



**Unit Assessment – Tutorial Paper (60%)**

*Dutch Football Philosophy*

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**Problem Based Learning 1 (PD112)**

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**KNVB**

## **Introduction**

It is known as the “world game”, played by millions of children every day in the streets, in the parks and on the playing fields across many countries. They call it “football”, also known as soccer. The object of the game seems simple enough; score more goals than your opponent by striking the ball into the net without using your hands. So why do so many countries struggle to win when competing, while a select few seem to win all the time? One country, the Netherlands, has been successful for many years in producing talented youth players by breaking the game down and implementing an attacking style, commonly referred to as “total football”.

In this paper a number of concepts will be identified, firstly, the basic skills needed to play the game, then an insightful look at Dutch football methodology focusing on “three main moments”. Discussion and application of these principles will conclude the paper along with a brief analysis of why Australia should model this system in developing a national philosophy.

## **Discussion**

The Dutch have a very simple way of looking at the game, which makes it easy to understand from a child’s perspective. According to van Lingen (1997), soccer is all about winning. He describes the objective as follows:

In order to win, one team has to score more goals than the other. A team can only score a goal if it is in possession, and it can only gain possession by taking the ball off its opponents. When a team gains possession it tries to build up an attack. If it loses the ball it tries to prevent the other team from scoring, by disrupting its buildup play defending against an attack. These basic aspects are fundamental to any analysis of the structure of the game. (p.2)

The elements on which the actual play is based under the Dutch philosophy is known as the “TIC” principle, which stands for “technique”, “insight” and “communication”. It is believed that no matter how small children are, or however elementary the standard of play, the players possess a certain degree of technical skill. It is necessary for a player to possess an insight into the game in order to understand the appropriate or inappropriate actions required in a given situation. Insight is largely a question of experience and soccer intelligence which a child will develop over time. The most important of factors within this principle is communication, that is, the interaction between the players and the elements involved in the game, primarily the interaction with the ball (van Lingen, 1997).

The Dutch believe you have to have TIC to play the game. In order to establish player development, better decision-making and problem solving, technique, insight and communication must be the focal points to improving performance systematically and methodically. One of the key structures within the development phase of this philosophy is breaking-up the age groups by giving values, for example, six to eight year olds are considered “F” grade because they are easily distracted and in the cognitive phase of development. Eight to ten year olds are given an “E” and ten to twelve a “D” grade as their willingness to participate and compare themselves to others improves (van Lingen, 1997).

The key objectives for children participating in the game from as early as five years and up to the age of eight are familiarity through play, gaining control over the ball, as the ball is the most important obstacle, and always involved in small sized games (usually 4v4) where each player gets as many ball contacts as possible. While from the age of nine through twelve the objectives start to get more in-depth. Players

start to receive instruction when playing small sized games and basic games, players develop technical skills within the context of basic soccer games and the emphasis to link technical skills to insight into the game and communication, referring again to TIC. In these critical years the Dutch focus primarily on technical development whereas from the age of twelve on there is a shift in focus to the development and maturing of insight (van Lingen, 1997).

To simplify the Dutch philosophy, a child is told to think of their development as “the ball and me”. As a child grows familiar with the ball they develop their skills and improve their sense of direction, speed and precision. It is only through the uncompromised attention of outstanding youth coaches that this country, the Netherlands, has been able to achieve success at youth level. The Dutch have a saying: No youth. No future. The ability to break the game down and simplify the message to children in early stage development is exceptional, if not, the most outstanding amongst the European nations. An example of success at youth level in particular comes from AFC Ajax. The Amsterdam based football club has produced the likes of Johan Crujff, Marco van Basten, Frank Rijkaard, Dennis Bergkamp and Patrick Kluivert from their youth academy (AFC Ajax NV, 2007).

Each of the teams at AFC Ajax plays the 4-3-3 system. This is historical, but they believe this is the best system to produce good technical players and attractive football. Each player is then accustomed to playing this system from the age of eight which benefits the first team in future years. This system is hugely reliant on 1v1 situations and requires two highly skilled wingers and a “target” striker. The coaches at AFC Ajax are forbidden to play any other system. The philosophy is always to play and promote “total football” (Van Buusen, 2006).

In 1999, revolutionary Dutch coach and philosopher, Rinus Michels, was awarded the highest honour in world football, the FIFA Coach of the Century. Michels was instrumental in developing the “total football” concept during the early 70s at AFC Ajax. According to Michels (2001), “total football” made its mark on the evolution of the game by utilising 4-3-3 as its basic organisational form, he explains as follows:

‘Total football’ was the consequence of my search for a way to break open the enforced defenses. This required actions during the build-up and attack that would surprise the opponent. This is the reason that I chose to have frequent changes in the positions, within and between the three lines. All players were allowed to participate in the build-up and attack as long as they also felt responsible for their defensive tasks. Individually and team tactically, this does put high demands on the players. (pp.42-43)

Michels “total football” philosophy is very spectacular and high on attacking pressure displaying tactical and technical excellence. It is through the development of this philosophy that football right down to the grassroots can produce players with confidence to represent their country at senior international level.



Figure 1. “Rinus Michels” (Rauchensteiner, Augenblick, 1988)

To understand this philosophy, one must break it down and take a look at its working methods. Every child participating in training sessions under this system receives fundamental coaching focusing on four key elements. The first being typical objectives, for example, scoring and preventing goals, buildup and team work, goal-orientedness and rapid switch when change of possession occurs. Following is the concept of “many repetitions”, which includes, frequent involvement, short waiting times, good planning and organisation, sufficient balls and equipment and playing to win. Another is group considerations, mainly, age, ability and perception, either serious or casual. A crucial factor is attention to the work-rest ratio. Finally, the correct coaching or influence, this is achieved by making objectives clear. Coaches influence and teach players by intervening or stopping play, giving instructions, asking questions, encouraging suggestions, setting an example and demonstrating (van Lingen, 1997). The accumulation of these principles creates the ideal learning environment.

The Dutch methodology is based on three main moments. In possession, opponents in possession and change of possession, known as, transition. The Dutch aim to initiate play starting from the back, this also involves the goalkeeper, who at times acts as a sweeper, the last man in defence. The main objective in possession is to be organised and take up the right positions at the correct distances from each other, known as, balance. Good positional play, with the aim of keeping possession of the ball, and passing it forward or deep into the oppositions half, will create scoring opportunities (van Lingen, 1997).

When the opponent is in possession they will try and create a scoring opportunity, as the defending team the aim is to disrupt the opposition’s buildup play.

If the ball is at a safe distance from goal the mentality above all, is to try not to be beaten, play close to each other, known as, compact and pressure the opposition. However, if the opponent is close to goal the first aim is to prevent a goal scoring opportunity and the second to regain possession of the ball. This is done by shielding the goal properly and if necessary covering for your team mates. Keeping the opponent and the ball in front of you, blocking shots and winning the ball without fouling the opponent (van Lingen, 1997).

During the transition phase, or change of possession, it is important to adapt immediately to the new situation in “thought and deed” (van Lingen, 1997, p.110). Immediate pressure on the ball when in transition will stifle the opponent. These three main moments form the basis of the Dutch philosophy which can be easily related to the game by coaches and players.

When analysing the Dutch philosophy it is noteworthy to pay respect to their objectives. The Dutch want to win, play attractive free-flowing football while demonstrating technique and tactical awareness in a highly disciplined manner. They are methodical, sometimes too structured, but at the cognitive stage of development, that is, grassroots football, this is an essential part of learning the game.

The Dutch believe that creativity and technique rate higher than slavish adherence to rigid systems and simple physical strength. Again, AFC Ajax is renowned for expressive and attacking football. An exceptionally large amount of expectation is placed on their coaches and players, winning by playing defensive football is not acceptable, no matter how many trophies are won, producing highly technical players and an attractive brand of football is all the matters. It would seem an almost impossible set of demands to play attacking soccer, to dare to take risks, to

accept nothing but the best in terms of expressing this philosophy on the field, and to win prizes every year (Kormelink & Seeverens, 1997). Such is life at AFC Ajax.

One of the most influential coaches in recent times at AFC Ajax has been Louis Van Gaal. Van Gaal's defining moment came in 1995 when he led his team to victory over AC Milan in the Final of the UEFA Champions League. Van Gaal must be credited with further developing the Dutch philosophy during the modern era. Van Gaal, much like his mentor Michels, is recognised as the benchmark for Dutch football methodology.

The basis of Van Gaal's philosophy is discipline, followed closely by communication and team-building. Van Gaal believes that "each player has to carry out his basic tasks to the best of his ability, and this requires a disciplined approach on the pitch" (Kormelink & Seeverens, 1997, p.2). Van Gaal sees every training session as a form of communication and believes team-building is the result of "discipline and continuous communication with each other" (Kormelink & Seeverens, 1997, p.2).



Figure 2. "Louis Van Gaal" (Getty Images, 2007)

So, if leading Dutch coaches believe in creativity, attacking play, discipline, team-building and technical and tactical excellence, why wouldn't Australia model their philosophy on the Dutch? Especially, after the Socceroos impressive display at the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany. Guus Hiddink, a masterful technician well-renowned in the South of the Netherlands and respected in world football, enlightened the Australian football community. Now, Football Federation Australia (FFA) has appointed a Dutch Technical Director in Robert Baan, the implementation of this philosophy across the nation would surely make sense. Australian football is crying out for guidance and leadership right down to the grassroots.

The implementation of the "Dutch Youth Licence" model would only benefit the current and future crop of coaches in Australia. Former Socceroo and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) Chief Football Analyst, Craig Foster, concurs and believes it is youth coaches who are responsible for producing talented footballers. "We've got Baan on board now, a perfect example, you bring the Dutch licences in... ..all the coaches in junior club land get the Dutch Youth Licence which is very simple [to understand as] it breaks the game down very well" (C. Foster, personal communication, August 31, 2007).

The methodology of "three main moments" could transpire across the country and form the basis of Australia's national philosophy. Australia is a nation with a proud and successful sporting history, producing exceptional athletes with both physical and mental strength envied by the rest of the world. The so-called "sleeping giant" of Australian football codes has awoken, now is the time to act and implement change for the benefit of the game and the pleasure of all who participate in the world's most enjoyed sport.

## **Conclusion**

In reflection, the Dutch philosophy is exciting on many levels. Exciting not only to watch, in its attacking style, but in how it fundamentally breaks the game down into clear and understandable methods. It would appear that this philosophy can compare to the use of both left and right sides of the brain. The organised, methodical and pragmatic left, meeting the creative, excited and free-flowing right, together producing “total football”, a magical ninety minute experience.

Dutch football owes a lot to Rinus Michels, his passion and vision in developing a national philosophy will go down in history, he paved the way for coaches to express themselves through attacking football. Much like Michels, Van Gaal has been influential in the modern era, producing talented Dutch players, who in return, produce games full of goals. According to Michels (2001) football is like an orchestra, he describes it as follows:

Football coaches have often been compared to conductors. Every musician plays his own role and instrument in an orchestra. It is not only the task of the conductor to ensure that every one of the individual musicians is able to contribute, he must also ensure that the result is harmonic. (p.3)

Who would have thought the twelve year old boy who joined the AFC Ajax youth set-up in 1940 would grow up to be the inventor of a philosophy enjoyed by fans the world over. Michels put Dutch football on the map. If “total football” is harmonic, then the powers that be in Australian football should listen to the music.

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