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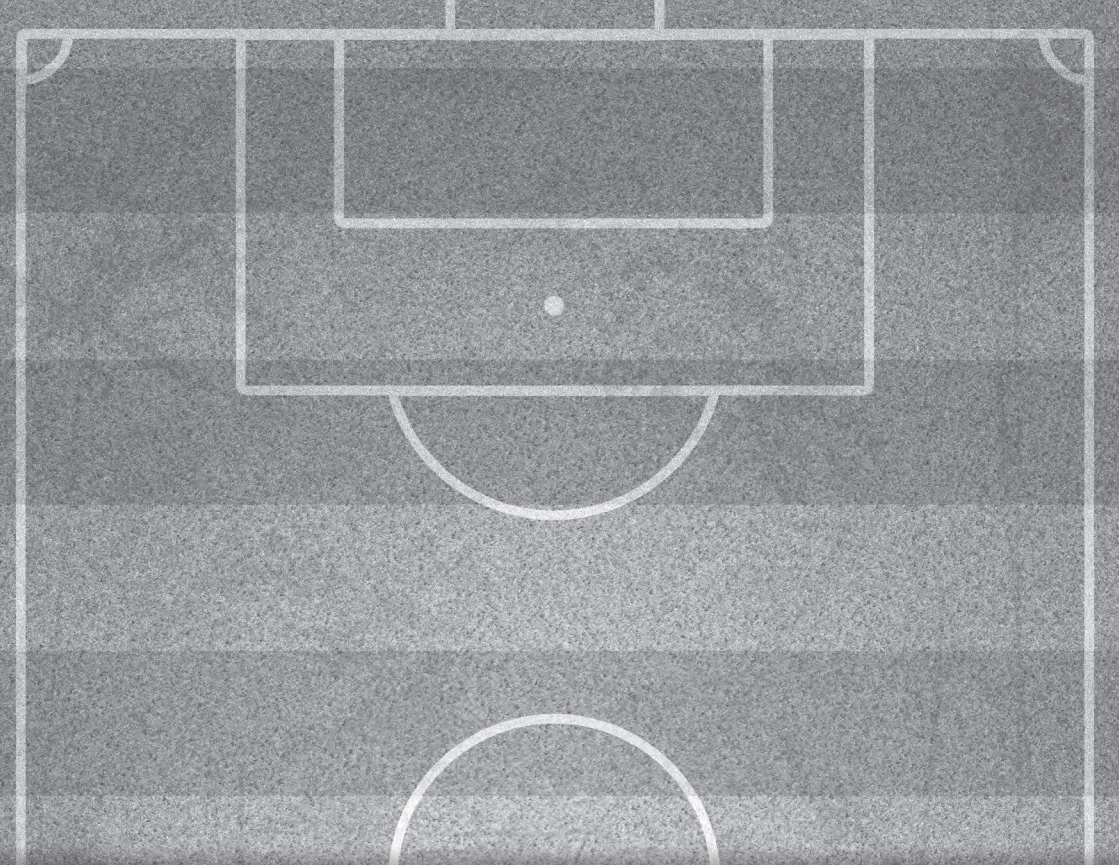
MAPPING THE PITCH

Football Formations Through the Ages

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SPORT

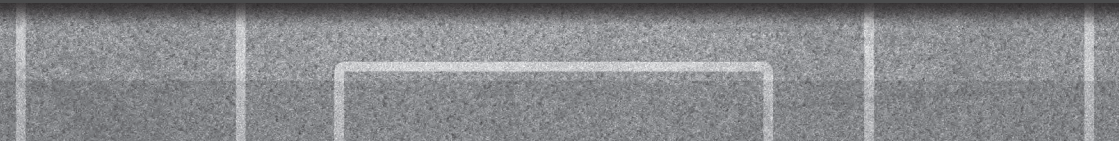
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CHAPTER ONE: MOB FOOTBALL

Whenever a player from either side got the ball, he had but one objective in mind: put his head down, take on an expression of grim countenance and attempt, at all costs, to dribble both himself and the ball up the field and into the opponent's goal.



1872. Let's set the scene in a general, historical sense before we focus on the football to get a sense of perspective.

In the US, Republican Ulysses S. Grant is the incumbent president. The country's flag, not yet the venerable Stars and Stripes, has just 37 stars, 13 short of its current total, a sign of a young and growing nation. But the nation is already making its fair share of world headlines, one of which was the discovery by the British ship *Dei Gratia* of the deserted and seemingly abandoned US vessel *Mary Celeste* that December.

In what is now the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV has been crowned as Emperor whilst in Australia, the Australian Overland Telegraph Line has been completed, the two separate lines having been joined at Frew Ponds in South Australia.

The Great War, that terrible conflagration that claimed 37 million casualties, was still 42 years into the future, a generation away.

Samuel Morse, the inventor of the electric telegraph dies. As does the man considered one of Mexico's greatest heroes, Benito Juárez.

Amongst those historical figures who were born in 1872 are future US president Calvin Coolidge, the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell and the first man to reach the South Pole, Roald Amundsen.

Another significant birth that occurred that year was that of international football.

It was contested between Scotland and England in Partick close to the north bank of the River Clyde in Glasgow and took place at, of all places, the West of Scotland Cricket Club's ground in front of just 4,000 curious, yet, you suspect, suitably fervent supporters demanding a drop

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or two of English blood, just as rather more had been dropped, nay, poured at Bannockburn in the 14th century.

It wasn't the first time the two nations had met in a football match, though. They'd already played a series of unofficial games, all arranged at the behest of the top hats and toffs at the Football Association who saw the Scots as malleable opponents there for the proverbial taking. It could also be, of course, that no one else wanted to play England or have anything to do with the FA who, a little under a decade earlier, had devised and introduced the first formalised rules of the game, one advantage of that of course being (and don't let anyone convince you otherwise) that if you make up the rules then you own the game.

It was, after all, what the English had already been doing for several centuries, a combination of fighting spirit and an altogether rather too fond love of rules, regulation and bureaucracy, making them, in their eyes, the perfect nation to own and regulate a game that looked set to conquer the world just as they had set out to do.

Thus both the rules of the game and the manner in which it was first played reflected the nation that had taken ownership of the same with both on-field formations and tactics reflecting the zeal of the soldiers and sailors that had set out with orders to take over the world.

In other words: attack, attack, attack.

Anyone who was at that first Scotland versus England game would therefore have witnessed the spectacle of 22 men repeatedly running, en masse, at each other, carrying the ball with them as if it was a battle standard with the mission objective very clear and simple: plant that standard (the ball) behind enemy lines as swiftly and effectively as possible. And if someone gets in the way, take them out.

It was, for all intents and purposes, a small outbreak of war on the banks of the Clyde, albeit one that was played out in a spirit of good sportsmanship allied with a reportedly ‘firm but fair’ performance from the Scottish referee (this was in Great Britain after all).

Formations, such as they were, typified the ‘up and at ‘em’ approach of both sides with England opting for a 1-1-8 formation – that is, with eight forwards in their side, or, in contemporary parlance, two inside and outside rights, two inside and outside lefts and four centre forwards. Scotland, on the other hand, opted for the relatively more cautious 2-2-6 formation, a decision that, no doubt, provoked howls of protest from the Scottish support, aghast at their sides decision to offer such a negative response to the front eight of the opposition.

Twenty-two players, 14 of which were attackers – that’s nearly 65% of all the players on show. Compare that, say, to today’s game where the away side might choose to counter the home teams tried and trusted 4-4-2 formation with a 5-4-1, opting for that little extra security at the back. It’s still 22 players, but only three of that 22 are now attacking players, or just 14% of all the players on show. Put it another way, nine of them are defenders; that’s nine in total from *both* teams, just one more than all of the attacking players who represented England alone on that dim and distant day in 1872.

Twenty-two players, 14 attackers. It sounds like footballing heaven. All either side could do was attack. And attack they both did. For 90 minutes. There were no back passes; in fact, there were hardly any passes that went backwards at all. Whenever a player from either side got the ball, he had but one objective in mind: put his head down, take on an expression of grim countenance and attempt, at all costs, to dribble both himself and the ball up the field and into the opponent’s goal. Whilst he was attempting to do this, his nine outfield teammates would be in close

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proximity to him, all eager to have a chance of their own to get their head down and run like hell whilst the opposition did everything they could, including body checks, in order to dispossess him and regain possession.

And then one of their own players would get his head down, take on that same determined expression and...well, you get the picture. And that's how it was for the entire game. First one group of players collectively swept forward. Then the other. And repeat. It really was end-to-end stuff; in fact, it was the very definition of that oft expressed footballing quotation.

In his book *Don't Mention The Score*,⁴ Simon Briggs imagines viewing the game from above, observing that, to the aerial observer, the '...shapeless bustle must have resembled particles in Brownian motion.'⁵ With such a commitment to attacking football from both sides, there could, of course, only be one consequence as far as the final score was concerned.

A 0-0 draw.

Quite how both sides managed to throw so many of their players into attacking mode only for the game to end as a 0-0 draw defies footballing logic. You could perhaps understand it if the game had been played in a mirror universe with England's sterile 8-1-1 coming up against the similarly dank 6-2-2 of the Scots. But not this way, not the way the teams had been set up to play the game – in other words, to get as many goals as they could. But 0-0? To even the casual observer, it would have

4 Briggs, Simon. 2007. *Don't Mention the Score*. *Quereus*. 13.

5 An apt description of the frantic, frenetic movement of the players in question, *Brownian motion* describes the highly random motion of particles suspended in a fluid which results from their collision with rapidly moving atoms or molecules in that gas or liquid—in other words, lots and lots of tiny little objects all randomly scurrying around with no perceived plan or purpose.

seemed, with the teams set up as they were with the emphasis on attack, to be more difficult not to score a goal than it would have been to score at least one or even the proverbial hatful. So how on earth did two such trigger happy teams manage to play out a goalless draw?

The answer to that is simple – they were two very good teams who managed to cancel each other out on the day. They may well have been set up to play offensively and most certainly would have gone into the game with that intent in mind. But this was England versus Scotland, and neither side wanted to lose. Indeed, it was quite likely that the players of each side saw not losing to their greatest foes as more of a priority than beating them. That rivalry has endeared ever since with the two sides meeting in a full international a further 111 times between then and 2014. With both players and fans from both sides going into the game with thoughts of ‘we mustn’t lose this’ rather than ‘we must win this’ – a mentality perhaps reflected in 1872 just as it would have been in the days leading up to the two teams most recent meeting – a comfortable 3-1 win for England at Celtic Park in 2014 that saw the Scotland side play just one man, Chris Martin of Derby County, in an attacking role at home, in front of a fired up crowd and against their most hated rivals.

Going all out to win? Or going all out not to lose? Scotland’s 4-5-1 formation on the night seems as overtly negative now as their 2-2-6 seemed rather too carefree for their first ever game.

Unlike that contemporary meeting, the two teams that met in 1872 were very evenly matched. The Scotland side, for example, was made up of 11 players, all of whom played for the same club team, Queens Park, then the leading side in Scotland. They therefore knew each other and the way they played the game as well as any international team has ever done, and this would have translated onto the pitch where England, the marginal favourites on the day, would have found the combination

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of team spirit (there was a rallying cry prior to one early clash between the teams that implored ‘...any Scotch players who may be desirous of assisting their country... may communicate with Messrs A F Kinnaird’) plus the heavy pitch two significant obstacles towards their expected victory.

Another point worthy of consideration is that the overtly attacking nature and line-ups of both teams were more of a hindrance than an asset to the match as far as goals were concerned. Briggs referred to the match as taking on the appearance of a ‘shapeless bustle’, and he is spot on. Yes, whenever one of the two sides found itself in possession, the man with the ball at his feet would have set out for goal with up to seven of his teammates all closely gathered around him. They would have had to contend with all of their opponents standing, running, punching, barging and even kicking them as they attempted to retain possession for themselves, the whole game resembling a scrum of players slowly moving up and down the pitch but never really getting anywhere. Players seeking space or a pass, players even doing something as ordinary as making a pass to one of their teammates was largely anathema to them; it was all about getting the ball at your feet and running with it until such time as someone took it off you. The whole process would then start again in the opposite direction, the defending posse became the attacking one and vice versa.

Run and jostle forwards, lose the ball, run and jostle backwards. And repeat.

No wonder it ended in a goalless draw. It was football Jim, but not as we know it. And perhaps that’s not too surprising as the game was, in many ways, still evolving from one of its forerunners, an early version that they would more like have been aware of, even if none of the England and Scotland players had played it themselves. As, too, would have their

fathers and grandfathers, both of whom would almost certainly have played the game themselves. That version of the game could be up to 200 a side or more and rarely, if ever, see a ‘goal’ scored.⁶

It was called mob football.

Mob football by name and mob football by nature. It was a game that was exactly as its name implies – one that was played by a mob.

A loose definition of mob is that it is a large crowd of people, especially one that is unruly, disorderly and intent on causing trouble or even violence. So, how about getting two opposing mobs together, throwing them a football and letting them get on with it?

There you have it. Mob football. A primitive, yet genuine forerunner of the game we all know and (mostly) love today. It was an occasionally violent and disorganised form of the game that was usually contested between two neighbouring villages, but was nothing like the conventional eleven-a-side. In fact, around 200-a-side would be regarded more as the norm. Those 200 men would comprise the strongest and most athletic working men from the village as well as a sprinkling of the landed gentry; each, no doubt keen to give their social opposites a good kicking in the process regardless of whether they were on their own side or not.

⁶ *Ball games where the objective is to score a goal yet hardly ever seeing one being scored are hardly unique. Take the Eton Wall Game, for example, played annually at the world-famous school between Collegers and Oppidans up against a 110-metre-long wall and on a pitch just five-metres wide. The sole objective, by just about any non-violent means possible, is to get the ball down to one end of the pitch to score a goal. It sounds simple enough, and it isn't for the want of trying. However, the last time a goal was recorded as being scored in one of the matches was in 1909!*

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An early form of football played in 17th-century Florence.

Picture the scene. A typical English market town at around the turn of the 13th century. Two large groups of people have gathered at the market cross; one has been gathered from the north and eastern side of the town, the other from the south and the western edges. The two groups are comprised entirely of men (though it would not be unknown for some women to disguise their appearance so they could take part), and all are now focused on the figure standing at the market cross, holding aloft in his hand an inflated animal bladder of some kind that will act as the ball and the focus of the game. As the town clock begins to strike 10, he throws the ball into the melee where a great and near uncontrollable scrum breaks out between all of the competitors. Their objective? Those from the north and eastern parts of the town have to get the ball to a pre-ordained spot in the southwest part of the town, those from the south and west have to get it to a point in the northeast of the town. That is their

group's prime aim and sole objective, that site more than likely marked by two posts stuck in the ground with a piece of netting hung between them.

Their goal.

The rules are fairly straightforward and easy to follow. Admittedly, yes, one of the great strengths of the modern game is its simplicity, the fact that it remains a game easy to understand and play. Yet the rules of today's game are in no way as user friendly as those of mob football, rule one of which was, pretty much, there are no rules.

Now that's maybe a slight exaggeration. Although kicking, punching, head-butting and even a little light gouging were all considered as much a part of the game then as a clearance into row Z or perfectly executed slide tackle is now, there was one possible consequence of the game that was regarded as being unacceptable and contrary to the spirit of the occasion.

Killing someone. Intentionally, at least.

Such was the rough and violent nature of mob football. There would certainly have been instances where players-cum-combatants died as a result of their taking part in the game. After all, if you're part of a surging group of a hundred-plus men, all with their testosterone raised to unheard of levels and the scent of opposition blood in their nostrils, it would be advisable not to stumble or fall over as part of that group because, rather than collectively stop to pick you up and dust you down, they would have carried on regardless, leaving the unfortunate faller at the very real risk of being trampled to death. There were myriad other ways in which you might have an inclination to expire during the game; they seemed limitless. One historical account, for example, tells of a game in Northumberland where a player was killed as a result of running against

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the dagger of his opponent, whilst another tells of a player taking part in a game in Cornwall who was struck and killed by a stone that was thrown at him by an opposing member.

Such was the popularity of the game and the zeal in which it was played that complaints about both it and the conduct of its players were soon being raised and noted. Early 14th-century London saw complaints by wealthy and influential merchants to King Edward II that led to the game being banned in the confines of the city due to the fact that it created ‘... great noise in the city, caused by hustling over large balls from which many evils may arise.’

Football in England was later banned by both King Edward III and King Edward IV, the reason given at the time was that it was preventing archers from practicing their art, an art considered, like themselves, a valuable asset in the many battles the country was actively taking part in at the time. Various illustrations that reference the ban often show a somewhat genteel group passing a ball from one to the other on what looks like a verdant village green whilst their bows lie, discarded, on the ground. This is fanciful at best as it would have been the mob form of the game that those monarchs were so keen to ban rather than the romantic and somewhat fragrant (as well as non-existent) form pictured. One reason was that the archers weren’t missing their practice sessions because they were playing football but because they had incurred assorted injuries playing football, including broken or permanently disfigured bow fingers.

No wonder the two Edwards were anti-football if it meant their most important soldiers were missing due to incapacitations earned whilst playing what was still, after all, a mere game.