and telling everyone where to stand. Starting position was everything; football and Michels's system of playing required this level of perfection and precision for it to work tactically.

His Ajax team-mate Barry Hulshoff (who passed away in February 2020) shared some insight on what it was like to share the pitch with Cruyff: 'We discussed space the whole time. Cruyff always talked about where people should run, where they should stand, where they should not be moving. It was all about making space and coming into space.'

The football world started to take notice of this guy playing for Ajax. Cruyff had started to make waves. A few seasons after

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breaking through he was catching the eye, and then there was the result against Liverpool which really saw his profile rising. Quick, elegant, skilful and intelligent, he was central to the brand of football Ajax played. The team's style clashed with the prevalent one of an era when games could get agricultural. They were about power, strength and tough tackling, played on surfaces resembling half-ploughed farmland. Even then, Cruyff was able to dribble around players, and with his rangy long legs, vault over opponents trying to hit him and avoid ruthless tackles by somehow managing to glide over what would be red-card challenges today.

* * *

Returning home from a remarkable footballing odyssey, Cruyff was still in great shape, better than even he expected, and by 1981 he was keeping fit and training with Ajax. He was also able to keep up and compete. Ajax offered him a deal in December 1981 so he re-signed and that season they won the Eredivisie. The following season he won the league and cup double and was back in form, playing delightful stuff. In fact, during this period of his career, he scored one of his most memorable goals. When taking a penalty in 1982 against Helmond Sport, he passed to Jesper Olsen who rolled the ball back for Cruyff to tap in. When asked about it after the game, Cruyff remarked, 'With Christmas coming up, it seemed like a nice idea to do it so people would have something to talk about.'

Over the original nine seasons he had spent in Amsterdam, Cruyff won six league titles, four KNVB Cups and three consecutive European Cups. He scored 190 goals in 240 games

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and was awarded the Ballon d'Or in 1971 and 1973. In his second stint at the club in the 1980s, over 18 months he won two titles and a Dutch Cup. With this in mind, it's difficult to understand Ajax's decision in 1983 to jettison Cruyff. They decided not to go along with his terms and renew his contract. They claimed he was past his best. Had a career of being over-opinionated, shouting at team-mates, coaches, club officials and everyone who couldn't maintain his exacting standards come home to roost? Surely he had done enough for the club to take a gamble on, even rewarding their most famous player with a final season to go out in style? Not with the board then in charge at Ajax. And what did happen tells you more about them than it does about Cruyff.

Cor Coster, his agent, liked to have a plan B. If Ajax would not meet his terms, then Feyenoord would. To say Cruyff's venture to Rotterdam, behind enemy lines, was a shock would be a colossal understatement. He joined the club's biggest rivals, and, initially, they didn't like him much at all. The attendance at his first game wasn't great, and those present weren't interested in his titles, trophies and awards. Cruyff was met with ambivalence from the majority of fans and abuse from the hardcore element of the support. He would have a major job on his hands turning around the animosity echoing around Feyenoord's De Kuip Stadion.