

Evolution of Systems of Play, Part I

In the first of three articles, John Bluem reviews how systems of play have evolved from 1890 to the 1950 World Cup

By John Bluem

In this series of articles, we will trace the development and evolution of the game of soccer through the growth of systems of play. Today's modern game clearly can be traced back to the late 1800s.

Why study the development of systems of play? Perhaps NSCAA president and Academy staff coach Barry Gorman says it best: "If you don't know where you have been, how do you know where you are going?"

Well, here we go, back to the 1860s.

The dribbling game

On Oct. 26, 1863, representatives from a group of clubs met at the Freemason's Tavern in England to draw up the first official rules. The rules were accepted on Dec. 18, 1863.

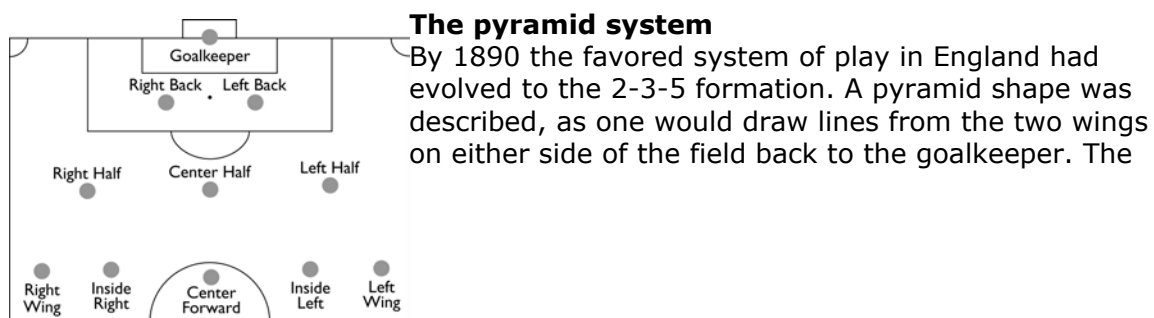
Rule 6 stated that "when a player has kicked the ball, any one of the same side who is nearer to the opponent's goal line is out of play" (offside!). The lifeblood of the early games was the skill of dribbling. The forward pass was banned. Rule 6 was changed in 1866 to permit advanced players to receive a pass, providing there were at least three opponents between themselves and the goal line.

There still was little difference in the way the game was played. In the 1870s, soccer pundit C.W. Alcock wrote about "the grand and essential principle of backing up." This first recognized principle of play was understood to mean the following closely of a fellow player in case possession was lost. There was no mention of passing.

The first international match saw Scotland play England in Glasgow, where the English played a 1-2-7 and the Scots a 2-2-6. It was the Scots who realized the potential of the 1866 rule change and began to employ the short pass. Despite the large number of forwards in the game, the result was a 0-0 tie.

Players now had to think about their positional play due to the new weapon, the pass. By the 1883 Football Association Cup final, the English had developed the long passing game. Blackburn won the finale easily, using the long pass to change the point of attack from wing to wing.

By this time, new skills had been introduced to the game — the ability to hit a long ball and the skills necessary to receive, intercept or clear long passes. Heading, chest trapping, receiving on the run and volleying were skills now emphasized.



key player was the center halfback, who was supposed to come forward on attack and also serve to organize the five-person defense (versus the five attackers of the opponents). Note that the system utilized only two defending backs.

The W-M formation

The offside law was amended in 1925. From then on, attackers needed only two opponents between themselves and the goal line at the moment the ball was played. If justification for the rule change was needed, it emerged from the matches themselves. The number of goals in the English First Division shot up 40 percent, from 1,192 in 1925 to 1,703 in 1926.

Defenses had to be strengthened, and Arsenal coach Herbert Chapman, who had taken over the London club in 1925, drew up a new tactical plan.

The most attacking damage in the game was being done by the center forward, so Chapman dropped the center half to the position of fullback to mark him. This position became known as the "stopper" and represented the birth of the modern man-to-man marker style. Defensive responsibilities were now reassigned, with the original fullbacks moving wide to mark the wingers and the wing halves assigned to look after the inside forwards.

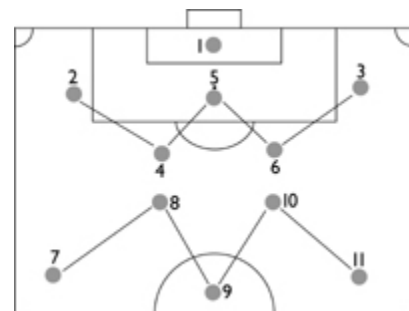
For the next 25 years, the game was dominated by the new center back or "stopper" and the pivot of the other backs to provide cover and balance. Basically, if the ball was with a winger, the outside back marked that player, the center back provided cover and the weak side back was concerned with balancing things.

Any system of play stands or falls with the men who put it into practice. Arsenal's W-M prevailed because of the genius of Chapman in finding the right players to fill the roles he had established. The key to the attacking success of Arsenal was in the playmaking abilities of one of the withdrawn inside forwards, Scotsman Alex James.

Chapman died in 1934, but between 1927 and 1938 the team that he built won the league championship five times and the FA Cup twice. By the late 1930s the W-M was the standard formation of every English club.

Outside of the English game, the attacking center half continued to flourish, particularly in Hungary, Austria and South America. In the first World Cup in 1930, both finalists, Argentina and Uruguay, utilized the 2-3-5 pyramid formation.

Artistry was the essence of the South American game, which often emphasized individual talent to decide games while collective tactics were minimized. Asked about the role of coaching in those days, Uruguayan left back Ernesto Mascheroni replied, "What are the coaches for? Only the player can solve the problems on the field. What does a player do when he meets another who makes a fool of him? Ask the coach?"



The Uruguayans won the first Cup by the score of 4-2, and opinions were expressed that they were a better-organized team. With the score 3-2 and with Argentina doing

all the attacking, Uruguay laid back and then used a quick counter to score on a breakaway. This type of play now would become a tactic for some teams.

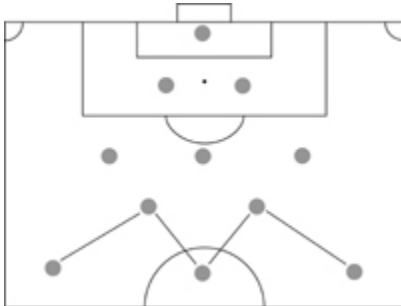
The Italian *metodo*

In Italy, the national team was coached by Vittorio Pozzo, an undistinguished player who as a coach had a great interest in tactics. For the 1934 Italian World Cup team, he devised a scheme based on the classic 2-3-5 as played by the Austrians, Czechs and Hungarians, the so-called Danubian school of soccer.

The Danubian school had emerged from the Scottish short-passing game brought to central Europe by a remarkable Englishman named Jimmy Hogan. His philosophy was that soccer was a game in which the ball belonged on the ground, and he used the phrase "keep it on the carpet" to describe how he wanted the ball to be passed.

The Danubian style, based on the 2-3-5, was faithful to Hogan's artistic approach to the game. By 1934, the Austrians had raised the style to its pinnacle under national coach Hugo Meisl. The Austrian "wunderteam" was considered the strongest in continental Europe.

Pozzo could not simply copy the Danubian model because he lacked the player to fill the vital playmaking center half role. This role was taken over by two players, the inside forwards, who were withdrawn into midfield. Thus Pozzo's *metodo*, as it was called, retained elements of the 2-3-5 (particularly the marking assignments under which the fullbacks guarded the penalty area and the wing halves marked the opposing wingers), but used the M formation for the forward line.



The *metodo* proved ideally suited to the Italian player. It stressed methodical defense and gave birth to the lightning counterattack, which was to be the basis of the Italian game for a long time. As one journalist put it, "The other team does all the attacking, but Italy wins the game."

In the 1934 World Cup final, the *metodo* triumphed over the Danubian 2-3-5 of the Czechs. However the general feeling was that it was Italian strength, stamina and ruthlessness that actually determined the 2-1 outcome. The 1938 final resulted in a similar match-up, the Italian *metodo* against the Hungarian 2-3-5. It was an easy 4-2 win by the Italians, whose system proved itself capable of accommodating a new, faster, more athletic type of game.

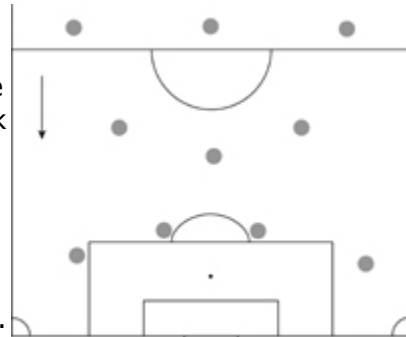
The 2-3-5 was stagnating and the tactics of its defensive system were about to be exposed. As the world prepared for war, there were three systems of play throughout the world: The W-M, the standard formation in England; the Italian *metodo*, part W-M, part 2-3-5; and the 2-3-5, the Pyramid, still favored in South America, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Austria.

The "Swissbolt"

Within the various systems, soccer had become a game for specialist players, each with certain rather limited functions (i.e., wingers). There was one system that went against this trend, a system that at the time didn't receive the study it deserved. In

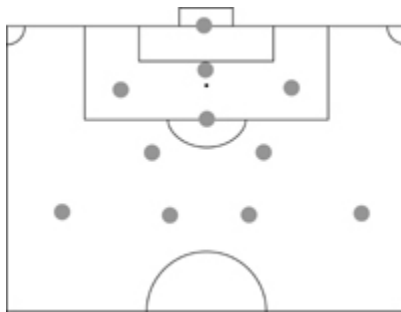
part this was because it was developed in Switzerland, which was not considered a bastion of soccer thought, and in part because it was a difficult theory to put into practice.

Karl Rappan, a former Austrian international who from 1931 on coached club soccer in Switzerland, concocted the system. The aim of the "bolt" system was to create a team that would outnumber opponents in both attack and defense. On attack, the bolt had a 3-3-4 shape complete with an attacking center half, with all the players, including the three-man fullback line, moving well upfield.



When ball possession was lost, all 10 players retreated. The function of the four forwards was to harass the opponents and slow down the attack. The other six players raced deep into their own defensive half of the field. The attacking center half now became the center back, while the former center back retreated to an ultra-deep position behind everyone else. From this deep position, that player could move laterally across the field, covering the other three backs and functioning as the sliding "bolt" to lock out opposing forwards.

The bolt system required great fitness from its players. They had to be capable of high-speed running and have the ability to function both as attackers and defenders. The system was not widely utilized, but it did introduce the two ideas: a retreating defense and the lone fullback playing deep. Its attacking and defending shapes are shown in Diagrams 4 and 5.



Uruguay's 2-1 victory over Brazil in the 1950 World Cup final remains the most astonishing upset in World Cup history. The Brazilians produced an attack-oriented version of the W-M that they called the diagonal system to start the tournament and dismissed Mexico, 4-0. They then were held to a 2-2 tie by Switzerland, which frustrated them with their bolt system. Changing to a more traditional W-M, the Brazilians regrouped and defeated Yugoslavia, 2-0, Sweden, 7-1, and Spain, 6-1.

Meanwhile, the Uruguayans were plodding along with their version of the *metodo*. In the final the Uruguayans utilized a deep-lying fullback and tight man marking everywhere on the field. In reality, the team looked more like the 4-3-3 of the future than the *metodo*. Although the Uruguayans trailed 1-0 at halftime, their counterattacks exposed the fragility of the Brazilian defense to capture the Cup. The Uruguayans, an Italian journalist commented, had become the world champions of marking.



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.