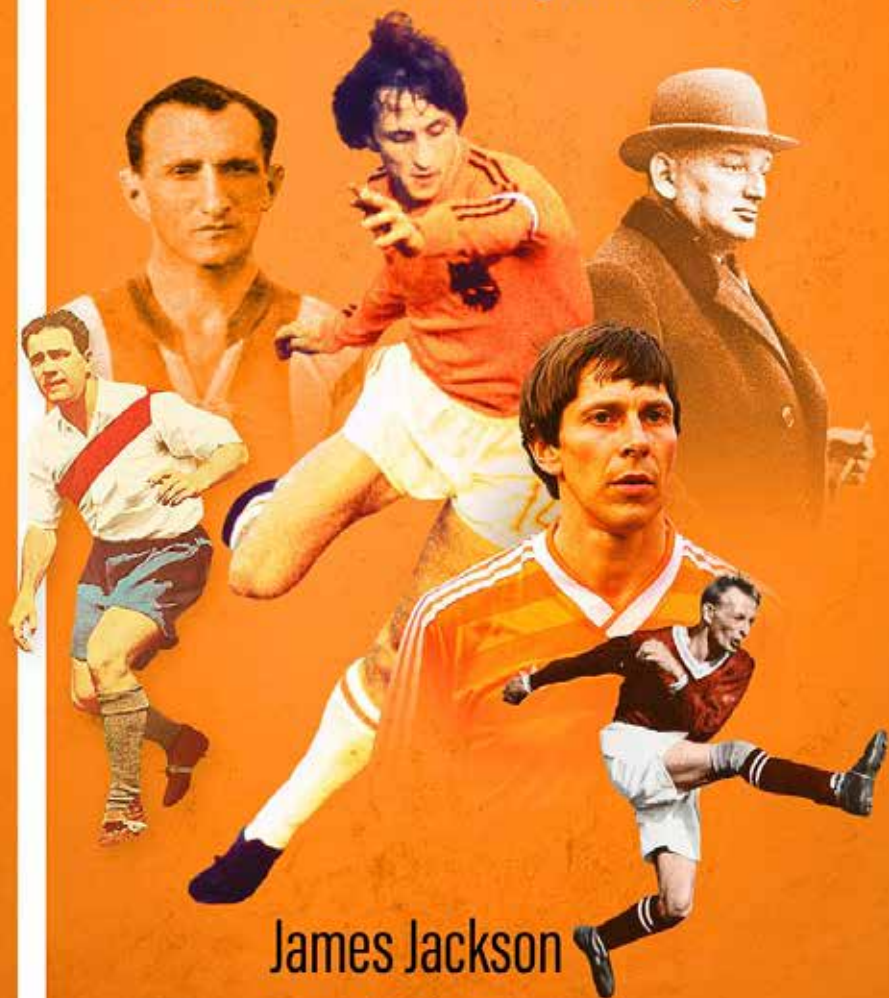


the life of

total football

The Origins and Development of
Football's Most Entertaining Philosophy



James Jackson

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Part One

The Hungarian Roots

AS JONATHAN Wilson states in his book *The Names Heard Long Ago*: ‘Hungary taught the world to play; we’re all the protégés of Jimmy Hogan now.’⁽³⁾ So, with that in mind, the story of Hogan and what happened in Hungary must be told. Although he may not have a direct link to the birth of Total Football, you can’t help thinking that, without these early developments in the game involving him, there simply wouldn’t be Total Football. A point I want to reiterate is that, although I am telling the tales of certain teams and coaches, I do not want to label any of them as the founders of Total Football until the parts focusing on Ajax and the Netherlands. Ultimately, Total Football was born and created in the Netherlands, but the journey this book will take us on will hopefully not only shed some light on what inspired Total Football to be created but will also help distinguish what attracts us, as fans, towards it.

Jimmy Hogan, without doubt one of the most influential pioneers of the early game, helped spread it across the continent with revolutionary ideas. He is often cited as the man whose work helped create the great Hungarian team that would go on to humiliate England 6-3 on 25 November 1953, but I want to look at the work of the Scotsman, John Tait Robertson, and what he brought to Budapest in 1911

before Hogan arrived in Hungary. I am going to argue that it was Robertson who created the pathway for the great Hungarian side, a theory supported by Ashley Hyne in his book on the career of Jimmy Hogan. The fact the base came from a Scotsman is integral when looking at the state of football in the late 1800s.

The Scottish combination

The English upper class created football to be a dribbling game and, to their disgust, they couldn't quite fathom the Scottish combination game, as it came to be known. Right from the inaugural international match in 1872, in which Scotland held England to a 0-0 draw, the Scots outplayed their neighbours. Scotland faced clear disadvantages; not only were they a physically smaller team, they only had players from Queen's Park to choose from and were inexperienced compared to their English opponents. This forced them to look at new ideas. The Scots decided they would move away from the charging game favoured by the English and invented a 'pattern weaving' approach. Scotland started with a 2-2-6 formation against England's 1-2-7 and the aim of the game was to keep the ball away from the English. The focus on passing was unique at the time; it is often said that, before this game, the English never passed at all. Glasgow-based Queen's Park, Scotland's first serious club, made the Scottish style famous.

Initially, the play was quite slow and not particularly effective and only really included one aspect of what would make up the general basis of the combination game: passing. Early on, it was successful enough against the rigid individuality of the English. In the first 16 official internationals against England, Scotland won ten and lost

only twice and the English were forced to move away from their dribbling and charging. The passing masters were certainly Queen's Park and their side contained some of football's greatest pioneers.

Clubs everywhere started to adopt the passing style. Queen's Park eventually fell asleep on their throne, allowing clubs all over the isle to adapt and progress their style. However, it was not a level playing field. Scottish clubs, hindered by their strict amateur status, saw English clubs lure away their talented players. The main focus in England became winning, whereas playing the game in the right or best way had been the objective in the early years. This characteristic of playing football in the right way is shared today by admirers of Total Football. Never mind the tactical implications the Scottish were introducing; just as important was the culture they instilled in the game. The pride of how you played it. Yes, this culture began with a tactical idea – how to counter English supremacy – but, along with the success, it also helped unearth a better sense of what the game of football was and would be.

Even at this early stage in the game, it was not just the English who were looking to learn from those footballers who preached the Scottish style. Formed in Glasgow in 1887, Celtic were invited to tour central Europe in 1904. John Madden played inside-right for Celtic on that tour and, subsequently, was offered a coaching role in Prague. He accepted and was the man who introduced the Scottish style to the continent.⁽⁴⁾ As it relied on team cohesion, the Scottish style must have included a lot of training using a football. This was not common elsewhere. Bernard Joy was an amateur footballer in the 1930s who, although registered as a Casuals FC player for most of his career, had a spell with

Arsenal and, in 1936, became the last amateur to be capped by England. After the Second World War, Joy never returned to his professional job as a teacher. He ventured into football journalism and his book *Soccer Tactics* helped shed light on the Scottish game. He described an attacking, pattern weaving formation with ‘the half-back, the inside-forward and the outside-forward working in unison by short passing to one another on the move ... the wing-halves pressed upfield to provide the base of a triangular movement which carried the ball forward with dainty inter-passing. Final touch was usually left to the winger who did not attempt to cut in, but lobbed the ball into the middle from the neighbourhood of the corner flag.’⁽⁵⁾ Although it was not necessarily tactically effective, what this style of short passes allowed was for teams not to be constantly caught offside. Before a change in the laws in 1924, it was easy to catch attacking players offside. The fact that Joy comments on the triangular movement is also important; the triangle base is still implemented now as the foundation of possession-based football.

The ground-breaking nature of Scottish football was not just tactical. Training concentrated on providing the players with a fundamental skill set that allowed them to be comfortable on the ball, controlling and passing it well. This allowed them to pass the ball crisply and confidently, enabling zig-zag passing sequences that would carve open teams from out wide.

Joy wrote: ‘It was a bit staid and perhaps lacked imagination, but it was polished, correct and attractive to watch.’ This mastery of the ball has become the foundation for many of the coaches captured in this book. As Johan Cruyff would later say: ‘There is only one ball, so you need to have it.’

The English finally started to take notice of the Scots and many Scottish players and managers were employed by Football League clubs as, although by the early 20th century there was a general acceptance among the English of the effectiveness of the passing game, the Scottish were still seen as the masters. The Scottish influence is illustrated by the so-called 'world championship' game, held in Edinburgh in 1895, in which English champions Sunderland beat Scottish champions Heart of Midlothian 5-3. The fact that all 22 players on the Tynecastle Park pitch were Scottish proves where the talent lay.

The Scotsmen

At the back end of the 1800s, Robert Smyth McColl, perhaps the greatest centre-forward in Queen's Park's history, went on a fantastic goalscoring spree for his country, netting 13 goals in 13 games. In 1900, the run would reach its peak in a game against England at Celtic Park. In a 4-1 win, McColl scored a hat-trick in what would be his final international. McColl was tempted south of the border, to Newcastle United, by a £300 signing-on fee and the chance to become a professional. McColl used £100 of his signing-on fee to go into business with his brother Tom. The newsagent R.S. McColl, which still exists today, was set up by the McColl brothers thanks to Newcastle United signing 'Toffee Bob', the nickname Robert acquired after starting his business. Next time you're in your local McColl's, remember to acknowledge Robert's role in the history of football and, more significantly, Total Football, because McColl's time at Newcastle United, albeit only three years before he returned to Glasgow to sign for Rangers, was long enough for the seeds of the passing game to be sown into their play.

It was at Newcastle that McColl inspired left-half Peter McWilliam, another Scot. McWilliam was signed from Inverness, so was not quite as educated on the passing style as McColl, but he would learn. McWilliam was so entranced by McColl's ideas that, when he became a manager, he took those ideas everywhere he went. Most importantly for our story, it was during McWilliam's second spell at Tottenham Hotspur that he brought through three players with great significance to the development of football – Arthur Rowe, Bill Nicholson and Vic Buckingham. The latter is perhaps the most significant for the Total Football story and we will examine this in detail further down the line. Rowe's impact cannot be ignored either; he would meet with the great thinkers of Hungary and help lay the foundations of the great Hungarian team of the 1950s in a sort of domino effect, with the final piece clicking Total Football into activation. It was arguably Rowe's impact in mentoring Buckingham as a young player that would inspire him to go into management.

Returning to the influence of 'Toffee Bob', this was not just beneficial for the Geordies. When McColl headed back to Glasgow, he would inspire another team-mate who would sail the seas to spread the word on how football should be played; John Tait Robertson.

* * *

Another character I want to mention, who appears to have had an impact on McColl and Robertson, was a man called James 'Jimmy' Jackson. Born in 1875 in Lanarkshire, Scotland, his family emigrated to Australia when he was a young child before moving back when he was 18. During his time in Australia, Jackson played Australian Rules football. The game shares some similarities with association football

but, tactically, especially in the late 1800s, it was a game based much more on freedom of thought among its players rather than the rigid, conservative style of association football in Britain. So, by the time Jackson made it back to home soil and started only kicking the ball and not picking it up, he already had a more creative palette. Starting out in the junior ranks of Scottish football, mostly playing as a left-back, he had a short spell with Rangers in 1896 before moving to Tyneside and signing for Newcastle United. But what is the link between an Aussie Rules player turned professional footballer and the concept of Total Football? Jackson played as a 'runner' in his Aussie Rules days. This position is effectively the player who, while offering support to defenders, also has to back up the attackers. So, at Newcastle United, the club's strong links to the Scots helped pair Jackson's Aussie creativity with the technical ability the Scots would have taught him. This was just before McColl signed, but there is no doubt that Jackson had left his mark on the Geordie crop he left behind when he signed for Woolwich (who later became Arsenal). He also left Newcastle in the First Division after helping them to promotion, allowing McColl to inspire the Geordies at the highest level in English football.

After sharpening his skills at Rangers and Newcastle, Jackson was now ready to impose his tactical ideas on his new team-mates at Woolwich Arsenal. Under the management of Harry Bradshaw, who appointed him captain, he was fresh from a promotion from the Second Division with Newcastle and now had it all to do again. With the team plodding along in the Second Division, they badly needed some inspiration. Jimmy provided it, his fresh ideas giving Arsenal a new dimension, most notably his 'double cover' idea. This was innovative, as well as successful. What

Jackson promoted was that when either full-back advanced forward, the other full-back would file across on the diagonal to provide cover for the space vacated, supporting the player pushing forward. This would kick-start a natural revolving motion of the whole team, causing the respective wing-half to fall back into a more defensive role with everyone else shifting position around the centre-half. This unlocks the link to Total Football. Players were now asked to perform roles that were the complete opposite to their starting line-up position. Forwards became defenders and defenders found themselves in attacking roles, both wide and through the middle. Jackson's genius didn't stop there. When the situation required, Jackson showed his versatility even more. He would often instruct centre-half Percy Sands to play as a 'third back', a role that shared many characteristics with that of the 'sweeper' many years later. You could argue that this was the first real sighting of that role. The third back did not so much start the attack, but he allowed the wing-halves to push forward and spring the attacks. This style would become known as the Whirl.

Again, if not a predecessor, the Whirl is certainly a distant relative of Total Football, something I will look at in more detail in the chapter on the Austrian 'Wunderteam'. It was a term used by Willy Meisl and referred to how football coaching needed to focus on allowing players to play with more freedom; something he credited to the style of play of his brother's Austrian team and which also sums up the style and beliefs of Jimmy Jackson.

Born in Dumbarton in 1877, John Tait Robertson, sometimes referred to as Jacky, was a half-back (essentially a midfielder in today's terms).⁽³⁾ He started his senior career at Morgan in his homeland, before heading south of the border

to Everton. He then won the Southern League in his only year at Southampton (1898/99) before his most dominant spell as a player after joining Rangers in 1899. In Robertson's first season in Glasgow, the club won every single league match. Robertson was a clever footballer and built up a fantastic bond with team-mates Nelly Gibson and Robert Neill. All three were specialists in the passing game to some extent, but Robertson was always pushing the envelope and striving for new ideas. It was Robertson who was the first footballer to use the pass back to his goalkeeper as a measure of protection from the pressing of the opposition. It is said to have been a vital tactic for Rangers in their invincible run of 18 wins in 18 games in a division which boasted many strong teams. When Robertson started passing the ball back to goalkeeper Matthew Dickie to reduce the risk of Rangers losing their winning streak, it changed the game.

Teams all over the world adopted this negative tactic, something that was only tackled with a rule change in 1992. William Wilton, the Rangers club secretary who doubled up as manager, allowed all the tactical decisions to be led by Gibson, Neill and Robertson. With the obvious base of the passing style, these three also boasted expertise in tackling and regaining possession. The tackling was not so much the art form displayed by the likes of Paolo Maldini decades later and Robertson was known for the odd bone-crunching challenge. He was also good in the air and, when added to his technical ability, he was a fantastic midfielder, even in today's terms.

McColl arrived at Rangers in 1904 and only spent a year or so with Robertson, but it was enough time to influence Robertson into being more proactive with the passing approach, something he would take to London and

then Hungary. Robertson went on to win three successive Scottish titles but, more importantly in terms of his impact on the global game, was part of the Rangers team who toured Austria and Czechoslovakia in May 1904 in which the Scots won all six games comfortably (it is impossible to confirm, but it appears McColl was not on the tour). To help spread the joy of football to the world, successful teams would often be invited by their national association and entrepreneurs from the hosting countries to tour. Clubs would play exhibition matches, sometimes against teams from their own league who were also touring, with the hope of inspiring the locals into forming clubs.

After Rangers completed the 1904 tour, Robertson became the first player signed by Chelsea, who were London's newest professional club and boasted the capital's biggest football stadium ... just no players to play in it. Gus Mears targeted Robertson as the perfect man, not only for his football ability but also to help find players for their inaugural season in English football (1905/06). Although only 28 years of age and I feel sure he would have had plenty of other offers, Robertson could not resist the call from Chelsea. He had the opportunity to not only carry on playing but to build a team from scratch for ambitious directors willing to open their cheque book. He had a mammoth task on his hands, building a club which had no players or supporters; he also had to play and win matches.

Thanks to the extensive list of clubs he had played for in England and Scotland, he had fantastic connections. He was able to call on friends and peers who had the correct skills and hunger to form a formidable side at Stamford Bridge. His name carried with it a sense of respect and old team-mates and former opponents were among those who

answered his call and joined him in London. His first two 'star' signings were former opponents. William Foulke, nicknamed 'Fatty' thanks to his colossal 22st frame, was an England international. He was a football celebrity and it is said that attendances were boosted by several thousand every time he filled the goal (mainly out of sheer curiosity, I would think). Ireland's star winger Joe Kirwan was also recruited, with Robertson tempting him away from Tottenham Hotspur. I am sure money was a factor in these big names joining a brand new club who were starting out in the Second Division, but the prospect of playing for and with a charismatic footballing brain like John Tait Robertson must also have excited them.

However, the side Robertson was assembling was not some type of all-star team. He could not simply count on a cast of big-name players deserting the First Division to join him at Chelsea. He also networked his way around other clubs to see if there were any players they might be letting go. This worked a treat, as Robertson was able to clinch deals for a host of experienced professionals for reasonable sums. He also held trials for enthusiastic local players who would hopefully add some depth to his squad. The response to these trials was hilarious at times; speaking to the press later that season, Robertson revealed some of the applicants' stories. 'Among the many applications I received was one from a man who said he was a splendid centre-forward, but, if that position was not vacant, he could manipulate a turnstile.' One aspiring player claimed: 'You will be astonished to see me skip down the line like a deer.' Another said: 'I'm willing to be linesman, goal-keep or mind the coats.' Although many would-be players were rejected, Robertson had a squad ready for the club's inaugural league game against Stockport

County, although a 1-0 defeat brought them back down to earth. Robertson – already Chelsea’s first manager, first player and first coach – became the club’s first goalscorer, too, when he scored the only goal in their second game, a 1-0 win against Blackpool. John Tait Robertson was able to build an ultra-attacking side that went on to register 90 goals in 38 games in that first season, including a 5-1 demolition of Hull City in their first league game at Stamford Bridge.

* * *

During the early 1900s, a series of books titled *Book of Football* were published and, in the 1906 edition, Robertson wrote of his team’s style of play: ‘The forwards can play the three inside game or indulge in those long, swinging passes out to the wings that are more effective against some teams.’ This shows Robertson was moving towards adapting the original version of the Scottish style, opting for the interchanging of passes to be focused more centrally rather than on the wings. The terminology used by Robertson is also intriguing; he talks about allowing his players to ‘indulge’ in different patterns of play. To indulge in anything, you have to be deep within your comfort zone; this is even more relatable to football, where confidence works in harmony with a player’s performance. Players who are comfortable in their ability and with their position will always perform better, allowing confidence to grow. Robertson’s Scottish-style focus on mastery of the ball through training would have allowed him to give his players more freedom on the pitch to make their own decisions having armed them with a range of tactics and ideas. The long ball out to the wings that Robertson mentions was prominent in the English game; the centre-half would often switch the ball out to the wing, no matter

the state of the play. This diagonal ball – or ‘swinging’ as Robertson describes it – can still be seen in today’s football. However, Robertson and his colleagues weren’t too keen on focusing their play on this style, believing it slowed down the attack and was too predictable. Robertson shied away from using the wings unless forced to, opting for the ‘three inside game’ he refers to in *Book of Football*. While he still wanted to implement the zig-zag combination of passes more centrally, he also wanted his players, should the ball end up on the wing, to pass the ball back into the centre of the field as quickly as possible. This shows that his thoughts were still very structured and quite simple. Nonetheless, it allowed his teams to be direct and the speed of transfer from defence to attack was perhaps the first of its kind. There is no doubt about it; John Tait Robertson carved himself into football history as the first coach to move away from the old leisurely passing tradition of Queen’s Park and other Scottish team ⁽⁴⁾.

To allow his teams to drive through the middle of the opposition, with devastating pace, Robertson also reinvented the role of the centre-half somewhat. George Key was the centre-half for Chelsea. Also taken from his essay in *Book of Football*, Robertson mentions the role of Key in his side. ‘He acted as a sixth forward and then assist[ed] the defence and generally ma[de] himself exceedingly inconvenient to opponents.’ Was this the early beginnings of the sweeper? What is certain is that Robertson believed the centre-half role was as much about attacking as defending. You can’t get much more Total Football than that.

Despite this fantastic debut season and being mentioned among the country’s top teams, Chelsea finished third and missed out on promotion. The following season’s objective was pretty straightforward – promotion. On the pitch,

they looked in fine fettle to achieve this, but upstairs in the boardroom, Robertson was becoming a problem. His professionalism was under scrutiny thanks to a substance that would ruin so many great talents – alcohol. His whereabouts weren't always known and this problem went unnoticed until a board meeting in November 1906. Robertson was a no-show at the meeting and, looking back at the season's stats, he only played in three of the opening 12 games. His commitment was correctly questioned by club secretary William Lewis, the man who would replace Robertson as manager. The missed meeting would be the final straw for the Chelsea board.

On 21 November, Chelsea received the resignation of Robertson as manager, with a request that he could be released from his playing contract on a free transfer. Both requests were accepted, with the condition he did not join another Second Division club. Just over a month later, Robertson signed for Glossop in the Second Division as player-manager, breaking the agreement he made with Chelsea. However, Glossop were propping up the table at the time and were certainly no threat to Chelsea. The Stamford Bridge club went on to clinch promotion that season and it is clear their success was a result of Robertson's work. It was a great shame he could not be part of the celebrations, as it was the team he built, playing a style he created. Robertson spent two years at Glossop but was never able to recreate what he did in the capital. Leaving the club in 1909, he ended up at Manchester United for a brief spell as reserve team coach. It was during this time that Robertson needed to start afresh with a new challenge and Budapest was certainly that.

As Ashley Hyne points out in his book on Jimmy Hogan⁽⁴⁾, Robertson established himself as pretty much the

first modern coach by allowing more imagination from his players, moving away from the stale 'gentlemanly leisure of the great Glaswegian tradition'⁽⁴⁾ and opting for a quick, direct, attacking style of play. This focus on transferring from defence into attack at pace proved attractive to central European fans. Crowds who grew up following horse racing and wrestling demanded excitement and drama.

⁽⁴⁾ Robertson's motivation for this style of play was most likely purely down to his beliefs on how the game should be played and that it was the best way to get results. But even in 1910, before the Europeans had really got stuck into the game of football, they already demanded a certain style of play. There is a lot of literature on how England taught the world the game only to be left behind and plenty of books go on a journey to find the answers behind this. For me, the demands of the fans has to be one of the most important factors. League tables, pundits, stats; they all contribute as feedback for teams and coaches on how they are performing. But, ultimately, if the fans aren't happy, that is when something has to change. I have already mentioned how the journalism of the 1960s and 1970s influenced my father's views on the game, helping him become more conscious of what quality football was.

When Robertson arrived in Budapest, the demand for success was minimal. Instead, it was excitement and drama that brought in the fans. It was the fast-paced style that Robertson and others like him promoted; the hard-tackling, crisp-passing, fast football that attracted massive crowds during those 1905 tours in Vienna. In an era long before TV and sponsorship deals, the bigger the crowds, the more cash would be available to attract better players and improve the club's facilities.

Edward Shires was 17 when he abandoned his life and job at a typewriter factory in Manchester in 1894. His early work in sport was mostly based in Vienna, where he helped form one of the first football clubs in the city. A decent enough player, he also became the captain of the Austrian national team. In 1904, he moved to Budapest. He worked for the Underwood typewriter company⁽³⁾ but he was also involved in importing sports equipment and promoting new ideas, most notably introducing table tennis to Austria and Hungary. Settling in a new community, he sought out a football team to play for. Shires joined MTK. Magyar Testgyakorlók Köre (the circle of Hungarian fitness) were a club who originally focused mainly on fencing and gymnastics before branching out into football in 1901. Their first ten years were rather dull and, although they won two titles, they were miles off the dominant side in Hungary, Ferencvaros.

Alfréd Brüll, a businessman, took over as president when MTK won their first title in 1904. Shires retired from playing after this triumph, taking on a more administrative role, as well as working as a referee.⁽³⁾ The club won the title again in 1907/08 but the following years were dominated by Ferencvaros until Shires inspired some drastic changes. In 1911, he managed to negotiate the signings of two British imports. Joe Lane, who was an English centre-forward who signed as an amateur, scored the only goal in a win against Ferencvaros in the opening match at MTK's brand new stadium, the Hungaria Koruti Stadion. The other British import was, of course, John Tait Robertson.

Robertson was at Manchester United as assistant manager when Shires got in touch. Shires feared it would be difficult to persuade him to move to Budapest but, unbeknown to him, Robertson was on the hunt for a new

challenge. Despite all he had done for sport in general across Austria and Hungary, Shires felt his proudest achievement was convincing Robertson to accept the role as MTK manager. 'It was Robertson who did the most for developing football in Hungary,' Shires said.

However, when Robertson arrived in Budapest, he wasn't impressed with what he found. He told a Hungarian newspaper: 'The mistake the players commit ... is that they only use one foot.' He also said: 'The aerial game is very weak ... the half line does not play well with the backs; when the backs lose the ball, the halves should be there to provide cover. The halves are not working together with the forward line either, and their shots are not good.' These comments show just how much work he had to do if he was going to implement his style of fast-paced football from defence into attack. But this is why Shires wanted him; he recognised this style would be attractive for the fans and bring success.

In many ways, Robertson's task at MTK was even harder than his job at Chelsea, where he had to start from scratch. Here, he had to change the mindset of the players and develop their attributes, but he succeeded in both. Although Ferencvaros won the title in 1911/12 and again in 1912/13, making it five in a row, Shires was happy with what he was seeing. 'Because of Robertson's work, and the example set by Lane, the MTK style was created and MTK became a stronger and stronger opponent for Ferencvaros to face.'

In the summer of 1913, history repeated itself. Robertson returned to Scotland and, in an interview in 1933, Shires said: 'It is a pity that he wasn't teetotal. If he had been, he could still be around now.' Just as at Chelsea, his love of alcohol must have played a big part in his departure and, again, he was not able to enjoy the success of the team he built.

MTK ended the dominance of Ferencvaros by winning the league title in 1913/14 under the management of Bob Holmes. He had played for the great invincible Preston North End team, who had strong Scottish roots embedded in their success. After Robertson left, MTK went through a number of managers and coaches before finally settling on Holmes. However, to illustrate the impact Robertson had on MTK, shortly before he arrived in 1911, MTK hosted a Blackburn Rovers team managed by Holmes and Blackburn won comfortably by 4-0; just after Robertson left in May 1913, Blackburn returned, this time as English champions, and were beaten 2-1. Under Holmes, MTK won the title, finishing the season unbeaten and smashing Ferencvaros 4-1 in the process.

Holmes's work was disrupted when, with the First World War taking a turn for the worse, he left in 1914. With the war also disrupting the league calendar, there were three shortened unofficial seasons played, MTK winning the last of these before the full league resumed in 1916/17. The club needed a new manager to help carry on the work of Robertson. As Shires put it: 'The Hungarians learned more from him in two years than they would have learned from somebody else in ten.' What grew from this period in Hungary was a monster; not only did the Hungarians go on to become one of the greatest national sides in the world, but the number of coaches and footballing brains who emerged in the 1920s and 1930s are arguably the most influential and important class of students ever to bless the beautiful game. More recently, the only two clubs who can claim to have generated so many coaches and future coaches are Ajax and Barcelona; and I feel Total Football is the spine of it all.