

Evolution of Systems of Play, Part II

John Bluem picks up the narrative at the 1954 World Cup

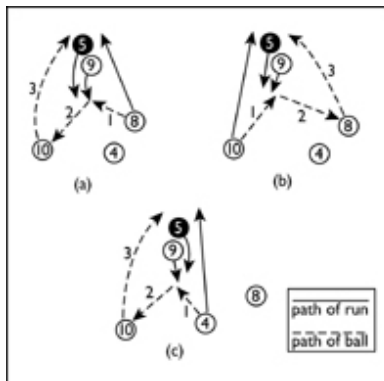
The Hungarian team, 1953

By the 1954 World Cup, the attacking center half was on his last legs. Attention now switched to the center forward, in particular the so-called withdrawn center forward utilized by the Hungarians. Chapman's invention of the third back killed off the attacking center half and also changed the role of the center forward from the talented all-rounder to the strong, powerful battering ram who battled the stopper.

Brawny center forwards were not available in Hungary. Marton Bukovi, coach of a top club in Budapest, Voros Loboga, got around the problem by bringing the center forward back to play in midfield. The role of the center forward was assumed by the two insides. The M had been turned upside down. These changes were the basis for the great Hungarian national team formed in the 1950s by Gustav Sebes.

The weakness of the three-back game was exposed when coaches began to think about attacking space. By withdrawing the center forward, the center back had to make a choice — follow his man and expose the central attacking space, or leave his man free to protect the central space. The fullbacks, when confronted or not confronted by the withdrawing wingers, were faced with the same problem. Defenders always have had two responsibilities, to mark and to cover. In 1953 Hungary crushed England, 6-3, at Wembley. The following year, to prove it was no fluke, Hungary defeated England, 7-1, in Budapest.

Through a series of training drills known as three-man combinations, the Hungarian players Puskas, Kocsis, Bozsik and Hidegkuti built up a great understanding. First developed around 1951, the combinations largely were based on positional switching allied to the wall pass. Later, between 1954 and 1956, these combinations were further developed to involve not two players, as in a wall pass, but three.



The great Hungarian team of 1953-54 had one player who was generally considered to be inferior to his colleagues. At the time no one could understand how left half Joseph Zakarias managed to keep his place in the team. It is now clear that Zakarias was not a left half at all but a left-center back.

Way back in the 1860s, the English had started playing soccer with one fullback; in 1872 the Scots had made it two; in 1925 Arsenal had introduced the third back, and now here were the Hungarians with approximately three-and-a-half fullbacks.

The 4-2-4 formation

The essential features of the 4-2-4 system introduced by the attack-minded Brazilians in 1958, two center forwards and two center halves, already had been seen in the Hungarian game. While the Hungarians concealed their system through place-changing, the Brazilians' rigid formation had Vava and Pelé clearly operating as twin center forwards. It was no longer possible for any opponent to play with one center back. Within 12 months of Brazil's World Cup success, almost the entire world had switched to the 4-2-4.

The 2-3-5 and 3-4-3 formations that have been discussed were not referenced in a numerical way at the time. They were simply the Pyramid and the W-M. Following 1958, all the talk was about the 4-2-4. Methodical

coaching was on the rise, and identifying formations with numbers gave them a more modern scientific sound.

Despite the four fullbacks, the 4-2-4 as played by the 1958 Brazilians was far from a defensive scheme. An exhilarating feature was the attacking role of the two outside fullbacks. On attack, the formation became 2-4-4, enabling Brazil to commit as many as eight players to the offense.

The new role demanded fullbacks who were quick-moving, with a fair share of the forward's talents, the ability to exchange short passes, and, once in attack, to shoot accurately. Quite a change from the W-M days when a fullback's main functions were to stay deep, win the ball through hard tackling and deliver long downfield passes. As Brazil spent most of its time on the attack, little attention was paid to its defensive adjustment. When its opponents had the ball, Brazil's left winger, Mario Zagallo, quickly withdrew into midfield, changing the alignment to 4-3-3.



The 4-2-4 succeeded in 1958 because the Brazilians' extravagant attacking talents allowed them to maintain relentless pressure on their opponents. But it contained a serious weakness. When forced into a defensive mode, the 4-2-4 was dangerously underpopulated in midfield.

The 4-3-3 formation

The 1962 World Cup featured a 4-3-3 system of play employed by the Brazilians as the altitude of the Chilean site demanded a bit more defensive posture by the participating teams. The use of three midfielders gave greater strength to the midfield and their more central alignment still allowed for attacking runs by the outside backs. The midfielders themselves could be staggered in a number of ways (one up, two back; two up, one back, etc.).

Of interest was the fact that the average number of goals scored in World Cup matches during the period of 1954-1962 decreased from 5.38 per game to 2.78 per game. Clearly the emphasis of coaches was more on the defensive side of the game than on the attack.



Catenaccio

The Italians continued the trend toward defensive soccer during the 1960s. They had perfected a system that used the deep-lying fullback seen in Switzerland's 1950 Verrou formation. *Catenaccio* ("large chain") was the name the Italians gave their system. Three of the fullbacks were given strict man-to-man marking duties. The *libero*, or "free man" because he had no specific opponent to mark, played deep behind the markers. His job was to patrol the entire center of the defense and to quickly close any gaps that might be opened by other defenders' errors.

The history of *catenaccio* tells much about the development of soccer tactics. There was absolutely nothing positive about its origin. It was designed not to win games, but rather to avoid losing them. The Italian Serie A (first division) had long been an unbalanced league, with a few rich clubs regularly carrying off all the honors. In 1947, Nereo Rocco took over at Triestina, a small club that was barely surviving. It was Rocco who loosed *catenaccio* on the soccer world. He had immediate and dramatic success. In 1948 Triestina climbed to second place in the league. Noting the team's success, other Italian clubs began to utilize the *catenaccio* system of play.

Herrera perfected the system with Inter Milan, which won the European Cup twice using its own brand of *catenaccio*. So even the wealthier, more powerful Italian clubs adopted *catenaccio*. It would become more than a style of play; it became a mentality that dragged Italian soccer down to a style of game that emphasized negativity at the expense of creativity.

Catenaccio had a special appeal for the Italians because it relied so heavily on the sudden counterattack to score goals. The quick breakaway, the rapid switch from defense to attack, had long been a feature of the Italian game. Now it had been given an almost scientific basis.

4-4-2 system of England

The English acknowledged the coming of the *libero*, but coined their own term for the position. They called the player the sweeper, the man who moved about at the back of the defense, cleaning up the errors of his teammates. Wingers were an endangered species and what looked like their burial took place in 1966, when England won the World Cup using a



formation that included no wingers at all. It was dubbed the "penguin" formation. Wingless! Sir Alf Ramsay, England manager, said he had experimented with wingers, but found none to his liking.



An increasing emphasis on not conceding goals led to the packing of numbers in midfield. Just as the 4-2-4 formation had lost a forward to midfield and became the 4-3-3, the process continued and the 4-3-3 became the 4-4-2. England's World Cup-winning side included a novelty in midfield — the evolution of the screen man. Nobby Stiles fulfilled this function as a defensively-oriented player detailed to mark or act as a sweeper between the back four and midfield.

Tactical trends, 1970-1998

Brazil won the 1970 World Cup due to the brilliance of Pelé and the goal scoring of Jairzinho, who scored in every game. The Italians' deep sweeper and counterattacks were not enough to win, but they would be heard from again.

Total soccer" burst on the scene in the '70s, with the emphasis on players fit enough and skilled enough to play any position on the field and intelligent enough to know exactly when to switch roles. The style reached its zenith with the Dutch National Team of 1974, which featured the brilliant play of Johan Cruyff under the direction of Rinus Michels. The Germans won the World Cup that year, however, led by the equally brilliant Franz Beckenbauer, who had revolutionized the role of libero in soccer by reshaping the position so he could utilize his immense attacking talents.

By 1978 total soccer had begun to dissipate, primarily because its two most inspirational players, Cruyff and Beckenbauer, had retired from international soccer. The Cup-winning side from Argentina had reverted to a traditional 4-3-3 and reintroduced the long-forgotten wingers to defeat the Dutch in the Buenos Aires final.

In 1982 the Italians used Paolo Rossi to effectuate their counter-attacking game as they overcame a solid but somewhat unimaginative German team in the World Cup final in Madrid. By 1986 Maradona was playing as a midfield schemer behind the double forwards. His skill at both freeing others and scoring goals himself led the Argentines to the title in Mexico. Maradona was covered by what had now become known as a defensive midfielder. That player's job (not unlike Stiles in 1966) was to break up play and play balls forward.

By 1990 and 1994, World Cups were becoming marked by strong defensive play, with no goals scored from free play in either final match. Germany won on a penalty kick in 1990 over Argentina in the Italian staging of the event, while Brazil prevailed in a penalty kick shootout over Italy in Los Angeles in 1994.



Editor's note: John Bluem is men's coach at Ohio State University and a member of the NSCAA National Academy staff. He is the men's college representative on the NSCAA Board of Directors.