

Winning or Playing Nicely

Dilemmas in Dutch Football

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Dutch footballers used not to need to be told they were the best, and, officially, they were not. The teams of Johan Cruyff, Ruud Gullit and Dennis Bergkamp never topped the world rankings, but were universally recognised as being magnificent.

Now, everything is reversed. Despite the embarrassingly violent “anti-football” played by less gifted Dutchmen at the last World Cup, the Netherlands stands at the very pinnacle of the world game.

In August 2011, when FIFA, the sport’s governing body, issued its monthly rankings, a new name topped the list. The pragmatic new *Oranje*, were, for the very first time, statistically the supreme nation in the most important sport of all.

Oddly, the last few steps to the summit involved no physical exertion. Holland went top because their match against England was cancelled while Spain, previous top-dogs and reigning world champions, lost in Italy.

Celebrations in Amsterdam were, naturally, a little muted: you can’t wave a FIFA computer printout to fans on a triumphal canal trip. Nevertheless, national coach Bert van Marwijk, architect of the triumph, was quietly satisfied. He said: “this team has learned to win no matter the circumstances, whether they feel motivated or not”.

Indeed. His team had won every one of its World Cup and Euro qualifying matches over the last three years, and only lost in the dying minutes of the World Cup Final.

Historically speaking, this is an unprecedented achievement and Van Marwijk has wrought a cultural and psychological revolution. No previous national coach, not protean Rinus Michels, father of the Dutch style, nor brilliant Guus Hiddink or even legendary Louis van Gaal, can begin to match Van Marwijk’s figures.

The FIFA rankings only began in 1993, but earlier generations of Dutch players would never have done so well.

Old Dutch teams were built around freewheeling, opinionated geniuses. Men like Cruyff, Van Hanegem, Van Basten, Rijkaard and Seedorf didn’t make their orange shirts famous by winning trophies. (If you wanted that sort of thing you could follow Germany or Italy). Instead, the Dutch used football as a vehicle for artistry and moral superiority.

De Hoef, The Netherlands.
Photo by Hans
van der Meer.



In terms of trophy-winning, these 'total footballers' never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. They dazzled opponents with the skill and daring of their clever attacking style, then suffered peculiar meltdowns in the biggest matches. They practised unique forms of football democracy and teamwork, yet were prone to bitter squabbling and destructive rivalries.

Van Marwijk has done away with all that. He is not particularly interested in football as art and has instilled in his team a mentality closer to that of the unloved but indomitable West Germans of the mid-1980s. The consequences of this cultural change for the Dutch nation are not yet clear.

Total Football emerged under coach Rinus Michels and the young Johan Cruyff at the Ajax club in Amsterdam in the late 1960s and early 70s and was rooted in a unique and daring Netherlandish conception of how to use and control space.

Over hundreds of years, the Dutch had developed clever ways of creating and using their small spaces. This tradition was deeply embedded in everything from landscape painting to town planning, and now it found its way into football too.

Other nations saw football differently. For the English, football was always an energetic manly and martial contest, a series of duels all over the field settled by strength, courage and hard work. The Brazilians valued individual skill and creativity. Italians traditionally aimed to not lose: if you couldn't score against them you'd never beat them.

Thanks to Michels and Cruyff, the Dutch came to see football more as physical chess, where the object was to manipulate and manage space. Technique



Oudega, The Netherlands.
Photo by Hans van der Meer.

was essential but position, passing, and movement off the ball were the most important arts. The key attributes were intelligence and speed of thought.

'Don't run around so much,' said Cruyff, 'football is a game you play with your brain'. The purpose of having supreme ball skills was not to perform tricks or go on mazy dribbles but to control and direct the flow of movement around the field. The most revered players were the ones like Cruyff and Bergkamp, who saw and understood space most profoundly.

The Dutch writer Arthur van den Boogaard argues that Cruyff discovered the 'metaphysical solution' to football. If you play his way to the max, using the best players, it's almost impossible to lose. Today's supreme Barcelona and Spain 'tiki-taka' teams seem to bear this out.

This is because the reigning world and European champions may be Spanish by passport and language, but they are Dutch by philosophy and history. Spain's team is mainly made up of Barcelona men, and Barca's philosophy, tactics and sensibilities were shaped by almost 40 years of Dutch influence, first under Rinus Michels, later because of Cruyff who played and coached there. 20 years ago Cruyff built Barcelona's 'dream team' and created the club's youth development system as a perfect copy of the one at Ajax. Later Dutch coaches Louis van Gaal and Frank Rijkaard continued this work. Current Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola is a Cruyff disciple. As he says: "Cruyff built our cathedral and we just maintain it".

But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves.

Before we can understand the current situation, we must return to the best and most important Dutch team of all, the majestic Michels/Cruyff'

total football' side of the 1974 World Cup. In that tournament the Dutch played the most graceful, intelligent and irresistible football ever seen, entranced fans everywhere and even took the lead in the first minute of the final against West Germany in Munich. And then ... disaster struck.

Instead of closing out the game as they should, the Dutch relaxed. As Brian Glanville, the great British football journalist writes, the Dutch took the lead against the Germans but were then 'moved to play cat and mouse with an opponent which, for historical reasons, they longed to humiliate. For twenty-five minutes the Dutch did as they pleased against a stunned German team, rolling the ball about, making pretty patterns, but creating no real opportunities.' The Germans recovered their nerve, fought back and won 2-1. The Netherlands was stunned. Many Dutch men remember July 7th 1974 as the first and only time they saw their fathers cry.

Even now, the Dutch have never quite recovered from this trauma and the Lost Final warped all future developments. Perhaps most damagingly of all, Cruyff justified the failure. He said that although the Dutch had lost the match they had won a great moral victory. As he put it: 'there is no greater medal than being recognised for your style'. Thus was established the justification for nearly four decades of romantic underachievement.

In fact, this founding moment of 'beautiful losing' was an accident, an aberration. The total footballers were tough and ruthless as well as beautiful and were accustomed to winning. After all, in the early 70s Dutch club teams Ajax and Feyenoord had won the European Cup four years in a row.

Two other near-misses followed over the next four years. In 1976 internal rivalries wrecked Holland's chances of winning the European championship. In 1978 they were unfortunate enough to face Argentina in Buenos Aires in the final of a World Cup manipulated by the host nation's fascist ruling junta. Nevertheless a pattern had been established.

In the decades which followed, the Dutch usually had the players to win pretty much every tournament they entered. But sticking both to their style and their excuses, they found it easier to lose. (Euro 1988 which they actually won is the exception which proves the rule).

Endlessly, unconsciously repeating the psychodrama of 1974 came somehow to be an expression of Dutchness. The Dutch strategy was: charm everyone with what Ruud Gullit called 'sexy football', then lose in tragic crazy circumstances.

These failures were invariably self-inflicted. Arrogant Dutch superstars squabbled over money, tactics or had 'artistic differences' with each other. Sometimes their best players refused to play. Alternatively, they collapsed psychologically when the going got tough or failed to take the opponents seriously. During the 1990s, *Oranje* developed the ridiculous habit of losing crucial matches on penalties, which they rarely bothered to practice. The team of such luminous talents as Dennis Bergkamp, Patrick Kluivert, Edgar Davids and the De Boer brothers which should have won both the '98 World Cup and Euro 2000 in fact won so few matches they were 22nd on the FIFA list in 1997.

'Taking the easy way out and being overly confident are classic Dutch traits,' said Van Marwijk recently, 'That was the first thing I had to battle against ... The opponent that this team needs to fear is itself.' Exactly right.

But there was at least one great advantage to all this neurosis: Holland's footballers were profoundly loved all over the world. Like Byron, Jimi Hendrix,

Kurt Cobain, Heath Ledger or Marilyn Monroe, the men in orange shirts were romantic heroes precisely because they were both beautiful and doomed never to fulfil their enormous potential.

The importance of all this for the Netherlands' international image and reputation can hardly be overstated.

Holland has a population of sixteen and a half million: roughly the same size as the average Chinese mega-city. The world profile of the Netherlands is commensurately tiny. Few ordinary folk around the globe know the names of Dutch artists, novelists, politicians, royal family members. From Guangdong to Guatemala, however, Dutch footballers are known and, until recently, adored.

Dutch footballers defined the nation to the outside world, and they've been important for the Netherlands' notion of itself too.

This is partly because football is now the biggest cultural form on the planet. Thanks to its strategic alliance with satellite TV, the game grows ever more powerful, eclipsing pop music and even Hollywood movies to be a kind of global language. The game of football cuts across barriers of language, religion, climate and culture and is followed with equal passion almost everywhere.

In few places, though, is it as important as in the Netherlands. The country has about a million registered players, roughly the same number as giant Germany whose population is five times bigger. Membership of a football club is an important part of the social fabric of many Dutch lives.

Professional club teams excite relatively minor devotions. But the national team provides a national sense of community and identity to replace crumbled old political and religious allegiances. The famous old 'pillars' of Dutch society have disappeared. But every two years the Netherlands gets together for a month-long orange festival, decorating their streets, painting their faces and staging a vast orange carnival in front of their TV screens as their team competes in world or European championships.

Just how important this ritual had become was illustrated by the curious crisis of late 2001, when the Dutch were suddenly overwhelmed by anxiety and populist politician Pim Fortuyn emerged, lurching Dutch politics to the right. None of the usual cultural or economic indicators quite explain the suddenness of this transformation – but Fortuyn's ascent began the same month the Dutch had shockingly lost to Ireland and failed to qualify for the 2002 World Cup: a genuine national trauma. As Sir Colin Budd, the highly-respected British ambassador in The Hague, reported to London: '[The Dutch] used to think they had a country where things worked ... In 2001 however they worried about the shortcomings of their railways/schools/hospitals; their failure to shrink their massive list of claimants for disability benefit; foot and mouth; growing public untidiness; the behaviour of immigrants; and - not least - the national football team's failure to qualify for the World Cup.'

In Fortuyn's wake (he was assassinated by an animal rights activist) Dutch football also began to shift towards conservatism. Cruyff, previously the nation's favourite guru, began to be viewed as out of touch. On TV and in his newspaper columns, he demanded fealty to the old ways, with 4-3-3 formations and wingers. Other coaches, however, were moving towards a more cautious, fearful pragmatic style.

A brief revival occurred at Euro 2008, when Holland, now coached by Cruyff's protégé, Marco van Basten, thrashed once-mighty Italy and France, before falling feebly to Russia. This, as the Financial Times columnist Simon Kuper

argues, was a turning point: 'I think the KNVB [the Dutch football association] decided: 'this beautiful losing is just no fun anymore'.'

They turned to Van Marwijk, the steel-haired, unsentimental former Feyenoord man. Previously, national coaches were contractually obliged to play traditional attacking football. This was now quietly ditched. Winning had become the overriding objective, 4-5-1 the new preferred formation. Marwijk promptly raised morale and achieved an ever-lengthening sequence of wins, albeit against weak opponents. Only when his team arrived in South Africa for the World Cup proper did the world realise that something more fundamental had shifted.

The first clue was when Nike, the sportswear company with close ties to the Dutch players and the KNVB, aired a commercial on the eve of the tournament. Nike had picked up something others had missed: Van Marwijk's *oranje* was going to be different. The so-called 'Blood Orange' commercial features team captain Giovanni van Bronckhorst and others training with the inten-

Hoogmade,
The Netherlands.
Photo by Hans
van der Meer.



sity of soldiers preparing for war. Drums beat in a military manner. As grim-visaged stars sweat and suffer, captions spell out a radically new philosophy: 'tears of joy are made of sweat'... 'destroy egos, starting with your own'. The Cruyff legacy is explicitly rejected: 'football isn't total without victory' and 'a beautiful defeat is still a defeat'. Old individualism, fun and artistry are out; discipline, loyalty and strength are in. The players embrace as comrades and march together down a corridor like reservoir dogs. The orange-clad masses exult. Short of seeing a three-engined plane in the clouds bearing a great leader, the message could hardly be more alarming.

The rest is now history. In South Africa, *Oranje* appeared to have undergone some kind of *Manchurian Candidate*-style personality-alteration. Holland



Marle, The Netherlands.
Photo by Hans van
der Meer.

deployed their famous footballing intelligence and understanding of space now to shut down games and do only what was necessary for victory. In the quarter final, Holland, displaying formidable willpower, came from behind to beat a technically superior Brazil. Only the semi-final against Uruguay seemed in keeping with the old spirit: Holland were more adventurous, took a 3-1 lead then almost collapsed at the end.

And then came the final against - of all people! - Spain.

Back in the 70s, admiring South Americans had dubbed the Dutch *La Naranja Mecanica*, *The Clockwork Orange*, like the Kubrick film. Now, faced with a side playing Dutch football, Holland resorted to genuine ultraviolence, cynically attempting to kick the Spanish into submission. At one point Spanish midfielder Xavi protested to his old friend and Barcelona team-mate Mark van Bommel (who happened to be Van Marwijk's son-in-law and was the Dutch team's principal destroyer). 'What the hell are you all doing?' said Xavi. Van Bommel gave him a cold stare, refused to answer and ran off.

A total of five Dutch players - and a couple of Spaniards - could or should have been sent off instead of just the one, Johnny Heitinga, who was. Holland played for penalties and defended in depth. Spain won with a late goal. The enduring image of the most widely seen TV event in history was of Dutch hatchet

man Nigel de Jong apparently attempting to perform open heart surgery on Spaniard Xabi Alonso with a kung fu kick to the chest.

Van Marwijk, the coach obsessed by the idea of righting the wrong of 1974, had ended up presiding over the biggest PR disaster in Dutch history. The watching world was appalled. Cruyff denounced the Dutch tactics as 'anti-football'. Many Dutch fans were ashamed. A couple of journalists called for Van Marwijk to resign.

But many Dutch people were proud. Queen Beatrix, Prime Minister Balkenende and Royal Dutch Air Force F-16s painted orange joined 700,000 orange-clad fans in welcoming their heroes back to Amsterdam. At a time of political, cultural and economic uncertainty, Balkenende praised the team for demonstrating *eenheid* (unity). "They were a strong team, mentally and physically," he said. 'It was a disciplined collective with a mission, with full resilience, fighting spirit and confidence. Look how far that attitude brought us... *Oranje* was one, and the Netherlands stood as one behind *Oranje*.'

As total football had reflected and exemplified the spirit of its time (the freewheeling optimism of the 70s), so it was natural that Van Marwijk's hard-nosed approach reflected the straightened circumstances of a more uncertain and economically frightening era. But the supreme irony was that it didn't have to be this way.

The dichotomy between football beauty or ugliness, between winning or losing was historically false.

Total football had been originally created as a system for winning. Rinus Michels wanted his teams to dominate. Players like Johan Neeskens, Ruud Krol and Wim Suurbier played dirty when required. By the same token, modern stars such as Arjen Robben, Robin van Persie, Wesley Sneijder and Rafael van der Vaart are perfectly capable of playing the beautiful Dutch style almost as well as most of their predecessors.

The Dutch will be among the favourites for next year's Euro 2012 Championships in Poland and Ukraine. If Bert van Marwijk can finally find a way to integrate the two aspects of Dutch history – to win and play nicely – then perhaps he will be forgiven the horrors of Johannesburg 2010. Maybe he might even begin to exorcise the ghosts of the more distant past. ■