



GLORIOUS REINVENTION

The Rebirth of Ajax Amsterdam

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PART 1:

AJAX AND THE
REVOLUTION

THIS IS AJAX

A brief history of the pride of Amsterdam

AJAX ARE a unique institution. A club of innovators and inspiration, revolutionaries and rebels – one that looked to the future. They've given birth to and hosted some of football's great minds and continue to influence the game around the world to this day. While Johan Cruyff, Louis van Gaal and Rinus Michels are significant to the club's modern history, Ajax's early years and British roots make them an admirable football club.

In 1894, a group of friends and students in Amsterdam, Floris Stempel, Han Dade and Carel Reeser, formed Union Football Club. That same year, they were renamed as Football Club Ajax, with 'football' being misspelled due to an error in the registration form. The name Ajax was chosen because the trio were fond of Greek mythology as a result of history lessons and were admirers of the warrior, Ajax. The team, donning their red and white stripes, played outside Amsterdam, namely at the Willemspark and later in Nieuwer-Amstel, against fellow townspeople. In 1896, Nieuwer-Amstel became a part of Amsterdam and the city wanted to build houses where Ajax played, leaving the club with no place to play.

By 1896, interest in Ajax was dying with many of their members taking their own path following the completion of their education at Hogere Burgerschool, where they all studied. Inspired by England and the English in the country, football was becoming increasingly popular in the Netherlands, with Amsterdam a key hub – the foundation of Amsterdamsche Football Club in 1895 was a prominent example. To cope with this, the Amsterdam Football Association set up rules to provide their clubs and players with a clear structure. Stempel, however, didn't want Ajax to die and in 1900 he wrote a letter to Dade and Reeser, calling for the rebirth of a new, more professional Ajax.

Hereby, the undersigned invites you politely to grace us with your presence in one of the upper rooms of Café-Bar Oost-Indië, at number 2, Kalverstraat, on Sunday morning at 9 hours and 3 quarters, to discuss the establishment of an entirely new Football Club. – Floris Stempel's letter.

He got a positive response and on 18 March 1900 at the Café Oost-Indië in Kalverstraat, Amsterdamsche Football Club Ajax (now spelled correctly) were born. Of course, the 'entirely new' aspect of that was entirely true – an Ajax existed before. This was a more thorough version of it.

At the new Ajax, Reeser was the club secretary while Stempel was their first chairman. Ajax were one of Amsterdam's more elite clubs and most of their playing squad, like their founders, were students and had upper- or middle-class backgrounds. A registration fee was charged, which was fairly pricey at the time, and that registration had to be renewed each year. Professionalism was a must and to ensure discipline – which was a problem at the time – they introduced a strict fine system, which included penalties for not showing up to matches, walking away from matches, not

carrying the right equipment and the use of inappropriate language or behaviour, amongst others.

Stempel remained chairman until 1908 and enabled the club to join the *Amsterdamsche Voetbalbond* (AVB), playing in their first official AVB league game on 29 September 1900 and winning 2-1 away at DOSB. In that first season, the club also yielded a profit of just over four guilders, which allowed them to play in their first away game outside of Amsterdam, winning 4-2 in Haarlem against a club named Oranje. Ajax were a step ahead of the rest in terms of facilities but were still playing in the second division of Dutch football for the first decade of their existence. It wasn't until the arrival of Irishman Jack Kirwan in 1910 – their first professional manager – that they went up. Until that point, Ajax wore red and white, but when they went up, they were asked to change their strip because Sparta Rotterdam, in the same division as them, had a similar shirt. Ajax chose a white shirt with a red bar in between, and that has stuck ever since.

Their stay at the top was short-lived, lasting just three seasons before they went back down. With the First World War impacting Europe, Kirwan departed. His replacement was Jack Reynolds, the Bury-born former Grimsby Town and Sheffield Wednesday player. Reynolds moved to Switzerland in 1912 to work at St Gallen and two years after that he was set to manage the German national team as they prepared for the 1916 Olympic Games. However, due to the outbreak of the war, those plans were halted. Instead, he moved to Ajax. Germany's loss was the Amsterdammers' gain as he revolutionised the club and set the foundations for eras of success.

At Ajax, Reynolds helped raise the standards of the club. He increased the number of training sessions per week

from one to two, engaged in tactical discussions and worked intensely on the fitness of the team. Learning the language was important for Reynolds to improve communication as his players grasped new ideas. The team focused on fast movement, passing and the use of wingers to work on an offensive system that resembled the popular *totaalvoetbal* (total football) of decades later. Additionally, Reynolds also emphasised youth development, with youth teams across various age groups training in the same way as the first-team players. This ensured that players understood the style and could easily transition to older age groups.

Joining the club in the second division in 1915, he led Ajax to the Dutch Cup in 1917 and, following the expansion of the *Eerste Klasse* (first division), they were promoted to the top flight in the same year. A year later they won their first regional title and the season after that they were unbeaten. In 1925, however, after a fallout with the board, Reynolds left to coach rivals Blauw-Wit, but that didn't stop Ajax's British connection. Ajax recognised England's tactical nous, and that encouraged the club to continue in that vein. Harold Rose and Stanley Castle followed Reynolds, and the latter won a few regional titles, but failed on the national scene. Soon, Reynolds would make his peace with Ajax after three seasons away, and his availability persuaded the club to make the simple decision of completing his return.

With Reynolds came players like Wim Anderiesen and Piet van Reenen and, while his first task was to ensure their survival in the top flight, the 1930s were a glorious era for Ajax. The national title win in 1931 – their first in 12 years – was impressive. They scored 75 goals in 18 games in the league season and then a further 39 in 24 in the play-offs to win the championship. Four more national championships

were added in that decade, as Ajax became the finest team in the country.

The increased popularity of Ajax led to an increase in demand to watch them. Until 1934, they played at the Het Houten Stadium, a ground with wooden stands, but as they attracted more fans, maintaining the stadium became difficult. With the Netherlands struggling from a financial crisis at the time, Ajax were keen to move, but were mindful of their spending. Eventually, at a cost of 300,000 guilders, which some of the players contributed to, board member and architect Daan Roodenburg designed De Meer, 100 metres away from their old stadium.

As the Second World War formed a dark cloud over Europe in the 1940s, football and sport in general flourished in the Netherlands. The country, under Nazi occupation, continued the league, but there were difficulties. Due to players being unavailable because of the war and transport for away games being tough, there were troubles, but football during wartime was still relatively undisturbed and seasons were allowed to run their course.

For Ajax, this period was challenging. Reynolds was arrested in June 1940 and sent to a camp on the North Sea as a prisoner of war as well as a hard labour camp in Poland. As the Russians advanced in Poland in 1944, Reynolds was moved once more, this time to the Belfort camp in France. That year, as part of an exchange with German prisoners, he was able to return to his home in England. Football, however, stayed close to him. His 'Technical Tips' column continued to feature in Ajax's magazine, and he even oversaw matches between prisoners and guards.

He wasn't the only *Ajaxied* victim of the war. Edward Hamel, the New York-born Ajax player, was one of their

greats in the 1920s, featuring 125 times. He was arrested by the Germans for his Jewish descent and eventually deported to Auschwitz, where he died in April 1943. Another Jewish Ajax player, Johnny Roeg, survived the war by going into hiding.

Ajax had built a close connection with the Jewish population in Amsterdam in the 1930s. Many of them resided in the De Meer district, and the rapport was strong. After the war, about three-quarters of the city's Jewish population had either fled the city or were trapped in ghettos. However, Ajax were always proud of the relationship and fought against any forms of antisemitism they faced in games. Hamel was an Ajax hero, and he paved the way for more Jewish players, most notably Sjaak Swaart, their record appearance maker who played for the Amsterdam club between 1956 and 1973.

Post-war, Reynolds was gone, but his legacy was eminent. He coached Rinus Michels, who would go on to become one of the most important figures in Ajax history. Before that, in the 1950s, Ajax were involved in key decisions as the Dutch game would go professional.

The Amsterdam club were losing key players to French clubs for money, something unheard of in the Netherlands. Cor van der Hart went to Olympique Lille while captain Joop Stoffelen went to Racing Paris. The KNVB knew something had to be done to stop losing their best players for transfer fees but didn't want to implement the idea of paying hefty sums. Clubs in favour of professional or semi-professional football disagreed, believing money was the way forward. They formed the *Nederlandse Beroeps Voetbal Bond*, or NBVB. Ajax, however, were uncertain of joining them. In July 1954, at their most attended board meeting, the

board were against payment, but were vetoed by a majority of their members. It took until November of 1954 for the KNVB and NBVB to come together and professionalise football and two years later several regional leagues joined together to form one competition: the *Eredivisie*, and Ajax were its first champions.

That also led to their first taste of the European Cup in 1957, as they beat SC Wismut of East Germany 4-1 on aggregate before falling to Vasas Budapest of Hungary 4-0. Englishman Vic Buckingham led them to another title in 1960 but departed the same year and the decline began. Just five years later, with Buckingham at the helm again, they were nearly relegated, finishing 13th of 16 teams. However, it was in that season that things changed. The foundations were laid for Golden Ajax as Johan Cruyff made his debut in October 1964 and the Reynolds-inspired Michels took over from Buckingham as head coach in January 1965. Alongside Cruyff, the likes of Piet Keizer, Barry Hulshoff, Gerrie Mühren and Wim Suurbier all made their debuts for Ajax.

The success under Michels was quick and the rest of Europe took notice. Ajax won the league in 1966 and in December of that year they took on Liverpool at the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium with over 55,000 in attendance. With a thick fog blanket around the stadium, visibility was at bare minimum, but the game still went ahead. In *De Mistwedstrijd* (the fog match), Ajax won 5-1 and Amsterdam knew their team were ready. Dukla Prague may have eliminated them in the next round, but it was clear something good was brewing. It was just three years later that they reached the European Cup Final, losing to AC Milan, but beating the likes of Nürnberg, Fenerbahçe, Spartak Trvana and especially Benfica, who had to be put

aside after three games (home, away and a play-off after the first two games were level), was a matter of pride. They wouldn't wait long for another shot at the biggest prize in Europe, and when it arrived, they couldn't stop winning.

Seeing Feyenoord become the first Dutch club to win the European Cup in 1970 must have been disheartening, but at Wembley in 1971, they showed their class. Goals from Dick van Dijk and Arie Haan led them to a 2-0 win over Panathinaikos for their first-ever European Cup. That would be Michels's crowning moment as he would leave for Barcelona after winning four league titles, three cups and one European title.

Michels was a disciplinarian, a teacher, a genius, and he inspired his Ajax team as well as many in the future with his ingenuity. Incorporating his learnings from Reynolds and using the talent at his disposal, he lifted Ajax to new heights. In David Winner's book, *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football*, he described Michels's influence: '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. In possession, Ajax – and later the Dutch national team – aimed to make the pitch as large as possible, spreading play to the wings and seeing every run and movement as a way to increase and exploit the available space. When they lost the ball, the same thinking and techniques were used to destroy the space of their opponents.'

Replacing him was Štefan Kovács and he carried the Ajax juggernaut forward. Given the tricky task of leading a team he hadn't built, one that had reached two European Cup finals in the previous three years, winning one, he was asked to replicate that quality. There was surprise when

he got the job. Kovács himself booked a return ticket to Amsterdam from Bucharest, thinking his stay would be short-lived, but his work was exemplary. This Ajax team broke records and made history. They retained the European Cup, beating Internazionale in the final in Rotterdam no less, and in the league they lost just once. No Dutch club had ever done the treble, but Ajax did so in that year, as Den Haag were beaten for the KNVB Cup.

Without serious reinforcements or changes to the squad, the success was repeated once again in 1973, as a third successive European Cup was won. Juventus were beaten in the final, this time through a goal from Johnny Rep. After Michels left, there were doubts in that the loss of discipline in the side would affect the team and they would lose their way. Kovács, however, ensured that the players' freedom would only make them better. 'We must accept that Ajax was his opera. It was one of the greatest football has known,' Florin Halagian, the great Romanian coach, said of Kovács's side. Ajax were the most dominant club in the continent at the time and this came as a result of their constant innovation and evolution.

Johan Cruyff said in his 2016 autobiography, *My Turn*: 'In 1971, we won the European Cup for the first time, and won it the next two years as well. So, within six years Ajax had gone from being an average club to the best team in the world. And what was the secret? It was simple – it was a combination of talent, technique and discipline, which were all things that we had been working on at Ajax, even before Rinus Michels had arrived.'

It was an era of unparalleled dominance. Between 1965 and 1973, Ajax scored 793 goals across all competitions and conceded just 183. The third successive European

Cup would signal the end of this era, and the acrimonious departure of Cruyff was central to this. It was in that year that his team-mates believed Keizer would be the more suitable captain and Kovács obliged, leaving their star man furious. He would depart for Barcelona for a record six million guilders, further strengthening the *Barçajax* connection. That began a period of a few lean years at Ajax.

Three league titles at the end of the 1970s were a fine return, but European success eluded them. As football grew and clubs developed, transfers were frequent as the club started looking abroad for players. Denmark was a key talent hub and players like Tscheu La Ling, Simon Tahamata, Frank Arnesen and Wim Kieft emerged. Cruyff returned in 1981 as well and there was optimism Ajax could become the best again, but his stay was short-lived as he made a shock move to Feyenoord in 1983. Having clinched the league and cup double with Ajax that year, Cruyff, 36, was not awarded a new contract. Furious, he did the unthinkable and moved to Ajax's rivals in Rotterdam.

The common trend of domestic glory with no continental reward continued and there was also another return for Cruyff in 1985, this time as head coach. Just two years later, a European title returned too in the form of the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, as German side Lokomotive Leipzig were put to the sword thanks to a Marco van Basten strike in Athens. This was a team of many talents: Van Basten was one, and alongside him, the likes of Frank Rijkaard, Aron Winter and Dennis Bergkamp were also coming through. However, just like the previous decade, players left after winning in Europe and, for a third time, Cruyff would depart soon after as well.

Louis van Gaal took over as head coach in 1991 and, after a difficult start where fans called for the return of Cruyff, he won them over with a distinct style – and that wasn't just restricted to performances on the pitch. Led by Wim Jonk and Bergkamp, they beat Torino in the final of the UEFA Cup in 1992, becoming only the second club to win all three of the European Cup, Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Cup.

Once again, though, the team was dismantled, and Van Gaal would need to start afresh. Fortunately, there was a bright group coming through at Voorland, their famous academy. With a squad consisting of the De Boer brothers – Frank and Ronald – Edwin van der Sar, Edgar Davids and signings like Marc Overmars and Jari Litmanen, they reached new levels. The league was won again in 1994, while the following year, one of the greatest teams in Ajax history won the treble of league (unbeaten no less), cup and the Champions League. They also reached the final again a year later but lost to Juventus.

That year, Ajax moved to the exquisite and futuristic Amsterdam Arena, but by the end of that century most of the 1995 squad had either left the club or retired. Football was changing. The money and career progression didn't lie in the Netherlands and, in the middle of it all, Ajax were falling behind. They were the Netherlands' most successful club, but in a new era for the game, they needed change, and it wasn't easy.