



ONE STEP FROM GLORY

The Story of Tottenham Hotspur's
Champions League Campaign 2018/19

Alex Fynn and Martin Cloake



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The Spurs Way

THE SPURS Way is not the name of a road leading to the new stadium, but it is a route that will run through this story. It is central to the identity of Tottenham Hotspur FC and understanding it is the key to achieving any kind of success at Spurs.

One of the enduring attractions of the game is that, despite the increasing application of science, outcomes often defy rational analysis. The Spurs Way is a romantic concept in a hard-headed world and is part of what enables football to stay a sport, rather than a manifestation of statistics. As Danny Blanchflower, the captain of Tottenham Hotspur's 1961 Double-winning team, once said when asked who would win a match he was co-commentating on: 'I don't know,

that's why they're playing the game.' If we know who is going to win, what is the attraction of watching? If the club that has the most money, that pays the highest wages, that accumulates what are statistically proven to be the best players is guaranteed victory, football is no longer a sport.

In the football business of 2018/19, Tottenham Hotspur's appearance in the Champions League Final was not meant to happen. And it caught the imagination for precisely that reason. It was the product of a remarkable revival in fortune, and of a rediscovery and redeployment of the Spurs Way. It signalled that, as the Spurs went marching on, the soul of football was not a-mouldering in the grave.

If you think there is a danger of overplaying the importance of character and identity to a football club, set Spurs aside for a moment and consider the fortunes of Manchester United under José Mourinho. One of the most successful managers of the modern era – the only one who has won the Champions League with three different clubs – Mourinho ultimately failed at Old Trafford for a number of reasons, among them, perhaps, because he did not understand or value the club's character. Manchester United lost their way,

supporters and club lost their connection, players lost that extra bit of heart that comes from drawing on characteristics rooted deep in a club's DNA. Fanciful nonsense? In the end, it's a subjective judgement, but Spurs' European adventure in 2018/19 is the tale of a club rediscovering its sense of identity, reconnecting with a past – one which it is often criticised for clutching too closely to its heart – in order to create a new present and, maybe, a glorious future.

At Tottenham Hotspur, the demand for football played in a particular way runs deep. The Spurs Way is football played for the most part on the ground, with intelligence, where the creation of the end result is valued as much as the end result itself. It is often misinterpreted, most frequently by those who quote Blanchflower's famous maxim without fully understanding what the great man said. The game was about glory, for sure, but he went on pointedly to say, 'it's about going out to beat the other lot, not waiting for them to die of boredom'. Winning was as important a part of Danny's vision as style, and he came to Tottenham Hotspur because he saw in the club's modality an echo of his own.

Tottenham Hotspur's daring can be traced right back to the club's establishment by a group of schoolboys

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in 1882. They were in search of a sport to play during the winter months when the cricket season for their club was over. Enthralled by the tales of the knight who spurred his horse onto the battlefield in advance of the men he commanded and perhaps inspired by lines such as ‘And if we live, we live to tread on kings’, the boys named the club Hotspur after Sir Harry Hotspur, the real-life Sir Henry Percy who was turned into an iconic swashbuckling character by Shakespeare.

Tottenham Hotspur quickly developed an identity, as a team that carried the standard for the emerging suburbs of the age, for the largely amateur south against the professional might of the industrial north, and for playing entertaining football at odds with the traditional English game. Towards the end of the 19th century, the English game had relied on power and brawn to batter the opposition into submission. The pass and move method was regarded with some suspicion. Jonathan Wilson, in his history of football tactics, *Inverting the Pyramid*, talks of ‘Englishmen convinced that anything other than charging directly at a target was suspiciously subtle and unmanly’. It was in Scotland, most notably at Queen’s Park, that what was termed the combination game was honed, the forerunner of what would become

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push and run. One of the club's players, inside forward John Cameron, fetched up in North London in 1898 and his style of play fitted in with the ideas of Spurs' founding members who were keen for their team to play fast, attacking, entertaining football.

They certainly made people sit up and take notice. In 1901, as player-manager, Cameron led Spurs to victory in the FA Cup Final against Sheffield United in a contest that so captivated the public's imagination that over 100,000 people flocked to the Crystal Palace in South-East London. And to this day Spurs remain the only non-league side to win the FA Cup. The seeds of glory had been sown.

The work of the early pioneers such as Cameron earned Spurs the nickname 'the Flower of the South', and was advanced from 1912 onwards by Peter McWilliam. McWilliam was hugely influential, managing the club for 19 years in two periods between 1912 and 1942 and establishing a youth development system that sought to embed the Spurs style of play throughout the club.

McWilliam's system spawned two influential figures, Arthur Rowe and Bill Nicholson, who stayed at Spurs and made history. In 1949, Rowe, a Tottenham

lad, returned to the club he had played for before the war to take charge after a long fallow period. He immediately restored character and purpose through deploying a modernised version of the passing game, reprising the tactics that had been developed in central Europe between the wars. This style of play emphasised short passing, forwards dropping deep to collect the ball, a fluidity that saw the switching of positions and a willingness to let the ball, rather than the physical strength of the players, do the work.

Rowe modestly denied he was a revolutionary; his inspiration was much more workaday. 'I merely evolved the idea after watching kids running down the street, flicking a tennis ball against a wall and collecting the instant rebound in full stride,' he said. 'The wall-pass, one-two touch play, push and run, call it what you will, we developed it at Tottenham from the rear, from the goalkeeper up to the front right through the team.' The tactics Rowe explained were based on 'accuracy. We had two or three great performers [he probably had in mind Alf Ramsey, Ron Burgess and Eddie Bailey], and we had a lot who were not but they were all made to look great players because of the system we adopted, and because they played in a winning side.' His axiom succinctly

summed up his philosophy. 'Make it simple, make it accurate, make it quick.'

Rowe's team won the Second and First Division titles and finished runners-up in three successive seasons (1950–53), sending shock waves around an English game suffocating in its post-war insularity and arrogance. What is now recognised as the modern Spurs Way had been firmly established.

Push and run heralded a period of prowess unparalleled in Spurs' history, unfortunately seemingly over almost as soon as it began. As the manager kept faith with his ageing team, Spurs dropped down the table to 16th place before ill health forced Rowe's premature retirement in 1955. His assistant, Jimmy Anderson, replaced him.

Quality players such as Danny Blanchflower, Bobby Smith, Maurice Norman and Cliff Jones were added to the squad and Spurs' fortunes turned the corner until ill health again forced a change in the managerial seat. However, the seamless succession was maintained when Anderson's assistant, Bill Nicholson, replaced his boss in 1958. As with his two predecessors, Bill Nick was a Spurs man through and through, most notably as a tenacious wing-half member of Arthur Rowe's championship

sides. His first match in charge, an astounding 10-4 victory at home to Everton, proved a false dawn and Spurs ended the season languishing in 18th place. The quip forward Tommy Harmer made to Bill Nick as the players left the pitch after the Everton game seemed to have taken on the character of a prophecy – ‘It’s downhill all the way now,’ Harmer is reported to have said.

Bill Nick then made an unforeseen but groundbreaking decision: he built his hopes for the future around an ageing, attacking wing-half who had been dropped by Jimmy Anderson supposedly for taking the initiative and reorganising the team’s tactics during a game when he believed circumstances warranted it. ‘I told Danny’, explained Anderson, ‘it was no use my picking the team on Friday if he was going to change it on the field on Saturday.’ Far from feeling undermined, Bill Nick was emboldened by Danny Blanchflower’s singular approach. Asked how Northern Ireland reached the quarter-finals of the 1958 World Cup, Blanchflower explained their unexpected success was based on ‘our new tactics: we equalise before the others have scored’.

With the acquisition of Bill Brown, Les Allen and John White and with Dave Mackay restored to full fitness (he had arrived from Hearts carrying an

injury) the missing pieces of the jigsaw were in place and Blanchflower began to believe that Spurs could do the Double. ‘I told some of the players that I thought we could do it. “Oh yes”, they said, as if they did not believe it or maybe they didn’t know what I was talking about,’ said Blanchflower. ‘Then I mentioned it to Bill Nick. He looked at me cautiously, as if it was another of my fancy ideas. Then he surprised me. “I was thinking about that myself,” he said. We agreed that we all had to believe in it to do it. We must create the right atmosphere.’

After finishing two points behind Burnley in third place in 1960, the scene was set for an historic season.

Bill Nick’s Double-winning side of 1960/61 is still described by many who saw it as the greatest of the 20th century. It captured the imagination not just by playing football the like of which had never been seen before and breaking record after record – most successive wins at the start of the season (11) in a 42-game First Division, most victories (31), most away wins (16), most goals in the club’s history (115) – but by dint of being in the right place at the right time. As post-war austerity faded away it was replaced by the age of mass entertainment, of the leisure society, and Spurs were as much a show business hit as a footballing sensation.

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Tottenham Hotspur not only played stylish football; for many fans and new converts to the game, they were stylish football. Spearheaded by the incomparable Jimmy Greaves, the latest in Bill Nick's astounding series of transfer coups, Spurs finished third in 1961/62, and second in 1962/63. Bill Nick went on to lead his men to the first victory in European competition by a British club. This was followed by another FA Cup in 1967 and, in the early 1970s, two League Cups and another European trophy, the UEFA Cup. He had fashioned Tottenham Hotspur into one of the most famous sides in Europe and helped ensure the club's name was synonymous with flair and excitement for generations to come.

When Bill Nick left in 1974, disillusioned with the way the game was going, Spurs lost their way. Constant battles with players who did not share his principles had worn him down. But while he knew he was no longer up for the job, he knew a man who was. Sad to say the Spurs directors did not see themselves as custodians of a special institution, that their role was to preserve the Spurs Way for future generations. Otherwise, how could they ignore Bill Nick's recommendation of Danny Blanchflower as his successor and select instead Terry

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Neill, a former Arsenal captain? A crass appointment that was to be repeated 25 years later when Alan Sugar appointed George Graham as the Spurs manager.

Spurs fell into the old Second Division in 1977. The great entertainers were no more, and the club exuded the air of a music hall artist whose patter no longer connected with his audience. But it drew on its resources and propelled itself back to the top. In this instance the directors got it right. Rather than sack Keith Burkinshaw, the young manager who had been in charge when Spurs were relegated, they stuck by him. The captain, Steve Perryman, refused to leave the ship that had 'gone down on my watch' and his steely determination and football intelligence combined with the creativity of a gifted young midfielder called Glenn Hoddle were instrumental in taking Spurs back at the first attempt. Once again those inherent, essential ingredients were present – silk, steel and a willingness to draw on and develop what was already there.

The following year, Burkinshaw elevated the Spurs Way to new heights – signing two Argentinian World Cup winners, Osvaldo Ardiles and Ricardo Villa, for a combined total of £750,000. It is difficult to convey just what a sensation this was – in 1978 foreign stars

didn't sign for English clubs, and World Cup winners certainly didn't join clubs that had only just been promoted. The transfer swoop catapulted the club back into the public eye. It was a bold, brash break with the past, a wind of change that would blow through English football.

The Argentinians took time to gel, but between 1980 and 1984, Tottenham Hotspur became one of the most successful, entertaining sides in the country. Hoddle, dubbed 'Ghod' by the fans, was the fulcrum of the team. On the way to lifting the UEFA Cup in 1984, he famously handed out a footballing lesson to the great Johan Cruyff himself when he came to White Hart Lane with Feyenoord towards the end of his playing career. Even so Hoddle was regarded with suspicion by England managers. Despite scoring with a 20-yard volley on his international debut he was promptly left out of the next match, manager Ron Greenwood justifying his decision by saying that 'Sometimes a player's weaknesses can be ignored, his strengths over-ride everything, but I did not feel this was the case with the young Hoddle.' Unsurprisingly, Danny Blanchflower had a different point of view. 'Hoddle a luxury?', he asked rhetorically. 'It's the bad players who are a luxury.'

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Glenn Hoddle was adored by the fans because he was a creative, cultured and exciting player, the latest in a long line of his ilk such as Eddie Bailey, Tommy Harmer, Alf Ramsey, Blanchflower, Jimmy Greaves and Alan Gilzean. Inspired by Ghod, the FA Cup semi-final replay demolition of Wolverhampton Wanderers on a wild night at Highbury, of all places, in 1981 was, for many Spurs fans who witnessed it, akin to the spectacle raved about by those who witnessed the Double team. Football played the Spurs Way.

After Hoddle – who was integral to FA Cup wins in 1981 and 1982 and to David Pleat’s ‘nearly men’ of 1987 (third in the league, League Cup semi-finalists and FA Cup finalists) who featured another great entertainer, Chris Waddle – came Gary Lineker, Paul Gascoigne, a new generation and another FA Cup win in 1991 under Terry Venables. Spurs were doing what they did, turning heads, turning on the style. But then it all went wrong.

From the moment he took over the club he loved in December 1982, Irving Scholar’s *modus operandi* was to ensure that Spurs could continue to buy the sort of players he admired, who exemplified the Spurs Way. To that end, Tottenham Hotspur became the first football club to go to the Stock Exchange. Similarly, the onus was

put on the expansion of commercial activities. Scholar was a football visionary, probably the first chairman to anticipate the potential of broadcasting, commercial and matchday revenues. Unfortunately, he moved too fast and too far for the times. And although his heart was undoubtedly in the right place, his hands-on approach caused problems on the playing side and his vision was not one universally embraced by supporters. Ironically, while the club's merchandising – replica shirts, videos, books and the like – was innovatory and profitable, the decision of the plc to diversify into non-football areas such as leisurewear was a drain on the football club. Instead of providing a war chest, it saddled the club with a mountain of debt forcing Scholar, after flirting with Robert Maxwell, to sell the love of his life to Alan Sugar.

Looking back, Tottenham Hotspur exemplified the 1980s. Everything looked fine on the surface, but the substance was lacking. Maybe eyes had been taken off the ball, but the reality was soon revealed to be very different from the flash exterior. Somewhere along the line, the bit in Blanchflower's quote about winning had been forgotten.

Spurs drifted, stabilised by new owner Alan Sugar after dismissing his erstwhile partner, Terry Venables,

but becalmed, existing on history, some exciting individuals, and at times the sheer bloody-mindedness of the owner. Sugar was, and remains, a controversial figure. He faced the authorities down when they deducted points from his club and banned it from the FA Cup over financial irregularities he inherited from the previous regime. He brought in superstar Jürgen Klinsmann in a swoop reminiscent of the deal that brought Ossie and Ricky to White Hart Lane all those years before, and he sanctioned the signing of David Ginola, who brightened some dark days as the club continued to mark time.

Supporters weren't always convinced Alan Sugar really got the club and at times he seemed suspicious of much about the football business. He'd kept Spurs alive, but it was becoming hard for supporters to understand what for. When he eventually sold up, professing his despair with an ungrateful fan base but nonetheless still pocketing a tidy sum for his troubles, new owners ENIC and chairman Daniel Levy made a bold first move. They axed manager George Graham, unpopular not as much for his Arsenal connections as for the fact that the style of football he played was in almost direct opposition to the tenets of the Spurs Way, and installed

Ghod as the new manager. Opinion remains divided on whether ENIC were looking for an instant crowd-pleaser or had a deeper plan to restore the club's spirit. In his defence, Graham will point out he'd guided Spurs to their first trophy for eight years, the 1999 League Cup. And without resorting to all that Spurs Way malarkey.

Whatever the reasoning, the appointment of Hoddle – hailed by fan website *TopSpurs* as 'the return of sunshine football' – did not work out despite a promising start and he was sacked. ENIC trumpeted a series of grand plans involving continental management systems with directors of football, only to drop them when they went awry in favour of conventional English-style autocratic gaffers, then return to a more continental system... all the while affirming the necessity to develop young talent. The need to do so was evident as Spurs, one of the clubs who led the breakaway Premier League, had failed to capitalise on their own vision and had fallen far behind many of their rivals. As players came and went at an increasingly rapid rate, and with frequent changes of manager as well, fans began to question what their club had become and where it was heading.

The arrival of Martin Jol in 2004 brought Spurs some success and the fans some belief. Jol stepped up

after another of ENIC's cunning plans fell apart when highly regarded former Lyon and France manager Jacques Santini walked out just 13 games into his tenure, disagreements with sporting director Frank Arnesen said to have prompted his decision. Caught unawares, the club had little option but to offer Santini's deputy Jol the job, and he seized his chance. He built an entertaining side that established itself in the top third of the table, and importantly took Spurs back into European competition. But the suspicion was always there that the club's board were not entirely comfortable with the fact that Jol was not their first choice. When the 2007 season began inauspiciously, he was dismissed, and replaced by the moment's next great prospect, Juande Ramos, who had made his mark with Sevilla in La Liga.

Ramos took Jol's team to another League Cup victory in 2008 but the new model soon fell apart and the club continued on its round of managerial musical chairs, grasping at the glory – most notably under Harry Redknapp – but never quite holding on. The streetwise, personable Redknapp appeared an unlikely accomplice for Spurs chairman Daniel Levy but the pairing of this football odd couple gave the fans glimpses of the Spurs they craved.

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The team played some attractive football and embarked on a glorious maiden run in the Champions League. Some of the old swagger and identity returned. But Redknapp's frequent reminders that Spurs were lucky to be achieving anything grated, with a substantial section of the support viewing him as self-serving. In the cut-throat world of modern football self-preservation may have been advisable, but when someone seems to put themselves before the club it never goes down well.

Redknapp was ousted and replaced by yet another manager of the moment – André Villas-Boas. Unsurprisingly it didn't work out, and once again a volte-face was executed, and it was back to drawing on internal resources and a more traditional British approach under Tim Sherwood. The club, though, was riven with factions as the managerial chair spun again. The draw and power of the Spurs Way on the collective psyche was still there, but it needed reviving and rethinking for the modern world.

Enter Mauricio Pochettino and the transformation of Spurs from a Europa League club into a Champions League club.