

Throughout the years, soccer has been analysed through different perspectives that have emerged due to the use of paradigms that were created by part of the scientific community, which began to apply them to understand the reality of the phenomena (Capra, 1996; Morin, 1991). Over the last centuries, the evolution of knowledge and expertise was based on paradigms that separated the phenomena or the objects of study so as to understand them in a more simplified manner (Morin, 1991). These approaches not only facilitated countless discoveries and promoted exponential growth in science but also made it clear that the complexity of certain phenomena and fields could not be studied from such angle. That is, they could not be simplified and had to be studied inside the limits of their inherent complexity; otherwise they would cease to exist. Trying to solve this issue, new fields of study, theories and investigation methodologies emerged in the Sixties in a more consistent manner, attempting to understand the phenomena in their complex nature (Benkirane, 2002; Capra, 1996; Morin, 1991; Stacey, 1995). The attempt to comprehend and understand soccer games is also going through this dichotomy of paradigms. On the one hand the game is split into four dimensions (tactical, technical, physical and psychological), but on the other hand new approaches appear, describing the game as a full and complex creation, in which any attempt of breaking it apart is regarded as a mutilator of its essence. While in the first approach these different dimensions are broken down to the smallest detail, in the second approach, the study of the whole, the dimension or the detail are inseparable from the complexity intrinsic to it. Given these different approaches, elaborated with the purpose of understanding and acting effectively and efficiently within the game and, consequently, within the training that generates it, we understand that the concept of tactics in soccer should also be considered in light of its own complexity. In this context, if the definitions of tactics from different authors (Garganta & Oliveira, 1996; Gréhaigne, 1992; Mahlo, 1974; Teodorescu, 1984) point towards the behaviours that the player and/or team assume to deal in a correct way with the problems systematically presented by the game, regarding the occupation of DOI: 10.4324/9781003223375-24 *Understanding the Soccer Game* the field, it is reasonable to say that the concept of tactics may be considered as the management (positioning and displacement/movement) of the playing space by players and teams. This concept is related to what may be observed of the behaviour of players and the team in the field. Thus, we emphasize that this is a simple way to conceive tactics, given that underlying each positioning and displacement/movement there is a complex process that involves multiple aspects of players' cognition—(central and peripheral) perception and memory, information processing, attention/concentration and the (procedural and declarative) knowledge among them—which subsidize a more creative and/or intelligent decision-making from the players and the team, leading to the solution of the problems posed by the game. Such comprehension of tactics takes this dimension to an emergent process (Frade, 1990; Laughlin, 2008), resulting in the interaction between a combination of factors, ideas and specific knowledge (Guilherme, 2004; Mahlo, 1974) among the different actors of a team: players, coach and the surrounding context (Guilherme, 2004). Therefore, the tactical dimension of a soccer team should be understood as a unique structure distinguished by its non-linear and spiralling complexity and dynamics. In summary, it is about a specific cultural context generated by the interaction of its different actors, which enables the emergence of a collective identity over time. This idea of the tactical dimension as a unique structure, in which each team uncovers their own measure in a *sui generis* manner, contrasts with the abstract idea through which it is often presented. Thus, when we talk about a team's tactical dimension we do not mean a general concept, but rather a specific one, which contextualizes and gives meaning and consistency to all other dimensions. In this case, as defined by Gibson (1979), the specificity refers to a qualifying concept of a relation of interaction between variables. These variables represent the specific information of a given context (Laughlin, 2008). As such, the variables are only considered specific if the informational links between them maintain a relation of dependence (Beek, Jacobs, Daffertshofer, & Huys, 2003). Therefore, the tactical dimension assumes in each team a different organism, with its own identity and particularities, which emerge from the relation of complicity with other dimensions. These, however, also exhibit particular characteristics influenced by the specific informational context generated by the respective interactions. As a consequence of such properties, the technical, physical or psychological dimensions are meaningless without the tactical one to contextualize them, in the same way that the tactical dimension cannot express itself if any of the others is not present. With this statement we do not intend to convey the idea that the tactical dimension is more important than the others, but rather to highlight that it plays the role of generator, catalyst and specific informational coordinator of each team. This understanding of tactics refers to the interaction of distinct variables: the ideas and specific knowledge of the different actors. Soccer 5 The ideas are related to the direction we give to the way of solving problems. Usually, coaches know the style of play they intend to implement in their teams. They know what they want in the different moments of play, they know what they intend when the team is in offensive or defensive organization or in the respective transitions (defence-attack and attack-defence). These are the ideas conveyed to the players through training, the process of incorporating the play (Maciel, 2011), which drives the paths to be followed by the teams and their respective players. The coaches' ideas function as a guiding light. Therefore, the play that is created is closely related to the ideas transmitted by the coach. The players' specific knowledge is related to the interaction between their particular tactical understanding and expertise related to distinguishing motor skills applied to the context (Guilherme, 2004). The specific tactical knowledge leads us to the knowledge the player possesses that allows him/her to play, selecting the options that seem appropriate when facing different situations. This one is related to the declarative and procedural knowledge. With respect to both concepts, procedural knowledge is related to the motor skills which ensures the feasibility of the action intended to operationalize the decision (Guilherme, 2004). When there is an interaction between the player's specific knowledge, and the coach's ideas of play, the outcome is a collective project of dynamic play, simultaneously and paradoxically, predictable and unpredictable. The predictability emerges from the ideas of play the coach conveys and is structured on a macro level. On the other hand, the unpredictability rises from the interpretation and interaction structured on a micro level that the different players make from those ideas, with their own knowledge, perception and particularities. Let us make an analogy to better understand and evoke the idea. Say the ideas of play the coach intends to convey are represented by the colour blue. When the idea of this colour is transmitted, it will be interpreted by the players and each one will recognize this blue in a peculiar way, according to their experiences, characteristics, skills, limitations, preferences and emotions. When these different blues expressed by the players interact, the resulting shade of blue that emerges is unpredictable. Through this analogy we have just presented, we intend to demonstrate that the predictability is the understanding that the interaction between the coach's ideas and the players' specific knowledge will be represented by the colour blue, and not by red, green or yellow. However, the shade of blue that will rise from every interaction is unknown to us. This is the unpredictability, the shade of blue, on the macro level, and the different players' shades, on the micro level. The combination of the coaches' ideas, the respective interpretation by the players and the resulting rebuilding of these ideas through the training process is what enables the players to continuously find new individual and collective paths. At this point, we intend to highlight that tactic is a complex dimension related to the team's identity and also to the operational process of building this identity. Next we will seek to understand the tactical evolution that game and the player had over time. 6 *Understanding the Soccer Game* 1.2 The Paths Taken by Tactics From its origins to the present day, soccer has been through different phases, characterized by equally distinct demonstrations of play (Guilherme, 2004). These phases grant understanding of the evolution of the game, the player and, at the same time, of the concept of tactics. As mentioned earlier, the current definition of tactics refers to the behaviours the player and/or the team performs to solve the problems that arise from the game. We also verified that the patterns of these behaviours come from the interaction between various levels, specifically the coaches' ideas and the players' specific knowledge. Thus, we understand tactics as a concept from which emerges a particular and specific informational context that is gradually built and recreated in a spiralling way, as its actors interact in training and matches. Therefore, we are aware that the onset of tactics in the soccer game is in the origin of the game itself, regardless of the completely different nuances currently observed. 1.3 The Game Begins, Tactics Emerge The emancipation of soccer as a game happened at the occasion of its institutionalization through The Football Association, in 1863, in England. However, its practice as a recognized sport started in the early years of this century. The first known rules were proposed in 1815 by the Eton College. However, it was only in 1848 in Cambridge, in a meeting between the most prestigious Universities at the time, that the first standardized rules were created, strongly influenced by rugby (Sebastián, 1996). The particularities highlighted, such as the prohibition of passing the ball to a more advanced teammate, which would be considered offside, constrained the progression of the team and the players in the field, thus determining the characteristics of the game and player at that time (Castelo, 1996). The solution found to overcome this issue was the progression through individual actions. The player in possession of the ball would move forward trying to dribble all opponents that appeared and, if successful, would shoot at goal. However, if any of the opponents took away the ball, he/she would be the one to perform the same actions of progression and dribble. The teammates of the player leading the progression were concerned about supporting him/her and, if he/she lost possession of the ball, they would try to recover it and start a new action of dribbling penetration. The players of the opposite team would try to prevent this advancement, and when they gained the ball, they would try to advance themselves through dribble. Because of these characteristics, this period of soccer was mentioned to as the dribbler's period (Castelo, 1996). The arrangement of the players on the field employed at the time consisted of one goalkeeper, one defender and nine forwards (1–1–9) (Figure 1.1). This solution turned the game into a set of individualized actions with little collective meaning. After the foundation of The Football Association in 1863 there was an attempt to permanently emancipate soccer from rugby. This effort enabled the introduction Soccer 7 Gr Figure 1.1 Representation of the arrangement of the players on the field: (1–1–9) one goalkeeper, one defender and nine forwards Source: Guilherme (2004) of changes to the rules in 1866, which was decisive for the evolution and the path that the game started to follow. The most relevant adjustment, among many, was the modification in the offside rule. A player would then be considered offside only if he/she received the ball without having at least three opponents between himself/herself and the opposite goal line. This alteration made forward passes possible, thus progressively turning soccer from a game of essentially individual features into a game of collective ones (Gréhaigne, 1992). With the purpose of creating new solutions to the possibilities and characteristics the game began to present, the arrangements of the players started to change. There was a decrease in the number of forwards and an increase in the number of players with defensive and organizational tasks, that is the concern gradually shifted to lessen the imbalance between the number of players in defence and attack (Figure 1.2) (Castelo, 1996). Gr Gr Gr Figure 1.2 Representation of the different arrangements of the players on the field: (1-1-1-3) one goalkeeper, one defender, one midfielder and eight forwards; (1-1-2-7) one goalkeeper, one defender, two midfielders and seven forwards; (1-2-2-5) one goalkeeper, two defenders, two midfielders and six forwards Source: Guilherme (2004) 8 *Understanding the Soccer Game* Gr Figure 1.3 Representation of the "Classical System" or "Pyramid": (1-2-3-5) one goalkeeper, two defenders, three midfielders and five forwards Source: Guilherme (2004) These changes were progressive for around 20 years, until 1884, when as a consequence of the evolution that had been observed there came which was considered the first soccer system, the "Classical System" or "Pyramid" (Figure 1.3). This system was organized with players arranged in: one goalkeeper, two defenders, three midfielders and five forwards (1-2-3-5). It was considered the first soccer system because, for the first time, the three sectors of the team were taken into account: defence, midfield and attack, allowing a certain balance between offensive and defensive actions (Castelo, 1996; Mendes, 1979). In comparison with the game played in previous decades, the meaning of the game had definitively changed. Due to the generalized possibility of passing, the game was no longer a set of individual actions of dribbling progression, but rather a more collective one. This stage of adaptation and evolution (in)to a game with different, more collective characteristics, lasted around 50 years. Another change in the offside rule, proposed in 1925, reduced for two the number of opponents the attacker were allowed to have between himself/herself and the opposite goal line when he/she received the ball, led the game to a considerable evolution. From that point forwards, the doors to the development of tactics were also opened, since the ideas for solving problems of the game started to diversify. As an example of the alterations observed then, the centre-backs who previously played in projection (one in front and the other behind) started to play in line to benefit from the offside rule. Those players positioned up the field, by the side corridors, known as wingers, progressed to play close to the line of the centre-backs, thus shaping the "W" of notorious systems, which have been very successful since the 1930s. Because of the emergence of three new coaches, from three different countries, who revolutionized the characteristics of soccer and influenced the following generations, that decade was considered, in turn, quite rich. Herbert Chapman Soccer 9 Gr Figure 1.4 Representation of Herbert Chapman's "WM System" Source: Guilherme (2004) appeared in England, while Italy and Austria saw the rise of Vittorio Pozzo and Hugo Meisl, respectively. In 1932, Herbert Chapman, Arsenal's coach, developed a new playing "system" called "WM" (Figure 1.4). This "system" became revolutionary because it provided, for the first time, a numerical balance between defenders and forwards and, as a result, individual defence appears as a collective concern (Sebastián, 1996). If we project the letters that make the acronym for this system among teams, we will notice that the "W" (attack) projected on the "M" (defence) provides the exact fit of the marking for each player: the centre-back marking the centre forward, the full-backs marking the two midfielders and the defensive midfielder marking the attacking midfielder. In addition, this system enabled a balanced occupation, for that time, of all playing spaces: defence, midfield and attack. These positional characteristics brought out a more collective game compared to the one practiced up to that point, and it was from that time on that the tactical dimension started being acknowledged in the characteristics and qualities the game exhibited (Guilherme, 2004). The "WM system", also known as "magic square" due to the square-shaped positioning of the four midfield players, was of paramount importance for the evolution of the characteristics of the game and the players. The game began to show a more collective meaning (Castelo, 1996), while the player became an integral part of a group with previously established tasks and objectives, in which the final result was not the sum of all players' roles, but rather of the relations they took on. For the first time, there was an idea of an organized team, both collectively and individually (Guilherme, 2004). Vittorio Pozzo, coach of the Italian National Team crowned World Champions in 1934 and 1938, and gold medalist at the Olympic Games in Berlin, in 1936, was also a very important coach at that time, due to the titles won and his ideas of play. Pozzo's ideas of play were based on off-ball play and on the preparation he demanded from the team. He wanted the team to display a very rigorous and 10 *Understanding the Soccer Game* Gr Figure 1.5 Representation of Vittorio Pozzo's "WM System" Source: Guilherme (2004) safe defensive organization, with the purpose of regaining possession and counter attack, through a fast and in-depth play. He was the precursor of counter attacking and positional shifts between forwards. The playing "system" displayed was the so-called WW (Figure 1.5), an adaptation of the "classical system": five defenders, two midfielders and three forwards. With respect to team conditioning, due to the influence of the military dictatorship that ruled the country at the time, he imposed a quite demanding and rigorous physical and psychological preparation, as he understood this was the path to success (Sebastián, 1996). Hugo Meisl, coach of the Austrian

National Team and creator of the so-called *Wunderteam*, dazzled the entire Europe between 1931 and 1935 with the quality of his game. Meisl gathered the renowned technique of the Austrian players and his new ideas of play that were revolutionary at the time and that inspired the follow- ing generations. In defensive terms they were the first team to collectively constrain their opponents. It was not only the players with defensive tasks who performed it but also those in the offensive, thus giving rise to the ideas of collective defensive organization and pressing. In offensive terms, he demanded great mobility from all players, required players to constantly shift positions in order to create additional problems to the opponents, and also expected the players with defensive tasks to be involved in the offensive ones (Sebastián, 1996). These ideas, which then were completely revolutionary and performed by play- ers with great technique, allowed for the soccer game to be played as never seen before. The structure employed by Meisl was an adaptation of the "classical sys- tem" with some alterations that had the purpose of creating balance between all three sectors and a rational occupation of the playing space (Figure 1.6). The *Wunderteam* was considered back then the ultimate expression of attacking soccer (Márcio et al., 1992; Sebastián, 1996). Its continuity was not possible due to the death of its creator in 1937, and because its players were involved in the war during several years. For these reasons Meisl's ideas were neglected at the time, Soccer 11 GR *Figure 1.6 Representation of Hugo Meisl's "System"* Source: Guilherme (2004) maybe because they were far too evolved. Nevertheless, they later inspired several coaches who were also very important for the evolution of the game. The importance of all three coaches mentioned was decisive due to the ideas introduced, the paths that they opened and, consequently, the ideological versatil- ity that soccer began to exhibit, that is for the first time ever, the relevance of the tactical dimension started taking shape. The predominance of the "WM" system lasted until the early 1950s, more pre- cisely November, 1953, when England was beaten at home by Hungary 6–3 and again, after a few months, in 1954, in Hungary, 7–1. During the 20 years within this period, some variations of the "WM" emerged, always with the purpose of improving it. However, the true changes only occurred in the 1950s, with the Hun- garian and Brazilian National Teams (Sebastián, 1996). The Hungarian team, coached by Gustav Sebes, featured a group of players of great technical quality, but it was the tactical characteristics that made it different and were responsible for their achievements (Mendes, 1979). The key aspect of the Hungarian team was the dynamics the players and, as a result, the team were able to impose to their offensive game. However, another element displayed was the distinctive positional organization of the players when defending and attacking (Figure 1.7). This change brought several problems to their opponents, due to the static positional approach that existed at the time. From this point forward, the dynamics, that is the players' and team's mobility with and without the ball proved to be key aspects of the game. It was the return of a more incisive and definitive version of Hugo Meisl's ideas. The Brazilian team was also decisive within this period due to the new systems it displayed. At first, the "1-4-2-4", (one goalkeeper, four defenders, two midfielders and four forwards), in 1958 and, later, in 1962 the "1-4-3-3" (one goalkeeper, four defenders, three midfielders and three forwards), the latter because it adapted to the players' skills and characteristics (Figure 1.8). GR GR *Figure 1.7 Representation of Gustav Sebes' "System"*, with the positioning of the players when defending and attacking Source: Guilherme (2004) GR GR *Figure 1.8 Representation of the 1-4-2-4 and 1-4-3-3 "Systems"* used by the Brazilian Team in the 1958 and 1962 World Cups, respectively Source: Guilherme (2004) Soccer 13 GR GR *Figure 1.9 X Diagonal of the "WM" and asymmetric "WM" systems*, respectively Source: Guilherme (2004) The former (1-4-2-4) system was the consequence of the evolution of some years of experiences and adaptations of South American soccer. After the applica- tion of the "WM" and "WW" systems in Brazil, mainly in the Flamengo and Fluminense teams during the 1930s and 1940s, alternatives for the expression of the game appeared, slowly displaying the essence of Brazilian soccer (Parreira, 2005). The first change ever recorded was from the X diagonal of the "WM" System to the asymmetric "WM" (see Figure 1.9), causing one of the midfielders to be pushed forward and the other to be pulled back. Thus, two new functions emerged in soccer: attacking midfielder and centre-forward. Because the centre-forward often penetrated the penalty box unmarked, forc- ing the centre-back to divide his attention between him/her and the target man, the fourth defender emerged to mark him/her. Besides, the freedom granted to the full-backs to progress to the offensive half made the defensive coverage of the space vacated by them essential to preserve defensive balance. As a result came the 1-4-2-4, a winning system used by the Brazilian Team during the 1958 World Cup, in Sweden. Conversely, the 1-4-3-3 system was an evolution of the former caused by some organizational and functional adjustments to the players' characteristics and skills. This innovative system also allowed Brazil to win the 1962 World Cup, in Chile. The essential characteristics of these systems were: the balance between the defensive and offensive play, which allowed for an easy and rapid turn from a strong defence into a strong attack and vice versa; a dynamics of team and play- ers which allowed them to generate defensive and offensive edge within the area where the ball was being played; and, lastly, the acknowledgement of the physical dimension as core aspect of this playing style. Both systems were successful at that time, because at first they encouraged by the proposed dynamics that did not exist until then, and also because its demands required of the midfielders who often took part in the defensive and offensive actions of the team (Castelo, 1996; Mendes, 1979; Sebastián, 1996). Thereafter, the physical dimension started being permanently recognized as deci- sive for the evolution of the game (Castelo, 1996; Mendes, 1979; Sebastián, 1996). 14 *Understanding the Soccer Game* In spite of the importance of this recognition, it has not always been interpreted with the intention of protecting the essence of the game and, as a consequence, its quali- tative evolution. Since the different dimensions of the game were not acknowledged by most of the sports people in its complex uniqueness, there was the interpretation of the possibility of splitting them. If in some cases, as we will refer to later, this fact was not evidenced as a limitation for the evolution of the game and the player, in others, it was found that the direction through which it went led the game to winding paths, in which the quality of the play and the players was even up. One of the most crucial examples of this line of reasoning was the 1966 World Cup, held in England. The champion and runner-up, England and Germany, respectively, were distinguished as the greatest exponents of what was known at the time as the "physical style". This style of play was distinguished by the supremacy of the physical dimension above all others. The players would run a lot and often went to the challenges with great vigour. Many of the technical and puny play- ers were replaced by the strong, tall and robust ones. The game was described as ugly and violent due to the excessive number of dangerous fouls, lacking technical quality and artless, driven by the absence of skills and creativity displayed by the players (Mendes, 1979). This style of play, adopted by many European countries and, consequently, important teams after the 1960s, was the answer to the recognition of the need of increased playing dynamics. This challenge was introduced by Gustav Sebes, in the 1950s, and by the Brazilian National teams in 1958 and 1962, though with completely distinct nuances, since, as we mentioned, the dynamics of the teams emerged from the creative and innovative ideas of play presented and from the technical skills of the different players. Yet, the continuity and evolution of the ideas patented by the Brazilian team in South America and the resurgence in Europe of innovative ideas of play, proposed by the Dutch National team and by Ajax, through the coaches Rinus Michels and Stephan Kovacs, were crucial for generating alternatives to the physical style that had been established in the Old Continent. Rinus Michels, Ajax's and future Netherlands' coach, created an idea of play that would be called "Total Football". The characteristics that supported this idea elected the technical skills and players' freedom and intelligence as the most important values of expression (Cruyff, 2002). Passing, constant mobility of the forwards without the ball, continuous support to the player in possession of the ball, versatility of tasks, control of the pace of play, with accelerations, decelera- tions or breaks generating adaptation problems for the opponents, and the supe- rior technical skills of the different players, supported by the physical dimension, were regarded as basic fundamentals for the offensive play. The reduction of the playing space, thus approximating the areas both in width and length and packing the team, the permanent search for recovering possession in every zone of the field and pressing the player in possession of the ball also supported by good physical strength were the characteristics of the defensive play (Cruyff, 2002; Mendes, 1979; Olivares, 1978; Sebastián, 1996). Soccer 15 According to what we have just mentioned, the late 1960s and the 1970s saw the rise of distinct ideas about the game. These ideas came from the same concern: the need for greater dynamics of play. However, taking into account the main concerns of each to solve the problem, the game began evidencing distinct forms of expression, which, in a simplified manner, may be named "technical-tactical" and "tactical-physical" (Guilherme, 2004). The "technical-tactical" form, mainly displayed by the Dutch, Brazilian and Argentinian national teams, as well as some domestic teams of these countries, was characterized by a playing style essentially based on the tactical and technical dimensions. The physical dimension also played an important role, but only as a support to the others rather than as a generator of the process. This style of play was expressed in different ways, but focused on the qualitative relation between the offensive and defensive processes and, above all, on their connection with the players' technical skills. Technique does not appear constrained, but it is rather a conditioning factor. It interacts with the tactical dimension to generate a more qualitative play, which, in consequence, compels the player to create new paths to respond to the ever-growing demands the game begins to exhibit. There is an evolutionary process of spiralling interaction between the game and the player (Guilherme, 2004). The "tactical-physical" form, exhibited by the English, German, Italian and Spanish national teams, among others, was characterized by a playing style based on the tactical and physical dimensions. Technique emerges from the need of solving problems in the game, but with a secondary importance in relation to and constrained by the other dimensions. For these reasons, in many teams over the years players were selected not according to technical superiority, but to tactical characteristics based on discipline, organizational capabilities and superior physi- cal skills. This style of play can also manifest in different ways: more offensive or more defensive, but always strongly linked to the tactical and physical dimensions. From the late 1960s up to present days, there has been an ongoing battle between these two styles of play. In some periods, a more "tactical-physical" style has dominated. Some of the highlights of this style were the 1966 World Cup, won by England, the 1982 World Cup, won by Italy and the 1990 World Cup, won by Germany. In other periods, it was the more "technical-tactical" style that prevailed, par- ticularly when supported by technically evolved players, and when those skills work in favour of the team. Some examples of this style are the Brazilian teams of 1958 and 1962, the Netherlands in 1974, Brazil in 1982, Argentina in 1986 and the current Spanish team. At club level, some European teams were also noteworthy: Rinus Michels' and Stephan Kovacs' Ajax of the early 1970s, Arrigo Sacchi's Milan of the late 1980s, Johan Cruyff's Barcelona of the early 1990s and, more recently, Pep Guardiola's Barcelona, Bayern München and Manchester City are some clear examples. Despite this evident dichotomy in understanding soccer, it was what, over the years, provided moments of clear evolution of the game and the player: The game! 16 *Understanding the Soccer Game* because of the new ideas that coaches proposed when facing the problems that arose, especially regarding gradual decrease of playing time and space. The player because he/she not only interpreted the new ideas presented but also reinvented them, at both tactical and physical dimensions, propelling the game to ever more elaborate levels. According to what we have just observed, the evolution that the game has undergone over the years has different aspects, though it always aimed at solving tactical problems that emerged. The first period was defined by the emancipation and identification of soccer as a sport with its own characteristics: the creation and restructuring of rules allowed the change from a game with mainly individual expressions into a collective one. The second was defined by the implementation and evolution of the "play- ing systems" and by the appearance of players with great technical skills who responded to tactical evolutions, promoting and propelling them to even more advanced levels. The logic that underpinned the effort to solve the evidenced tac- tical problems was the continuous attempt to balance the power between attack and defence. Some did so by favouring offensive characteristics, while others the defensive ones. Both ways succeeded, but the most exciting were those who focused on the offensive characteristics, supported by the superior technical skills of their players. The third period came from the acknowledgement of the need to increase the dynamics of the game. The paths to the achievement of these goals diverged. On one side were the advocates of a more "tactical-physical" style, while the ones who preferred a more "technical-tactical" one stood on the opposite side, with mixed expressions in between. The consequence of this significant and permanent increase of "dynamics" reflected in the constant reduction of space and time, thus constraining the teams' and players' defensive and offensive play. Currently, the teams wield their collective and individual competencies through their ideas and respective qualities. While defending, they try to constrain space and time more and better. When attacking, they try to create space and time to bet- ter decide and act, sometimes in high intensity, other times with a rhythmic vari- ability with the purpose of limiting the opponents' adaptations. Thus, the styles of play are distinct. We are being increasingly exposed to peculiar ideas of play; however, those characterized by the triumphs and aesthetics are the ones based on a game played in collective way, in which the technical excellence and diversity and the intelligence and creativity are acclaimed (Cruyff, 2002; Valdano, 2002). So that these styles of play can be expressed, we propose the analysis of soccer as a complex game and, therefore, the understanding of the concept of tactics through this perspective. Instead of understanding it as an abstract dimension, appreciate it as a specifying one that promotes the intera 3.5 - PRESSING AND DEFENSIVE ORGANISATION IN A 3-2 SHAPE A. Central Midfielder Moves to Press the Full Back and the Other Players Shift to Mark Potential Receivers Against the 4-3-3, the 3 midfielders must all be positioned in a line together and the focus is on preventing the opposition from moving the ball into the centre of the pitch: 1. The 2 blue forwards block the passing lanes towards the opposing defensive midfielder. 2. The 3 blue midfielders make sure to block the passing lanes into the centre or apply tight marking to the opposing central midfielders. In this example, the opposing full back has received in a wide position. When defending in a 3-5-2 shape, the coach should be focussed on the combined movement of the wide centre back (RCB), central midfielder (RCM) and wing back (RWB) on that side of the pitch. These 3 players have to deal with marking the opposing red central midfielder, winger and forward. The right central midfielder (RCM) moves forward to press the opposing left back. The right wing back's (RWB) defensive reaction is determined by the opponents. In this first example, the opposing red left winger doesn't move and is closely marked by the blue right wing back (RWB). Therefore, the right centre back (RCB) moves forward to mark the red left central midfielder and the blue CB and LCB shift across at the same time. ©SoccerTutor.com 70 COACHING 3-5-2 TACTICS Chapter 2: Tactics Against Different Formations - 4-3-3 B. Central Midfielder Moves to Press the Full Back and the Opposing Central Midfielder and Winger Switch Positions NOTE: This example shows a different reaction from the opposing left central midfielder and left winger, as they switch positions. The red left winger moves inside off the flank into the centre and the left central midfielder moves out wide. This changing situation requires a different reaction from the blue defending team. The right central midfielder (RCM) has again moved to close down the red left back and this creates the following chain reaction to mark the red central midfielder, winger and forward: 1. The right centre back (RCB) moves forward to mark the opposing red left winger, who has moved inside off the flank. 2. The right wing back (RWB) moves forward to mark the red left central midfielder, who has moved into a wide position. 3. 4. The middle centre back (CB) moves across to mark the opposing red forward. The left centre back (LCB) shifts across as part of the chain reaction to maintain balance in the defensive line. ©SoccerTutor.com 71 COACHING 3-5-2 TACTICS Chapter 2: Tactics Against Different Formations - 4-3-3 C. Wing Back Moves to Press the Full

Back and the Opposing Midfielder and Winger Make Opposite Vertical Movements If the pressing of the opposing full back is to be done by the wing back, the coach must make sure that the wing back presses in a way that blocks the pass up the line towards the opposing winger. The wing back wants to press with the correct body shape to force the ball carrier to play inside, where the team have plenty of players and defensive stability. The defensive reaction of the right central midfielder (RCM) and the right centre back (RCB) depends on the movements of the opposing red left central midfielder and left winger. The right wing back (RWB) has moved forward to close down the red left back and this creates the following chain reaction to mark the red central midfielder, winger and forward: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. The right central midfielder (RCM) moves across to mark the opposing left winger, who has dropped back. The right centre back (RCB) moves across to mark the opposing red left central midfielder, who makes an opposite forward movement. The middle centre back (CB) moves across to mark the opposing red forward. The left centre back (LCB) shifts across as part of the chain reaction, providing cover and balance. The left wing back (LWB) drops back into the defensive line to create balance and a numerical superiority in defence. Throughout this book we will use lots of numbers – we are, after all, talking about football tactics – whether those numbers happen to be 4-2-3-1, 4-4-2, or 3-4-3. What we must realise, however, is that tactics are much, much more complex than a combination of numbers on a television screen or in our newspaper articles. Tactics, as so clearly explained by Jonathan Wilson in *Inverting the Pyramid*, are “a combination of formation and style” – so, they are a merging of the numbers we use to describe our formation, and the style of football we wish to implement. In addition, tactics are a combination of player strengths, movements, and real decisions taken during the real action of a football game. Using the numbers as a starting point, and a starting point only, gives you a general outline of a team's shape, but all these shapes can vary. We could spend hours poring over whether Mexico played 3-5-2 or 5-3-2 or whether Cameroon's formation against them was mainly 6-3-1 rather than the 4-3-3 set out on the pre-match team sheet. The French and Russians both played a 4-3-3 formation, but varied considerably in their approach and tactics. So ultimately, while the numbers give us a good basis to start, in the all-action fluency of a football match – they are situational and can adjust at any given point. 2 Introduction Argentina – 4-4-2 Diamond / 4-3-3 / 4-1-2-1-2? The above diagram is the team shape Argentina utilised in the second half of their opening Group F game against Bosnia, having changed from a 3-5-1-1 at half-time. On paper, we may well call this a 4-4-2 with a diamond midfield, but with Lionel Messi more of an attacker than a midfielder, we can easily label it as 4-3-3. In some places we have also seen this called 4-1-2-1-2. The point is, the numbers used is not the most important thing – rather, it is our understanding of the team's style, patterns, and the decisions of players on the grass. Absolute Statements Before we delve into the tactical trends that are shaping modern football, it is worth pausing to take stock of (and, in a sense, put to bed) some myths that have become ingrained in match analysis even from the pundits that we see on our television screens employed purely to provide expert commentary. Absolute statements are those definitive words like ‘always’ and ‘never’. When I hear such words mentioned in football analysis, I sometimes close one eye and hope that the remaining part of the sentence is at least partly accurate! Often, however, the remaining part of the sentence is not accurate at all. By using absolute terms (such as “always”) we are essentially saying that something happened 100% of the time. 3 Introduction During the World Cup, Argentina's Mascherano did not complete every tackle, Neymar did not always beat his opponent 1v1, and the notion that the Germans never gave the ball away is incorrect, although media hyperbole and sensationalist newspapers would lead some to believe otherwise. The group stages of the 2014 World Cup for example produced 136 goals – more goals than for any other World Cup, six more than the previous record-setting 2002 tournament co-hosted by Japan and Korea (source: FIFA). This does not mean however that all games were goal-fests. There were several games that ended 0-0 and there were plenty of clean sheets. During the group stages there were goalless draws between Iran and Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico, Japan and Greece, Costa Rica and England, and Ecuador and France. Of the 48 games played during the group phase, there were 21 occasions when games involved at least one team that did not concede. As can often be customary then, we will steer clear of absolute statements from here on in. When you see one used in other analysis, it is time to question its validity. Germany's trend was to play short from the goalkeeper and build from the back, but they did not always do it. Let's base our analysis in fact instead. Using Statistics Throughout the book, as we have done above, we will utilise various statistics from the World Cup. I will generate some of these stats from my own research, and others will come from exceptionally informative sources like Squawka, FourFourTwo Stats Zone, Who Scored, Prozone and the resources provided by official FIFA documents (plus other stats published in various articles and assessments of games). Statistics will be used, where necessary, to help illuminate points, rather than seeking to blind the reader with their application. It is also worth pointing out that statistics are not always necessary. For example, below are two diagrams from Prozone displaying statistics from Dirk Kuyt's performance for the Netherlands in the World Cup semi-final against Argentina. Kuyt played the first half as a right wing-back and the second half as a left wing-back. 4 Introduction Kuyt's Average Positions v. Argentina (after 80 minutes) Kuyt's Actual Possessions v. Argentina (after 80 minutes) 5 Introduction Diagram one shows Kuyt's ‘average’ position as being right in the middle of the pitch, although diagram two shows the actual areas of the pitch where he had possession. His average position, therefore, is completely inaccurate, considering he only had one individual possession in any of the four midfield areas. ‘Winner's’ History They say that history is written by whoever wins the war. In a sense the analysis of football tactics can be the same. We often incorrectly judge whether tactics are effective or not based purely on the final result. If a team wins, their tactics are deemed to be absolutely correct and the tactics of the other team are, more often than not, unjustifiably forgotten about. Just prior to the quarter-finals of the 2014 World Cup, I had a conversation with a fellow coach who is also exceptionally analytical about football. We were discussing what teams we expected to do well (or not) in the remaining games. During our conversation he stated that he would be reserving his judgment for the success of certain teams once the tournament was over and we knew who had won. Needless to say this started quite a debate! While Germany, as world champions, will feature heavily in this book (and rightly so), for the holistic legitimacy of the book's content, we will spend a lot of time using examples from teams that made it into the early phases of the knock-out rounds, but also those who exited the competition at the group phase. If we only use history's winners for our spectrum of analysis, we would neglect the wonderful tactical lessons we can still learn from the Netherlands, France, Costa Rica, Iran and Cameroon. Chile, for example, made it to the last 16 of the competition, where they were ultimately beaten on penalties after an enthralling game against the hosts Brazil. In fact, they were only the width of the crossbar away from winning the match in extra-time. According to our historians, however, they will have exited the tournament at the same stage as Algeria, Greece and Nigeria, and their adventurous, distinct style of play would be forgotten. We will not be forgetting them here. Onwards So while I have spent a few pages telling you what this book will not do – here is what it will do! We will look at modern soccer tactics, and look at how the game has changed and evolved in recent times. We will look at formations, systems, trends, positional changes, attacking, defending, and a whole lot more in-between! We will do this all through the lens of the riveting games of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. 6 1 Football Tactics and National Identity “Surprised to read negative Dutch media about defensive playing style. It's about winning!” (Raymond Verheijen, Dutch Fitness Expert and Football Coach) All football leagues around the world have teams with different philosophies, a different style of play, and different sub-cultures. We often find that national teams have distinct (sometimes unique) philosophies, play, and cultures. The beauty of World Cup competitions is the convergence of many of these different styles; all in the one place, in a one-month period. In Brazil, some nations stuck rigidly to their national footballing identities. Some significantly moved away from their cultural roots in the game, while others, possibly still seeking to shape their own national distinctiveness, went about formulating their tactics based on: foreign influence (South Korea), their recent success (Greece), or their perceived failures (England). Chapter 1 Sticking Firm There is a great video available on YouTube of a team talk from Pep Guardiola to his Barcelona team before extra-time of their 2009 European Super Cup Final. Even in the tough circumstances of a hard-fought win against Shakhtar Donetsk, he insisted on the team playing the game “our way”.¹ It was steadfast, unwavering, and assertive. Below, we will look at two teams from the 2014 World Cup, whose insistence on doing things “their way” in Brazil would have mixed consequences. Spain Before a ball was kicked at the 2014 World Cup, we all wondered whether this generation of Spanish players could emulate their successes from recent international tournaments. Although humbled by hosts Brazil in the Confederations Cup in 2013, a lot was expected of Spain. They had, after all, won three back-to-back international tournaments; their 2010 World Cup victory in South Africa sandwiched between the lifting of European Championship titles in 2008 and 2012. We all also knew that Vicente del Bosque's side would stick firm with the ‘tiki-taka’ style of play that had brought them such success. In Brazil, although they lasted a mere three games, they still believed that they would win by dominating the ball, predominantly using short, precise passes and pressing their opponents aggressively. Regardless of their early exit, Spain's average possession from their three games was 61.4% - the highest in the tournament (whoscored.com). Although the team contained nine of the same starting line-up that lifted the European Championships two years previously (and eight of the team who began the 2010 World Cup Final), questions into a lack of team evolution were always going to need answering. There were, however, subtle changes to Spain's approach, mainly with the abandonment of their ‘False 9’ striker system, something they had pioneered in the modern game. In the 2012 European Championships, this role was fulfilled by midfielder Cesc Fàbregas, but was replaced (for 2014) with the Atletico Madrid forward Diego Costa, who played as an out-and-out number 9. Whether this can be looked at as a step forward, in terms of modern tactics, or a step backwards (where a rigid centre-forward replaced a free-flowing false striker) is debatable. 1 This video is available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRhVGSKVYMU> 8 Football Tactics and National Identity What has been found over the last couple of seasons is that, as football evolves, opponents not only learn how to combat a particular tactical blueprint, but also learn how to combat the same players using the same tactics. More and more teams are now challenging the dominance of tiki-taka, which culminated in two comprehensive Spanish defeats against the Netherlands (5 – 1) and Chile (2 – 0) in their opening games. Spain's ‘False 9’ System, European Champions Final, 2012 Spain's starting XI in their 2012 European Championships Final against Italy. Nine of this team started against The Netherlands in the 2014 World Cup, the main difference being their use of Cesc Fàbregas as a ‘False 9’. 9 Chapter 1 Spain's 4-2-3-1 v. The Netherlands, 2014 Spain's starting line-up in their opening game, a 5 - 1 defeat against The Netherlands. They stuck with their tried and tested 4-2-3-1 template, but used Diego Costa as a central striker, rather than Fàbregas as their ‘False 9’. Choosing Winning Over Identity The Chileans were arguably everyone's second favourite team at the 2014 World Cup. Owing much to the influence of renowned former coach Marco Bielsa, who took charge of Chile at the 2010 finals, current coach Jorge Sampaoli set about implementing a style that would stay true to the South Americans' recent playing approach. For the tacticians amongst us, watching Chile was, at times, quite surreal. They played with a high tempo both in and out of possession, attacking and defending as if their footballing lives depended on it. The former Manchester United right-back Gary Neville once commented that it seemed like a ten-year-old with a PlayStation controller was dictating the moves of the often fast-driven, erratic Brazilian, David Luiz. Football Tactics and National Identity Luiz. While watching Chile, one would be forgiven for thinking the same of the team as a whole(!), although there was a lot more craft and team synergy to their play. Beyond their exciting, quick-tempo play was a tactical structure and organisation that rivalled any other team in Brazil. Apart from their opening game against Australia, they stuck with their three-at-the-back roots that had served Bielsa so well, lining up in a 3-4-1-2 formation, that contained the dangerous front two of Barcelona's Alexis Sanchez, and Napoli's Eduardo Vargas – with Juventus midfielder Arturo Vidal playing behind them. Beyond this impressive front three, and left wing-back Mauricio Isla (who plays for Juventus), much of Chile's team play their club football in quite moderate environments. Influential centre-back Gary Medel was relegated to the English Championship with Cardiff prior to the World Cup. His team-mate Gonzalo Jara played in the Championship before the tournament too. Deep-lying midfielder Marcelo Díaz plays in Switzerland with FC Basel, Silva with Osasuna in Spain, and goalkeeper Claudio Bravo – at the age of 31 – was signed by Barcelona mid-tournament with question marks over whether he would play regular football at the Catalan giants. The rest of the team play their football in South America. If Chile did not have a squad full of household names, they had the single most important thing that would make them a real force in Brazil – a tactical blueprint – their blueprint – that all the players evidently bought into, and opponents struggled to handle. 11 Chapter 1 Chile's 3-4-3 v. Brazil Chile's 3-4-3 formation in the knock-out stages of their game against hosts Brazil. Chile have developed an identity for playing with three centre-backs and playing aggressive football both in and out of possession. Defying Their Identity With a World Cup you should never take anything for granted. Teams that you would expect to possibly win the tournament – fail early on! After all Spain, Italy and England (although they were maybe not true contenders) all exited the competition in the group stages losing two of their three opening games. There are also those, like Costa Rica and the USA, who qualify for the tournament's knock-out stages, despite having been drawn in exceptionally difficult groups. What you really do not expect to be writing about is how two nations with football entrenched in their psyche, and with a unique way of playing, can bend so much from their footballing identity. They did this however with winning, rather than sentiment in mind. 12 Football Tactics and National Identity The Netherlands It is hard to find a national footballing identity as strong as that found with the Netherlands. This identity is so fierce and so ingrained in the Oranje mindset that they have successfully exported it all over the world. Countless clubs and developing football countries, such as Ireland and Australia, have placed their national development programmes in the hands of Dutch coaches in an attempt to imitate the success of the Dutch coaching model, from youth through to professional football. We even find the legacy of the Dutch involvement in the Korean national team that has affected their national identity. The quote at the start of the chapter from outspoken coach and fitness expert, Raymond Verheijen, shows just how much of an internal battle has raged in the Netherlands on the back of the 2014 World Cup. The Dutch public and media expect to see attractive football, seeped in the culture of Total Football that lit the world up in the 1970s under Rinus Michels. Their leading club, Ajax Amsterdam, also successfully implemented a system where technique and tactical fluency was, to them, the only way forward, and although the Godfather of Dutch football, Johan Cruyff, insists that winning is their first priority, one cannot help but feel that there is a national embarrassment to winning ugly – and many feel that winning is nothing without doing so in an entertaining manner. The tactical approach of the Dutch at the 2014 World Cup was far removed from The Dutch Way. Not only did coach Louis van Gaal abandon his and the nation's trusted 4-3-3 formation in favour of a 3-4-1-2 (although not a system that is alien to the Dutch), he also chose to play a significant amount of this tournament without the ball. Staggeringly, only minnows Iran (29.7%) had less total possession than The Netherlands (39.5%) after their opening three groups games. Overall, The Netherlands were a lowly 20th when it came to overall possession at the 2014 World Cup (48.5%). Instead of dominating possession, as is the Oranje trademark, they defended resolutely, pressed hard in midfield, and looked to hit their opponents with quick counter-attacks to allow their front pairing of Arjen Robben and Robin van Persie, with the assistance of Wesley Sneijder, to do their damage offensively. For van Gaal it was no longer about the Dutch being the flamboyant under-achievers (which has in itself almost become a

footballing trait of the Dutch) – it was purely about winning. 13 Chapter 1 Louis van Gaal's Favoured Attacking 4-3-3 (2-3-2-3) This 4-3-3, or 2-3-2-3 is van Gaal's favoured system from the Philosophy Vision document he produced during his time at Barcelona. Its attacking intent is clear from the advanced start positions of the players (e.g. full-backs over the half-way line). Brazil When you think of Brazil culturally, you think of colour, carnival, and smiles. When you think of Brazilian football, you think of wonderfully technical players, beach footballers from the favelas who could make fools of the best foreign players with their trickery, and a country that is passionate about their status at entertainers in world football. Consequently, when you think of Brazil at World Cup Finals, you think of flair, individuality, and a game firmly rooted in their flamboyant culture. The Brazil we witnessed at their own World Cup however was far from that. They seemed rather more English in their set-up, although such a statement would probably never see me allowed to land in Rio or dare enter the Maracanã. Like van Gaal, Luis Felipe Scolari, chose the pursuit of 'winning' football over 'Brazilian' football – he chose function over flamboyance. Two holding midfield 14 Football Tactics and National Identity players were a constant, with Wolfsburg's Luis Gustavo the main midfield destroyer, coupled with midfield workhorses, Paulinho, Fernandinho or occasionally Ramires. Against Mexico, attacking midfielder Oscar completed the most tackles in one game at the World Cup, with eight. There is a legitimate suggestion that the team was built around Neymar, the so-called "golden boy" of the 2014 World Cup, with target strikers like Fred, and his usual replacement, Jo, designed to play high up against opposition centre-backs to allow Neymar more space to operate. You could be forgiven for assuming that the tactics were to allow Neymar to be the match-winner, and the others were there as the support-cast. It was very common to see goalkeeper Julio Cesar choose to play longer, more direct passes to Fred / Jo, appearing less comfortable in taking calculated risks by building possession from the back. Prior to their last 16 encounter with Chile, word from the Brazilian camp was that they were seeking to use their height and physical advantage from set-plays as one of their main ploys to win the game – something you may be expected to hear from a functional mid-table English coach rather than a Brazilian World Cup winner! Their over-physical tactic of targeting Columbia's James Rodriguez in their quarter-final match was a tragic cultural shift from when their very own Pelé was kicked around World Cup pitches decades before that. 15 Chapter 1 Pass, Take-on and Discipline Stats – Comparison of Final Four Evolving Football Cultures Not all countries will have a unique, pinned-down football culture or national identity. Some national teams will change their approach frequently depending on the philosophy and style of their coach. Others will dabble in various tactics and styles, trying to find their optimal way of playing the beautiful game, either because they need an evolution to take them to the next level, or a revolution to take them back to the level they expect. South Korea The introduction of South Korean football to the world stage began in their enthralling campaign when they co-hosted the first ever Asian World Cup in 2002. Marshalled by Dutch coach Guus Hiddink, the South Koreans won the hearts of the world with their journey to the semi-finals, before eventually being knocked out by Germany. 16 Football Tactics and National Identity The one thing you expect from the South Koreans is a work-ethic and physical conditioning that reflects the honesty that people stereotypically associate with this particular Asian culture; added to which one can add a well-honed football technique. Hiddink provided a Dutch-like structure and set of tactics to this work ethic and technical ability that brought such national delight and pride to the Korean fans and media. The Dutch influence would see attractive, possession-based football brought to the fore. The 2014 reign of coach Hong Myung-Bo saw an attempted return to this Dutch focus, following a spell under Choi Kang-Hee where a forceful direct-style was preferred. Whether purists in the Netherlands would approve of the comparison is doubtful as although midfielder Ki Sung-Yueng had completed 100% of his passes by half-time of their opening game against Russia2, the Koreans had played a number of wasteful, ill-judged longer passes, in particular to left-sided player, Son Heung-Min. It may be more accurate to describe Myung-Bo's efforts to mix the Dutch influence with the more direct style of his predecessor, and accommodate the quick, counter-attacking play prized in Korea, as an attempt to mix the best of all worlds. Their youthful squad however will look to build on this having exited at the group stages, and a future without the guidance of Myung-Bo. 2 See below a breakdown of Ki's passing statistics from the 2014 World Cup. Note how his success rate is 100% when playing backwards or sideways, but fall when we study his attempted forward passes. Forward passes are always the most difficult as they involve taking more risks to create a goal.17 Chapter 1 Midfielder Ki Sung-Yueng Possession Statistics Type of Pass Successful / Attempted Percentage Success Group Game 1 v. Russia All Passes 65 / 69 94% Forward 26 / 30 87% Square 18 / 18 100% Backwards 21 / 21 100% Group Game 2 v. Algeria All Passes 53 / 55 96% Forward 23 / 25 92% Square 14 / 14 100% Backwards 16 / 16 100% Group Game 3 v. Belgium All Passes 55 / 61 90% Forward 37 / 43 86% Square 10 / 10 100% Backwards 8 / 8 100% England Much work has gone into England's footballing identity or "DNA" over the last decade or so. Due to the perceived lack of success at major tournaments since their only World Cup triumph at Wembley in 1966, a lot of soul-searching has been undertaken. The usual conclusions are always presented by supporters and the media following tournament exits – players are not technically good enough compared to their international rivals, youth coaching is based on brawn rather than brain, and tactically, English players simply do not understand the game well enough. Traditionally, English teams were based around a direct-style 4-4-2 with a physically big centre-forward like Peter Crouch or Emile Heskey. Their game was about getting the ball forward quickly. This pace of play and directness can result in a lack of assured possession when asked to be patient with the ball or if asked to cut open a team who were defending resolutely. When asked to play in tight areas, the English 18 Football Tactics and National Identity traditionally favoured going over and around opposition bodies, rather than having the craft and guile to slice through them. At the 2010 World Cup, the England coach Fabio Capello, tried to address difficulties around possession, and chose the smaller, more natural striker Jermain Defoe. The tactical limitations of Capello's 4-4-2 (or 4-4-1-1) was highlighted in the tournament, particularly when trying to deal with Germany's adventurous style and interchanging positions (something the Germans would go on to perfect in 2014). Bizarrely, upon their win-less group-stage exit from the 2014 World Cup, the England team received arguably less criticism than they did when they were eliminated from the latter stages of previous tournaments against footballing powerhouses like Brazil and Germany. There was recognition that, although short-term gains were few, the long-term evolution of the team's style of play was moving in the right direction. Head coach, Roy Hodgson, chose to field a 4-2-3-1 formation, largely based around players from Liverpool who had recently excelled playing a very brave, possession-based style – although it was never in Hodgson's own DNA to be as flamboyant as Liverpool boss Brendan Rodgers. As well as experienced international players like Steven Gerrard and Wayne Rooney, the English line-up had been freshened up with the inclusion of young, quick, exciting and almost unknown quantities like Adam Lallana (although 26 years old), Raheem Sterling and Daniel Sturridge – with others like Ross Barkley, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Luke Shaw waiting in the wings (with Shaw's appearance in the final group game against Costa Rica, he became the youngest participant at the 2014 World Cup, at 18 years of age). In fact, 12 of their World Cup squad had less than 15 caps at the beginning of the tournament. There is a sense that England, in coming tournaments, may evolve and revolve around these gifted technicians, rather than around the big, powerful target strikers. 19 Chapter 1 England's 4-2-3-1 v. Italy 2014 England used a 4-2-3-1 throughout their three games at the 2014 World Cup, unlike the 4-4-2 traditionally favoured by them. 20 Football Tactics and National Identity England's Traditional 4-4-2 v Germany 2010 World Cup An example of the problematic 4-4-2 formation used by England. Its limitations were cruelly exposed by Germany in South Africa in 2010. Summary Lots of national teams have their own, unique national footballing identity. During the 2014 World Cup, some teams adhered to this identity, others moved away from theirs completely, while others were seeking evolution or revolution in their playing style. Spain stuck to their tiki-taka style, but with limited success. Chile stuck to their fast-tempo philosophy, both in and out of possession. The Netherlands were happy to play a 3-4-1-2 style and forgo dominating possession, rather than stick to their Total Football roots. 21 Chapter 1 The South Koreans effectively aimed to mix the Dutch influence into their game, with fast counter-attacks, and the more direct style of their recent World Cup qualifying team. England moved away from the traditional 4-4-2 they become renowned for, using younger, more technical players in a 4-2-3-1. 22 2 Systems, Players, and Opponents "The first task is to get to know the players really well – watching them as individuals in training and in match play to see what is good in their natural game. Then, and only then, can we begin to outline the general tactics." (Helenio Herrera, former Argentine coach of Inter Milan) Thoroughbred believers in football tactics will feel that tactics alone can win games. Others believe in the spontaneity of football and that anything can happen which a game plan cannot predict or control. A particular strategy can go out the window with a goal, sending-off, poor refereeing decision, or a host of other incidents. Look at minnows Iran against giants Argentina. The Iranian tactic to defend deep was only undone by a typically magical moment from Lionel Messi. Do we judge their game plan then as having failed? Or was it successful and just needed that Messi strike to flash the other side of the upright? Let's face it, Iran may have even been 1-0 up had the referee given a foul by Pablo Zabaleta on Ashkan Dejagah and their game tactics would have been immortalised in the football history books. Tactics can also be situational, as are team formations. How often do we hear commentators mention a forward player dropping deep to gain possession as he is not active enough in the game? Or teams going from all-out-attack to all-out- defence once they have scored? With all these puzzles in mind, let's look at the broad ways in which coaches select their teams, formations, and tactics. The System, The Players, or The Opposition? Hundreds of newspaper columns and online blogs will spend the days leading up to games trying to predict a team's starting line-line. Games will be previewed and predictions made about their outcomes based on the players selected. One of the most intriguing questions posed of a coach, then, is how to choose his team. Does he identify a system to play, and choose the players to fit that system? Does he select the 'best' players and mould a system around them? And what impact does the opposition have on this process? Of course there will also be countless other situational decisions – what injuries the team is carrying, what players are in form or not, and what is riding on the match. Fitting Players into The System With a World Cup squad of 23 players, the easy thing to do would be to pick two players for each position (with three goalkeepers). This may have been quite a rational thing to do say 20 years ago, but in modern football, this is far too rigid to be effective. A coach who sticks steadfastly to a particular formation or system would feel far more comfortable in doing this than one who changes his players or formation as events unfold. Argentina, for example, began their first group game playing a 3-5-1-1 formation but Alejandro Sabella, their coach, abandoned it at half-time and never returned to it. The Argentines spent the rest of the tournament moving between a 4- 3-3, 4-4-2, 4-2-3-1 and, depending on the circumstances of the game, a containing, defensive 4-5-1. Picking a squad with two expert players in each position is not, however, an exact science, nor should it be. Normally several squad players who can play at least two positions are included to allow extra space in any squad for the inclusion of impact players who may offer something different and may assist in a change of formation or focus. In 2006, for example, Germany included speedy, uncapped midfielder David Odonkor is the squad, and used the player's ability to run 100 metres in under 11 seconds as a weapon from the substitutes' bench. 24 2 Systems, Players, and Opponents At the 2014 World Cup Didier Deschamps had a selection decision to make over which of his two Premier League full-backs to opt for as starting full-back – Mathieu Debuchy of mid-table Newcastle United1 or Bacary Sagna who had just secured a bumper contract at champions Manchester City having left Champions League side Arsenal. One would assume that Sagna would be favourite for this slot, but instead Deschamps opted for Debuchy as he felt he was the more dynamic, forward-thinking of the two. Belgium Much has been made of Belgium's recent meteoric rise in terms of talent development. Their whole development process is based around a 4-2-3-1 formation (or variants of it) and has produced a generation of world-class players like Vincent Kompany, Thibaut Courtois, Eden Hazard, and Romelu Lukaku, amongst others. The one positional area that remains a problem for the current Belgian side is in the full-back positions. Of the eight defenders named in their World Cup squad, only one was a natural full-back in the shape of right-back Anthony Vanden Borre (who incidentally only played in Belgium's final group game against South Korea when their path into the knock-out stages was already secure). Belgium's steadfast stance around playing with a back four, rather than playing in an arguably more suitable back three, saw centre-backs Toby Alderweireld at right-back and either Jan Vertonghen or Thomas Vermaelen at left-back. This may be a reason why team tactics in Brazil were was to play in a more direct style from the goalkeeper, rather than risking possession by playing through the full-backs (although, being modern centre-backs, they are very good technicians). Considering the abundance of excellent attacking midfield players Belgium possess in Eden Hazard, Kevin De Bruyne, Nacer Chadli, Adnan Januzaj, Dries Mertens and Kevin Mirallas (plus Marouane Fellaini who played their 'dead rubber' game against the Koreans in the central attacking midfield position), starting with three of the six may well be the natural option – something they consistently altered along with their main striker. 1 Ironically Debuchy has been signed by Arsenal as Sagna's replacement. 25 Chapter 2 Game Time (Minutes) of Belgium's Attacking Players Hazard and De Bruyne were the most certain of their places in Belgium's attacking midfield positions, but in total seven players were used across the attacking midfield three positions. Lukaku and Divock Origi essentially shared the number 9 role, although Mirallas also featured there briefly. Russia Also in Belgium's group was Fabio Capello's Russia. The Italian coach favoured setting his team up in a 4-3-3 in the opening game, before changing to a 4-2-3-1 subsequently. In their opener against South Korea, the former England World Cup coach picked his players around his system, choosing the youthful Aleksandr Kokorin ahead of experienced forward Aleksandr Kerzhakov, rather than finding a way of including both (incidentally he did include both in their must-win final group game against Algeria). Before the World Cup many believed that Kokorin would instead play from the left in an effort to get both threatening players into the starting 11. In addition to the exclusion of Kerzhakov, Capello also left creative attacking midfielder Alan Dzagoev out of the team. The Italian, who favoured a team built on solid defensive foundations, rather than an open, attacking one (that was common at the 2014 World Cup) felt Dzagoev did not work hard enough within his system, and was happy to forgo using the midfielder's dribbling skills and ability to change games with something different in the attacking third. Interestingly, when 1-0 down to the 26 Systems, Players, and Opponents Koreans, with both Kerzhakov and Dzagoev on as substitutes, Russia developed a much greater attacking threat, looking more incisive and willing to take risks in an effort to equalise, which they did through substitute Kerzhakov. England and France Going into the tournament, there were several question marks over the team England's Roy Hodgson would pick in his preferred 4-2-3-1 formation. There were no question marks at all, however, as to whether the former Switzerland World Cup coach would deviate from this system. The main question was about the deployment of key striker, Wayne Rooney. Given the rise to prominence of Daniel Sturridge, whose 18 months as a central attacker at Liverpool made him the obvious choice to start as the number nine, Rooney was tipped to move either to the left side or play as the number 10. It was clear Hodgson wanted both in the team, as they were the country's two best match-winners, but by playing Rooney in attacking midfield positions, rather than in a preferred central striker role he was clearly choosing his players ahead of his system. This can be compared and contrasted to France's use of their 4-3-3 formation, in particular in their second group game against neighbours Switzerland. To get both Olivier Giroud and Karim Benzema into the team, the latter, like Rooney, was moved from his role as main striker to the left hand side. Interestingly, however, France coach Didier Deschamps adapted the role to suit

the Real Madrid man by using his central midfield players, notably Blaise Matuidi, to track attack-minded Swiss full-back Stephan Lichtsteiner, rather than force Benzema to defend in his own half. This was a deliberate ploy to allow France to counter-attack in the space left behind (we will take a closer look at this tactic in a later chapter). Rooney, when used on the left, on the other hand, was expected to do this defensive work which often left England vulnerable down their left hand side against Italy's dynamic right-back Matteo Darmian. 27 Chapter 2 The Rooney – Darmian Duel With Rooney playing out of position, on the left, he struggled to contain the forward-thinking Italian right full-back Darmian. Those who could offer cover were also occupied. Gerrard was occupied by compact Italian midfielders (in this case Marco Verratti) and left-back Leighton Baines by the runs of Antonio Candreva from wide right into central positions. The Players Choose the System Lots of coaches are deeply entrenched in playing 'their' system. They will therefore choose players that fit said system, or decide whether a player can play the system, even if it is not quite a square peg in a square hole. Other coaches, however, turn this on its head, almost refusing to play players 'out of position' or in an unfamiliar area to them. Their team and squad selection therefore will be based around the team's most effective players, and the rest of the team will be set up to allow the key players to flourish. This, of course, like anything in football, is not an exact science. Germany could not possibly include all their skilful attacking players – partly because they almost have too many of them! André Schürrle, for example, was mostly used from the 28 Systems, Players, and Opponents substitutes' bench, while Julian Draxler completed a mere handful of minutes at the World Cup – and we must remember that Marco Reus suffered a tournament-ending injury in the days leading up to the World Cup. Germany could not possibly include them all, but Löw's fluid attacking system allowed him to include as many as he could.

Argentina During their opening game of the World Cup, the Argentina coach, Sabella, surprised all of us by playing with three central defenders, moving away from the typical 4-3-3 that the team had usually preferred. The idea behind using this formation allowed him to play the talented trio of Sergio Agüero, Lionel Messi and Angel di Maria, in central areas. This opening game, against Bosnia, did not go especially well for Sabella's side and the 3-5-1-1 was abandoned at half-time in favour of their more favoured 4-3-3. For the second half Argentina reverted to a back 4, and added Napoli striker Gonzalo Higuaín to partner Agüero up front, which allowed Messi to drop off into more of a free role between the midfield and strikers. Sabella, in an effort to balance his side now playing with three strikers and di Maria as an attacking midfielder, introduced Fernando Gago to help fellow midfielder Javier Mascherano give the team some defensive protection. This balance between choosing his best attacking options, and balancing the team defensively saw Argentina progress to the final. It was only the last seven minutes of extra-time in the final against Germany that Argentina felt behind at any point in the tournament. After the opening game Argentina's starting formation was criticised publicly by captain Messi, who claimed he and fellow striker Agüero felt isolated and "suffered" during the first half playing 3-5-1-1. Prior to Argentina's second game against Iran, Sabella open-mindedly responded: "We can all make mistakes you know. Tomorrow we will start with a 4-3-3 formation and we will take it from there. We may have to change the formation or not." (via FIFA.com). Sabella's stance towards tactics and formations, and his willingness to change them if necessary was evident throughout the tournament. This was usually based on the best attacking options he felt he had open to him.

Higuaín became the mainstay of the Argentine forward-line, with Messi and di Maria also certain starters throughout the tournament. Having lost Agüero to injury against Nigeria, Ezequiel Lavezzi came into the side, which prompted another change in Argentine formation, utilising either a 4-2-3-1 or 4-4-2 for the remainder of the competition. 29 Chapter 2 Argentina's Changeable Tactics 1. Argentina's 3-5-1-1 from the first half of their opening game v. Bosnia 30 Systems, Players, and Opponents 2. Reverting to 4-3-3 in second game v. Iran in reaction to criticism of 3-5-1-1 31 Chapter 2 3. Argentina's change of shape to 4-2-3-1 with Lavezzi replacing the injured Agüero against Switzerland 32 Systems, Players, and Opponents 4. The 4-3-2-1 evolving to a more traditional 4-4-2 with the loss of Di Maria in the World Cup Final v. Germany Sabella will feel quite justified regarding his selection policy at the 2014 World Cup. Messi of course was the star of their side, and was the winner (although controversially according to some2) of the Golden Ball – the World Cup's best player. Trademark Messi goals against Bosnia and Iran, added to his brace against Nigeria, saw Argentina safely into the knock-out phase of the tournament. Although di Maria had a poor game against Switzerland, he scored the winning goal in extra-time to take Argentina into the quarter-finals, and Higuaín's expertly taken goal against Belgium and influence as a substitute in the Bosnia match, showed that Sabella's insistence on match-winners and a defensive balance proved decisive on numerous occasions. 2 Interestingly, although opinion varied, Messi received the highest individual score on whoscored.com, a website that translates performances into a tangible score out of 10 based on certain actions and calculations during games. See the Team of the Tournament from whoscored.com based on these ratings below. 33 Chapter 2 www.whoscored.com World Cup Best XI The Netherlands Most surprisingly, one of the coaches who chose his system to best suit his players was Netherlands coach, Louis van Gaal. The Dutchman had always been steadfast around his use of a 4-3-3 formation. Quoted in an interview, early in 2014, van Gaal said: "I'm always going back to the vision, then the team, and then which players fit in my system, a 1-4-3-3, because I'm always playing that." Those of you who have seen van Gaal's playing philosophy document during his time at Barcelona (available online) will know that the Dutchman bases his playing style around the team and happily foregoes the role of the individual. He has famously fallen out with countless star players across his time in coaching when they did not adhere to 'his' system. The blueprint for the Netherlands' tactics in Brazil however was thrown into chaos with the injury of key midfielder Kevin Strootman two months before the start of 34 Systems, Players, and Opponents the tournament. Rather than persist with his favoured 4-3-3 in light of his midfield man's absence, van Gaal altered his approach and set his team out in a 3-4-3 instead. This gave the tactically meticulous coach only a matter of weeks to prepare his team around this new layout. Strootman's absence was not the only consideration for the Dutch. Adding a third centre-back allowed attack-orientated wing-backs, particularly Danny Blind, greater defensive protection. It also allowed them to utilise their best front three players of Robben, van Persie and Wesley Sneijder - all tied together with the combative and straightforward central midfielders, Nigel de Jong and Jonathan de Guzman. Netherlands 3-4-3 Line-Up v. Spain 35 Chapter 2 Changing Tactics for Specific Opponents Lots of coaches can battle with team selection at the best of times. Above we see that some will be steadfast around a formation, and fit players into it, whilst others will choose their key players and revolve their formation and tactics around these players. An important consideration, however, is also the opposition, something coaches doubtlessly consider. Often the coaches of top international teams will stick with their plan, worrying more about themselves and doing their job correctly, rather than focusing on the opposition. Below, for example, is a hand-out from a team briefing from Arsène Wenger and Arsenal in preparation for an away fixture at Bolton Wanderers. Note Arsenal's insistence on "our identity" away from home as well as at home. Arsenal Philosophy Our team becomes stronger by: • Display a positive attitude on and off the pitch • Everyone making the right decisions for the team • Have an unshakable belief that we can achieve our target • Believe in the strength of the team • Always want more – always give more • Focus on our communication • Be demanding with yourself • Be fresh and well prepared to win • Focus on being mentally stronger and always keep going until the end • When we play away from home, believe in our identity and play the football we love to play at home • Stick together • Stay grounded and humble as a player and person • Show the desire to win in all that you do • Enjoy and contribute to all that is special about being in a team – don't take it for granted 36 Systems, Players, and Opponents Algeria The Algerians surprised and impressed lots of people in Brazil, and their four games in the 2014 World Cup provide us with a great case study on tactical changeability. Their ability to drastically change tack, literally from game to game, was arguably their most impressive attribute. This nous allowed them to qualify from Group H ahead of Russia and they gleaned more praise from their four point haul than group rivals Belgium who topped the group with nine points from the nine available. Defend Deep v. Belgium It was against the Belgians that Algeria's campaign started. Their distinct game plan was to morph their 4-2-3-1 formation into a 4-5-1 when out of possession, with the aim of containing Belgium and hitting them with quick counter-attacks. Having gone ahead after 25 minutes with a well taken penalty from Sofiane Feghouli, following a fast-flowing move which caught out Belgium's make-shift left-back Jan Vertonghen, their game plan was coming into effect nicely. Belgian coach Marc Wilmots was less impressed calling the Algerians "a team that refused to play football". While this sort of statement is a common slight from high level coaches when struggling to break down dogged, underdog defences, Wilmots' point was backed up by Algeria's comfort in playing the game without the ball, achieving only 32.1% of possession (only slightly less than they had over 120 minutes against eventual champions Germany) – and managing only three attempts on goal. Wilmots was forced into changing his line-up at the break, as, even with the wealth of talent in the Belgian side, they did not look to have the creative edge to open up Algeria's stubborn defensive set-up and were restricted mainly to shots from distance. It was two substitutes that were to drag Belgium to victory. When a team is defending deep, coaches often look for creative players to prise teams open with something special (as Eden Hazard did for Belgium with a deliberate run and assist against Russia), try to go around the 'block' of defenders and look for crosses, or play directly and look to go over the block. On 70 minutes, Belgium did just that with a De Bruyne cross finding the head of Marouane Fellaini, who expertly glanced in the equaliser. Using Fellaini's height as a tactic became a much-used weapon for Belgium in subsequent games. Against Russia, the joint highest number of pass combinations (11) was from goalkeeper Courtois to Fellaini positioned in an advanced area. According to FIFA statistics, Fellaini's average position against the Russians was more advanced than their number '10' Kevin De Bruyne. 37 Chapter 2 Belgium Average Positions v. Russia Having made an impact as a substitute against Algeria, Fellaini went from substitute to starter against Russia. The tactic of going long and high into the midfielder, especially from goalkeeper Courtois, saw this tactic affect the average position of the Belgian side, with Fellaini's average position further forward than number '10' De Bruyne. Jan Vertonghen replaced starter Thomas Vermaelen after 30 minutes. If Algeria felt hurt that all their good defensive work was undone with a headed goal from a cross, their manner in ultimately losing the game will give them nightmares. Having regained possession in their defensive third, Belgium's villain-cum-hero Vertonghen managed to cut open the Algerians with just one pass to set Hazard away and Belgium with a 3v2 advantage, bearing down on Raïs M'Bolhi's goal. His pass and the subsequent finish from Dries Mertens saw Algeria ultimately beaten at their own game – punished severely with a swift counter-attack from deep. 38 Systems, Players, and Opponents All Out Attack v. South Korea If a solid Algerian defensive performance impressed everyone outside of Algeria (the national media insisted with some justification that the squad had players who were built to attack), their approach to their second game against South Korea was to amaze even further. This was a footballing Jekyll and Hyde without the connotations of crazy. Their approach seemed as if they knew that a victory was a must against, on paper, their weakest opponent in the group. Algeria raced into a three-goal lead before half-time, their third goal a version of incisive, inventive tiki-taka football that the Spanish or Germans would have been rightly proud of. The openness of the game was only going to result in more goals, and South Korea did manage to get on the scoresheet twice, either side of a Yacine Brahimi goal to see the game finish 4-2 to the Algerians. A third game-plan was now needed to achieve at least a draw against stuttering Russian opponents and send the Africans into the World Cup knock-out rounds for the first time in their history. Clever and Combative v. Russia Their third group game against Russia threw up one of those great knock-out competition conundrums. A draw would take Algeria through, whereas the Russian giants needed to win. With this in mind, it was Capello's side who naturally set about dominating the early stages of the game, and scoring after only six minutes through striker Kokorin. A combative Algerian performance followed, understanding their need to score, but also that patience was required, to ensure they did not fall even further behind. Eventually Algeria did equalise through Islam Sliming after an hour, heading in from a wide free-kick, although the goal is as much remembered for a laser beam being shone in the eyes of Russian goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev. The equaliser allowed Algeria the opportunity to revert to their Belgian template and defend resolutely. From an Algerian point of view, they were thankful Russia did not possess a Fellaini of their own and they managed hold onto a point to take them through to a meeting with the much-fancied Germans. Quality and Lack of Quality v. Germany Outsiders looked at this game as one of high predictability – a David versus Goliath battle that would be won comfortably by the Europeans. When the curtain closed 39 Chapter 2 on this Round of 16 game, it was indeed the possession-based Goliath who was victorious – but the counter-attacking David gave him a real scare. Of Germany's six opponents on their path to the World Cup Final, it was Algeria who made them look as vulnerable as any. The Africans were left to rue a number of good chances through both the brilliance of German stopper Manuel Neuer and their own wastefulness in front of goal. Had they have been capable of taking those chances, the 2014 World Cup would have had a different name engraved on the Jules Rimet trophy. It was another game that was again famous for Algeria's opposition goalkeeper. With Algeria counter-attacking consistently, especially in the first half, German goalkeeper Neuer was frequently called into action to sweep up Algerian encroachments beyond his back four. He took a total of 17 touches outside his penalty box – a record number for a goalkeeper – and redefined the 'sweeper-keeper' tag. As the game progressed, and with Germany proving to be the masters of ball retention, the Algerians grew tired and their adventures into German territory became less and less frequent. Later in the book we will examine the trend where teams who play a counter-attacking tactic end up with less of the possession, but more of the clear-cut chances (ultimately though, the longer the game goes on, the fewer chances these counter-attacks produce). Algeria were left to rue some glorious chances, especially in the first half, and three goals in extra-time saw them defeated 2-1 and knocked out of the competition. On paper, one win from four games might not herald a lot of praise for tactical nous, but Algeria certainly left their adaptable tactical mark on the 2014 World Cup. 40 Systems, Players, and Opponents Manuel Neuer Touches Outside the Box v. Algeria Graphic of Manuel Neuer's 17 touches outside of the box against Algeria. Summary Tactics are situational and can be affected by moments in the game. Belgium and England chose their players to fit into their 4-2-3-1 system. The Russian national team sacrificed the use of a strike partnership by selecting Kokorin as a lone forward, rather than using both him and Kerzhakov, except in their final game when they needed to win. England and France both used strikers in wide left positions, but used them differently. Germany, the Netherlands and Argentina both found ways of including their best players in their starting line-up, adapting their formation and tactics around these players. In terms of altering tactics to cater for the opposition, Algeria did so most frequently and most dramatically. 41 3 With Back Fours "The problem with this 4-2-3-1 is that it very quickly becomes a 4-4-2 or at least a 4- 4-1-1 and we end up with flat lines and people getting between us" (Gary Lineker, former England International on England's 4-2-3-1) The 2014 World Cup in Brazil gave us lots of variation in terms of team formations. We saw teams play with a traditional back four, those that played with three central defenders and wing-backs, and teams that played with a back five. Cameroon spent most of their encounter against Mexico essentially playing with a back six, though I'm certain this was a consequence of how the game unfolded, rather than a specific tactical ploy. We saw teams that played with one and two holding central midfield players, use a midfield diamond, play with two wingers, one winger or no wingers at all – and while most teams used either one or two strikers, some played without a recognised centre-forward and, on occasions, teams used three out-and-out strikers. Of the four semi-finalists, we saw Holland mainly play a 3-4-3, Germany mainly a 4- 3-3 but using a 'false 9',

Brazil used a 4-2-3-1 and Argentina rotated significantly from 3-5-1-1, to 4-4-2, a 4-4-1-1 and 4-2-3-1. Colombia, one of the surprise packages and entertainers of the World Cup (although with a FIFA rank of fourth before the competition), played a 4-4-2 which morphed into a 4-2-2-2 against Uruguay. Chapter 3 Fluidity Before we get stuck into an analysis of the back four formations at the 2014 World Cup, let's just pause and acknowledge something mentioned in the introductory chapter around the "numbers game". Below, we have used typical formation numbers in a bid to give an indication into the shape of teams on the field of play. The truth is that team shapes and formations are becoming more and more fluid, and are therefore getting more difficult to analyse using formation numbers alone, so we will look at some of the interesting tactical set-ups, using formations as our starting point. Furthermore, as we will discuss in more detail later in the book, players no longer simply stick to one 'position'. Full-backs burst forward, centre-backs carry the ball into the opposition half, midfielders rotate, attacking midfield players seem to play anywhere they are needed, and strikers now have responsibilities that are about more than just scoring goals. So while we use Germany as an example of a 4-3-3, amongst the free-flowing nature of a live game, their 'numbers' can virtually be ripped apart. The numbers are (at best) starting positions, as we will see. Four-Two-Three-One – Popularity and Decline Fluidity within 4-2-3-1 systems can vary. In Brazil, we saw teams use it to defend deep and counter-attack (Switzerland v. France), contain the opposition (Russia), dominate possession (Spain), play a direct style (Belgium) and attack in numbers (Germany). Below we will look at the fluidity of Germany in the context of their 4-3-3, but this remained similar when they utilised a 4-2-3-1 in the early stages of the competition. It is no coincidence that the most fluid team at the World Cup went on to become champions. Arguably, the technical ability and game understanding of individual German players (and as a group) won them the World Cup, regardless of formation. Popularity For the second World Cup running, 4-2-3-1 proved to be the most popular formation. Although lots of teams chose the 4-2-3-1, many of them had a different way of playing it. Brazil constantly rotated the position of their supporting midfield three with Oscar, Neymar, and Hulk mainly being selected in different positions for different games. The Belgians were similar although they used more players across these positions, including Eden Hazard, Kevin de Bruyne, Dries Mertens, Nacer Chadli, Kevin Mirallas and Adnan Januzaj (all used at different points during Belgium's progression to the knock-out stages). Colombia's use of 4-2-3-1 saw their attacking midfield three in more consistent positions. Golden boot winner James Rodriguez played centrally (mostly, but we will look at that later in the chapter), with winger Juan Guillermo Cuadrado used from the right, and Victor Ibarbo from the left. On the brief occasions when Argentina used the system, Messi would be selected to play centrally (although with the freedom to roam) and allow Ángel Di María and Ezequiel Lavezzi the liberty to swap sides. The USA on the other hand seemed happier to use their advanced midfielders in set positions, with central players Jermaine Jones and Michael Bradley more box-to-box midfield players, rather than attackers in the guise of Neymar, de Bruyne, or Messi. Decline Although 4-2-3-1 was the default of the 2010 World Cup, and the most popular one again in Brazil, there appears to be a tactical evolution afoot that will see it superseded. After all, all styles and formations have their shelf life as people learn how to combat them. There is a real suggestion that the system appears to have become stale, particularly considering the tactical tinkering of van Gaal, Sabella, Jorge Luis Pinto, et al. Those who are critical of 4-2-3-1, like Gary Lineker in the opening quote of this chapter, will point to teams playing with a straight line of three behind one striker. As teams are so used to this now, it is very defensible for teams they play against. The central midfield pairing that plays as a double pivot can often become exposed in a way that 4-4-2 had before it went out of fashion. During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the double pivot was king. All four semi-finalists used it (although Uruguay used something akin to a 4-4-2 rather than the 4-2-3-1 of Spain, Holland and Germany). When pressed this midfield two can also be exposed, especially when up against a midfield three. Indeed the similarities between 4-2-3-1 and out-of-favour 4-4-2 are noticeable, especially when out of possession. In an attempt to become compact, the attacking midfield three will drop into defensive positions, as the diagram below illustrates. The players that are most useful when playing in between lines, and away from defenders, have now created these lines and become the defenders. 45 Chapter 3 Brazil Out of Possession Shape v. Croatia Out of possession, 4-2-3-1 formations can become similar to a 4-4-2, with two banks of four and one of the forward players dropping in to help defensively. This screenshot was of Brazil's out of possession shape against Croatia. 46 With Back Fours Uruguay's Opening Goal v. England's 4-2-3-1 Uruguay's opening goal against England typified the disadvantages of having a flat two as the double pivot. Once Uruguay won possession and broke past Gerrard and Henderson, Uruguay could attack a disorganised back four, and although outnumbered 3v4 by the England defenders, the pace and precision of their attack could out-maneuvre a disordered England back four. Spot the Difference – Brazil v. Croatia Day one of the World Cup saw Brazil and Croatia face-off and the battles of the 4-2-3-1 formations commence. Brazil, playing at home and riding the wave of fanaticism that had swept through the country, looked to dominate the ball and set the attacking tone. Although the Croatian coach, Niko Kovač, insisted he wouldn't "park the bus", a term used to indicate ultra-defensiveness, his team were set up to defend their own half and look for ways to counter-attack. The most outstanding difference in terms of player selection was less the attacking midfield three this time, but the style of players used in their midfield two. Brazil opted for the power of Luis Gustavo and Paulinho and, later in the game, Ramires was brought into the team for his extra legs. In contrast, however, Group A47 Chapter 3 rivals Croatia, famed for their small, yet technically impressive players, chose a midfield pairing of the diminutive Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić. Brazil's 4-2-3-1 v. Croatia 4-2-3-1 Although Modrić and Rakitić were Croatia's two most important and influential players, along with left-back Šime Vrsaljko, it was the Brazilian's power that was to be the deciding factor. Haven't taken the lead early in the game, though a quick counter-attack which saw Ivica Olić's left-wing cross turned into his own goal by the recovering Marcelo, Croatia then became even happier to defend deeply behind the halfway line and try to contain the Brazilians. Brazil received an early warning-shot about Croatia's quick counter-attacks when Olić again threatened their goal with a misplaced header. This tactic saw Brazil limited to chances arising mainly from set-pieces, with Croatia only pressing in Brazil's half if they felt they had the chance of winning the ball back, but otherwise allowing Brazil to pass the ball sideways or backwards. 48 With Back Fours Brazil's equaliser highlighted their midfield power, and was a sign of their focus on work-rate and tackling power in the central areas. It was Oscar on this occasion, whose vigour and determination saw him force a way through both Rakitić and Modrić. The ball landed at the feet of Neymar who had taken up a position between Croatia's two deep-lying midfielders and centre-backs to strike home from distance. It was Neymar who also added a second from the penalty-spot in the second-half, before Ramires was introduced for him in the closing stages, with Luis Felipe Scolari looking to add even more work-rate at the expense of their main flair player. It was this energy that saw Ramires capitalise on hesitation from Rakitić, powering him to the ground as he stole possession, allowing Oscar to run at the Croatian defence, and fire home a futsal-like, disguised shot from outside the box. Although Brazil had dominated possession (62% to 38%), it was their decision to build power into their midfield, which was the deciding factor in winning the game. Four-Three-Three Although 4-2-3-1 was the most popular, there was a significant presence of teams that played with variations of a 4-3-3 formation. From Russia with a Violin String Russia began the tournament using quite a traditional 4-3-3, and the most conventional variant of it as we know it. Unlike the 4-2-3-1, they used just one holding midfielder, Denis Glushakov, with two midfielders ahead of him who would join in the attacks, and the use of two wide players in Yuri Zhirkov and Aleksandr Samedov. What separates differing types of 4-3-3 formations is the use of the front three, and in particular the two wide players. Often teams will use "wrong-footed" (or inverted) wingers (for example, left-footed players from the right and vice versa). Sometimes they will employ a fluid, rotating three, and maybe even use two or three strikers. In their game against South Korea, after which coach Fabio Capello abandoned the system, Russia fielded the left-footed Zhirkov on the left and right-footed Samedov on the right, with quick, young striker Alexander Kokorin through the middle, hence my use of the term "traditional" in describing their approach. 49 Chapter 3 Russia's 4-3-3 v. South Korea While many teams in the opening stages, especially footballing powerhouse nations, looked to attack and play an open game, the Russians were quite conservative. Even in the post-match analysis, Capello seemed content, as his team had "been as tight as a violin string". Their 4-3-3 often morphed into a 4-5-1 with Kokorin having very little to feed off as a lone striker. It took South Korea to take the lead before Capello introduced substitutes Kerzhakov and Dzagoev to add some attacking intent and ingenuity. The Russian performance, compared to other teams, almost threw us back to the trend of World Cup 2010, where avoiding defeat seemed more important than trying to win in the early games. When Russia did take risks, however, in the last 20 minutes, they looked dangerous, and left us wondering what impact they may have had at the World Cup had they taken more chances and played a more adventurous 4-3-3. The French Connections Like the Russians, France utilised a 4-3-3, but offered us more variation in how they did so. While Russia abandoned their system in favour of a 4-2-3-1 after their 50 With Back Fours opening game, the French tweaked their system through the competition to accommodate two out-and-out strikers in their team. After their two opening games, and in an effort to get both strikers Karim Benzema and Olivier Giroud into the side, French coach Didier Deschamps adjusted his tactical shape by rotating natural wide man Antoine Griezmann in and out of the team, replacing him with Giroud as the central striker, and utilising Karim Benzema from the left-hand side. France 4-3-3 v. Switzerland Rather than expect Benzema, however, to completely adapt his game and play as an out-and-out winger, akin to Russia's Zhirkov, the Real Madrid striker (who ironically was one of only two strikers in the World Cup top 10 scoring charts with three goals despite being used a lot in this wide-left position) ventured inside to play closer to Giroud. The balance of the rest of the team was important to address Benzema's role in the 51 Chapter 3 team. Key to this was how Deschamps utilised Blaise Matuidi, whose energy, left-footedness and experience as a wide player, allowed him to cover the spaces left by Benzema, both in possession, with the assistance of left-back Patrice Evra, and out of possession. We will look at Benzema's role in this position when out of possession at a later point in this book. Argentina Do It Differently If France's conundrum was about getting both strikers Benzema and Giroud into the starting line-up, Argentina faced a similar problem entering their opening Group F game against Bosnia. Having started the game, and struggling, with a 3-5-1-1 formation, coach Alejandro Sabella ripped up their half-time script, added Gonzalo Higuaín and Fernando Gago, and changed to a 4-3-3. Argentina's Second-Half 4-3-3 v. Bosnia Rather than using one central striker, flanked by two support players, Argentina 52 With Back Fours narrowed their midfield, played with two dangerous strikers in Agüero and Higuaín, and supported by Lionel Messi from a deeper position. In the first half, Messi struggled to have an impact on the game, often picking the ball up in crowded midfield areas and having little room to manoeuvre. There were too many Eastern European bodies between him, the ball, and the Bosnian goal. With the addition of a second striker, both Higuaín and Agüero could occupy and push back the Bosnian back four, allowing Messi more room to operate and hurt them. This was typified by their goal, where Messi picked up possession deep and exchanged passes with Higuaín, before expertly finishing in goalkeeper Asmir Begović's bottom right-hand corner. The structure of the Argentine midfield was important to allow them to play with two strikers and a free-role for Messi. Angel Di María made Matuidi-like ventures to the left-hand side and a more disciplined Gago helped Mascherano protect the back four, further allowing the attacking ventures of full-backs Marcos Rojo and Pablo Zabaleta. Germany's Organised Chaos If Argentina's 4-3-3 style was innovative and played to their strengths, Germany offered us another, even more dynamic variation of it. It was a formation that allowed coach Joachim Löw the opportunity to include as many of his creative, diminutive attacking midfield players as he dared, plus utilise his ever-changing but dynamic full-backs. Having only brought 34-year-old Miroslav Klose to the World Cup as a recognised striker, Germany embarked on a campaign to win the biggest international competition accepting that they would play significant amounts of football striker-less. When Klose was not used from the beginning (four times), or substituted from the starting 11 (three times), Germany opted for an enviously talented attack with three from Thomas Müller, Mario Götze, Mesut Özil and André Schürrle in the three most attacking positions. To pin any of their front three down into a particular position was difficult. Any time Klose was withdrawn from a game, most of us spent our time trying to work out who would play where. Unlike when France's Giroud was frequently withdrawn, we knew that Benzema would take over as central striker with the substitute, normally Griezmann, taking his position on the left. Applying this easy rationale to the Germans was not so straightforward – even adding the movement arrows to the graphic below was tricky as you were never quite sure of their patterns. Germany's organisation and synergy allowed these players the fluidity to affect the 53 Chapter 3 game as they felt they needed to. Even Müller, their primary goal threat, wasn't a number nine in the traditional sense, and was utilised both centrally and from the right throughout the tournament. Added to a technically sound midfield, and a high defensive line, Germany could spend the majority of games in the opponent's half. I read (in lots of places) that Germany were "efficient", "organised" and "mechanical", all of which is true, but to limit this to a national stereotype is inaccurate and unfair. It was like they took the best of German organisation, game-sense, and discipline, and mixed it with modern features of football around defending high, taking risks, and attacking fluidly in numbers. They were expertly organised, yet instantaneously adaptable and fluid – a mix that is extremely difficult to master. Germany's 4-3-3 v. Portugal 54 With Back Fours Four-Five-One With the proliferation of teams playing 4-2-3-1, you could expect a certain number of transitions to both 4-4-2 and 4-5-1, especially when teams were not in possession. I guess the popularity of the system is because of its adaptability and ability to morph into different shapes as suited. At times, against Russia, South Korea's 4-2-3-1 looked very much like a 4-5-1 out of possession, although that can be said for many of the teams defending compactly with this formation. Greek Emperors If some teams' 4-5-1 was a mere consequence of their defensive shape, Greece used it wholeheartedly. Following their success at the 2004 European Champions, 4-5-1 became the staple Greek football diet. They were happy to play without the ball, defend well and resolutely, and hope to utilise counter-attacks or, more likely, set-pieces, to score. This blueprint saw them record five 1-0 victories in qualifying, and keep a total of eight clean sheets, conceding only four goals. They prepared for the World Cup Finals with two further clean sheets in friendlies against Nigeria and Portugal. From a tactical point of view, you could appreciate why coach Otto Rehhagel felt he needed to keep to a formula that had put the Greeks on the football map. Although competent in possession around their back four, and into their deep-lying midfielder, their technical ability and creative spark higher up the pitch was rarely seen. What they did have was a game plan to allow them to defend resolutely, transition quickly upon losing possession, and delay any threats of being counter-attacked themselves. Although they were well used to the system and the tactic of containing and playing without the ball, you could say that it took them three games to perfect it – beating the Ivory Coast following a goal from a quick regain of possession and a penalty-kick. In their 0-0 result against Japan, the plan to play compactly and defensively got them a result, even with only 25.3% of possession. This was vintage Greece; all that was missing was a set-piece goal to steal the game from a Japanese side that could not turn three-quarters of the game's possession into a goal. We did see, however, how this tactic can have its limits and could somewhat go out the window once they conceded, and in particular when they conceded early in 55 Chapter 3 games. Against Colombia, that very thing happened. After some trickery from impressive Colombian winger Cuadrado, rampant left-back Pablo Armero squeezed in a right-footed finish to put Greece behind after just five minutes. Pre-match, the game was pitched as being the technically dominant Colombians controlling the ball, and the willing

spoilers Greece happy to concede possession. Once the opening goal went in however, the tables were turned. Colombia allowed their technically inferior opponents to have possession, where their lack of attacking creativity saw them start to play quite directly (playing into Colombian hands). Earlier we mentioned that England could struggle to break down compact defences, and would tend to go around or over them, and the Greeks fell into this trap. Without the quality to chase the game, and without an efficient Plan B, the Colombians cruised to an eventual 3-0 victory. Greece 4-5-1 v. Japan The Greek 4-5-1 formation has been a common theme for the Europeans, hoping to replicate their famous European Championships victory in 2004. This line up56 With Back Fours held Japan to a 0-0 draw with only a quarter of the possession count – one of the lowest recorded at a World Cup. Four-Four-Two Four years ago, I wrote a magazine article about the “death” of 4-4-2, in particular following England’s struggles using this formation compared to the other top footballing nations. This was an absolute statement that I should never have used. Sure, 4-4-2 has seen a real decline since the 1990s, but it will be back, and no doubt it will come back a bigger, better, more well-oiled machine. During the 2014 World Cup, 4-4-2 did make a reappearance, though in different guises that we may have been used to during the 1990s. The Colombian Box By the time Colombia met Uruguay in the Final 16, James Rodriguez had made a name for himself. He had scored in all three of Colombia’s group games, made two official assists (! will add a third following his ‘dummying’ of the ball for Armero’s goal against Greece!) and was virtually involved in all of his side’s goals. By the end of the tournament, he was the winner of the Golden Boot (top goal scorer). No other player scored or assisted more goals at the 2014 World Cup (eight). During these group games, Colombia used a 4-2-3-1 formation, with Rodriguez utilised as an out-and-out number 10. Of course he roamed – his ability allowed him to do this, but he did his damage against teams in central attacking areas. With this in mind you would expect Uruguay to have a plan to negate the impact of the Colombian number 10 in those areas, just like defensive midfielder Egidio Arévalo Ríos had done against Wayne Rooney earlier in the tournament. To negate this, coach José Pékerman changed formation and used Rodriguez from the left- hand side, with the opportunity to drift inside and affect the game in an area he knew best. And affect the game he did. This 2-2 shape in midfield, commonly used by Brazil through the years, is often termed a “box” midfield. 57 Chapter 3 Colombia’s 4-4-2 v. Uruguay On paper Colombia’s 4-4-2 looked quite traditional, but their use of two wide players coming in from wide to take up central positions, particularly Rodriguez, meant it was anything but traditional. His start position from the left allowed him not only to drift inside, but to do so with some stealth and Maxi Pereira, the Uruguayan right-wing-back, was not going to track him inside. The further presence of two strikers, Jackson Martinez and Teófilo Gutiérrez, allowed them to occupy Uruguay’s three centre-backs, who were reluctant to vacate their central defensive positions. We all marvelled at the goal itself – the touch, turn and volley – which was voted the best goal at the World Cup. What we need to appreciate further, however, is the movement in the preceding seconds that allowed him to avoid detection and being marked, to drift into an area between Uruguay’s midfield and defenders. There is a 58 With Back Fours wonderful video of the goal on YouTube, shot from the crowd that shows this stealth and evasiveness from markers.1 James Rodriguez’s Possession v. Uruguay Although with a starting position from the left of a midfield four, it is clear from the illustration above that Rodriguez’s movement patterns took him into central positions, with seven individual possessions in central left areas, and nine in total centrally. Summary The 2014 World Cup presented us with wide tactical variety. We also saw lots of tactical fluidity, where teams either changed formation recurrently, and players shifted positions, and many occurrences of players affecting the game beyond the traditional duties of their chosen position. 1 See video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGPZf_aF82M59 Chapter 3 Although 4-2-3-1 was the most popular formation for the second World Cup running, there is a feeling that it is becoming stale. Russia, France, Argentina and Germany all utilised a 4-3-3 system, although all in differing ways. The Greeks once again showed their preference towards a defensive 4-5-1. 4-4-2 made a reappearance at the World Cup, with Uruguay and Argentina most notably using it. Columbia used a 4-2-2-2 variant of 4-4-2 in their knock-out game against the Uruguayans to free up space for star player James Rodriguez. 60 4 Back Threes and Fives “A man with new ideas is mad – until he succeeds!” (Marcelo Bielsa) If the large-scale presence of 4-2-3-1 was no surprise at the 2014 World Cup, the proliferation of teams playing with three centre-backs was. The 2010 event in South Africa offered very little indication that this would be the case. Sure, in Italy’s Serie ‘A’ in recent years there has been significant use of the 3-5-2 formation, particularly with Juventus as they claimed the Scudetto using the system under Antonio Conte. At the World Cup Chile, Mexico and the Italians themselves all seemed likely to use variants of a back three. Several other nations were to follow this path also; something we will look at over the coming pages. It was as much of a surprise that Italy chose not to use the 3-5-2, considering the success of the formation under coach Cesare Prandelli when reaching the final of Euro 2012 (of the sixteen teams that took part in the European Championships finals that year, Italy were the only ones to play with a back three). With the resurgence of the system in Italy, Prandelli reverted to it for the only time in their must-win contest against Uruguay in their last game in Group D. Although Italy are renowned for being especially flexible tactically, they were unimpressive in their opening games against England and Costa Rica, and their World Cup campaign was to cost Prandelli his job after the competition. Chapter 4 Italy’s 3-5-2 v. Uruguay In their final group game against Uruguay, Italy reverted to the 3-5-2 that served them well at Euro 2012 – a sign of their faith in the system, using it in a must-win game, although one they ultimately lost. Like we have said countless times throughout this book, tactics evolve and react to trends in the game. I remember being on my UEFA ‘A’ Licence course and the room scoffed when it came to the unit where we studied the topic of lining up with three-at-the-back and the use of a sweeper. That way of playing was perceived as ‘dead’. We should have known that - one day - it would come around again. And in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil it did exactly that. Since the late 1990s we have seen an astronomical rise in the number of teams that play with a single striker. As midfield domination has become more and more important, coaches have sacrificed strikers, reverting from two to three-man midfields. With only one striker to play against, there is little need to play with three centre-backs as a 3 v 1 in this area meant you would be significantly overloaded in another. Recently, however, there has been a clear rethink of the value of 3-5-2 formations. The use of wing-backs who work defensively at full-back, and with licence to attack 62 Back Three and Fives as wingers, saw teams who played the popular 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 struggle to set up to cope with them. The Back Line It is, often, not particularly easy to pigeon-hole formations that use three centre-backs. We can play the numbers game once again by dwelling on whether we should call systems 3-5-2, 5-3-2 or even, in the case of the Netherlands and Chile, 3-4-3 or 3-4-1-2. In reality the teams we saw at the World Cup will have used back threes, back fives, and situationally (and ironically) even back fours. Threes, Fours and Fives Just like teams that play 4-2-3-1, 4-3-3 or any other formation, all teams will set up and interact differently. Chile chose to defend almost purely with a back three (although they played with a back four in a 4-4-2 in their first group game against Australia), whereas Uruguay and Costa Rica were happy deploying a back five. Mexico, on the other hand, saw their back three often morph temporarily into a back four. Uruguay’s 5-3-2 v. Italy 63 Chapter 4 Regardless of team shape and formations, players move and interact based on the position of the ball and the opposition, as well as the immediate danger and the state of the game. It is important to note, as we will see below - with the graphic of the Netherlands against Costa Rica - back lines can shift between three, four and five players. Tactics and formations are situational and will depend on the team’s need at a particular time. Out of Possession Playing with three central defenders will predictably make a team quite strong in central areas, but sometimes quite vulnerable in the wider, less occupied zones. In their semi-final clash, Argentina routinely tried to get runners down the sides of the Netherlands’ back three, through their attacking trio of Higuain, Messi and Lavezzi. It is normal when out of possession, therefore, for the team’s wing-backs to join their three centre-back colleagues and produce a five-man defence. Teams that set up with three central defenders will often transform their back line into playing with a crescent shape containing either four or five individuals. In the case of the Netherlands, their numerical superiority in central defensive areas allowed them to press players aggressively in and around their penalty area. They could leave their ‘zone’ (their line of three) to deal with any danger they saw fit. We often saw Stefan de Vrij, Ron Vlaar or Martins Indi leave their positions to put pressure on a striker or advanced midfield player, without the fear of being exposed, like a centre-back would be when playing in a two-man partnership. 64 Back Three and Fives Netherlands Changeable Defensive Line In the above image we see a great snapshot of a three-man centre-back defence defending using differing shapes. The Dutch back three converted into a back five with wing-backs Dirk Kuyt and Daley Blind dropping into full-back positions. This five changed to a four once de Vrij left his right centre-back position to press Brian Ruiz. Within 30 seconds, the Dutch defended with a back three, five and then a four. Above, de Vrij could leave his other centre-back colleagues to defend 2 v 1 against Joel Campbell, who is temporarily offside. All the other players are marking a space but with designated players to press should they receive the ball. In Possession In possession, we often saw teams who play with three centre-backs push home their central numerical advantage in possession by driving with the ball out of defence. Mexican sweeper, Rafael Márquez, captaining the side at his fourth World Cup finals, particularly showed this against hosts Brazil and against Cameroon. Márquez, a good technician as well as defender was comfortable in driving forward in possession, knowing that both his centre-back colleagues, Héctor Moreno and Javier Rodríguez, had secured the space he vacated should a transition occur. The 65 Chapter 4 presence of three centre-backs, rather than two, also ensures there are greater numbers centrally should a transition and counter-attack occur. The presence of three centre-backs subsequently allows a team’s wing-backs to attack with much more freedom. Chile provided a great example of this in Brazil, where their wing-backs were free to attack aggressively as they saw fit. During their game against the reigning champions, Spain, right wing-back Mauricio Isla came close to scoring following a shot from left wing-back Eugenio Mena – a situation where both wing-backs found themselves in the Spanish box, even with a two-goal lead! Wing-Backs In the 3-5-2 formation, and its variants, the position(s) of a side’s wing-backs is crucial. With these teams loading central areas with lots of bodies, the wing-backs, as their title suggests, are almost fulfilling the position of two players – a full-back and a winger. They are obliged to provide the team’s width when attacking, but also to provide defensive numbers and balance in defence. This use of the wide player can either lead to teams being over-run in these flank areas, as we noted above by Argentina’s tactic against the Netherlands, or cause the defending team a problem in terms of whose responsibility it is to mark them or track their forward runs. Wing-Backs Pose the Problem The use of wing-backs pushing back opposition wingers was never so blatantly evident than in the Group A game between Mexico and Cameroon. The Africans never really got a grip on the game and the Mexican wing-backs pushed the normally attack-minded African wide players, Benjamin Moukandjo and Eric Choupo-Moting, back into full-back positions. Mexico’s forward-thinking approach saw them reduce Cameroon to virtually playing a back six when out of possession, meaning that support for their lone striker and talismanic captain Samuel Eto’o was very hard to come by. I noted two instances, one in each half, where Cameroon had won the ball, managed to smuggle it forward to Eto’o, and, like the best player in the school playground, he attempted to receive it and take on the Mexican defence on alone. Of course, with three central defenders and a defensive midfielder in the shape of José Juan Vázquez to contend with, plus the lack of support from the Cameroonian wide attackers, Eto’o found this predictably impossible. In contrast to this, Bosnia and Brazil were happy for the most part, to let their full-backs deal with the wing-backs of Argentina and Mexico respectively during their group games. 66 Back Three and Fives Cameroon Struggling to Deal with Mexican Wing-Backs Cameroon wide players Benjamin Moukandjo and Eric Choupo-Moting being forced into deep, defensive positions by Mexican wing-backs, Miguel Layún and Paul Aguilar. Not only did this reduce Cameroon to essentially playing with a back six for large parts of the match, their counter-attack was largely nullified as Eto’o was greatly out-numbered. Midfield Different formations and shapes lend themselves further to the different use of midfield players. The beauty of the 3-5-2 is that a team can still dominate the midfield by using three players in central areas. The Italian 3-5-2 that we looked at above had two holding midfielders and one attack-minded ‘number 10’ in the shape of Claudio Marchisio. Both the Netherlands and Chile used an even more attack- minded number 10 in the shapes of Wesley Sneijder and Arturo Vidal respectively in their 3-4-1-2 formations. If we invert Italy’s midfield three, we end up with the midfield shape that Argentina used in their opening game against Bosnia. They used the traditional operation of one holding midfielder in Javier Mascherano with two further midfield players in Maxi Rodríguez and Ángel Di María who had greater licence to get forward and involve themselves in attacks. 67 Chapter 4 By fielding a midfield three, teams could compete with a four-at-the-back opposition in the crucial central areas of the pitch. The likes of Costa Rica, who at times played a 5-4-1, would have a line of four midfield players, though the widest of the four, Bryan Ruiz and Christian Bolaños would tuck in and play quite centrally. Again allowing their wing-backs to provide genuine width in attack. Argentina Central Midfield Three v. Bosnia The shape of Argentina’s midfield three was typical of what you would expect from a 3-5-2 formation, with a designated holding midfielder in Mascherano, and two forward thinking players in Di María and Maxi Rodríguez. Italy Central Midfield Three in 3-5-2 v. Uruguay Against Uruguay, Italy inverted the shape used by Argentina, fielding a central midfield pairing of Verratti and Pirlo, allowing Marchisio to play further forward. 68 Back Three and Fives Chile Central Midfield Three in 3-4-3 v. Spain For much of the World Cup, Chile used Diaz as their holding midfield player, Aránguiz was their multi-purpose midfielder, and this allowed Vidal to play as high up the pitch as possible in support of their two strikers. Costa Rica Central Midfield Four v. Netherlands With Costa Rica playing with a back five, their midfield shape was a narrow four, again blocking central areas with numbers. Forward Players Arguably one of the most important impacts of the rebirth of the 3-5-2 at the 2014 World Cup was the resurgence of the strike partnership. Tactical analysts had begun to look at the famous combination of number nines and tens as something from the 69 Chapter 4 past, possibly never to be seen again with any consistency. The trend in football until this World Cup had been to use fewer and fewer strikers. The popularity of the 4-2-3-1 has forced forward players to become more than simply goalscorers. In his wonderful tactical book, Inverting the Pyramid, Jonathan Wilson traces the fortunes of 1998 World Cup starlet Michael Owen, noting that “the modern forward... is far more than a goalscorer, and it may even be that a modern forward can be successful without scoring goals.” Midway through his career, with teams prioritising one multi-functional striker, a 25-year-old Owen, with an international goal-scoring record of almost one goal in every two games, was unable to find a Champions League club to invest in his services. In fact, footballing fashion looked more like it was heading for striker-less 4-6-0 formations rather than playing with a strike partnership. At times during the 2014 World Cup however, we not only saw two strikers paired together, we even saw the use of three strikers, or certainly three notable attackers. Both Chile and the Netherlands used a designated front three in a 3-4-1-2 formation. Using Three Strikers When Costa Rica and the Netherlands lined up against each other in the quarter-finals, there was a sense (again) of David versus Goliath. The Dutch had earned plaudits early in the tournament by convincingly toppling champions Spain, coming from one-down to win 5 – 1; a performance which contained a wonderful display from clinical strike partnership Robben and van Persie. Both teams lined up with formations containing three central defenders. The Netherlands adapted their 3-4-1-2 to a more obvious 3-4-3, and Costa Rica fielded an unusual 5-4-1 – a formation that was seldom used in Brazil. 70 Back Three and Fives Costa Rica 5-4-1 v. the Netherlands 3-4-3 The Costa Ricans, in their

familiar role of David, had navigated an extremely tough group by beating Uruguay, Italy, and drawing against England to finish top of Group D. Their tactically astute coach, Jorge Luis Pinto, had set them up in a mixture of 4-5-1 or 3-5-2 system or a mixture of both. They reverted to a definite 5- 4-1 against the Dutch, who themselves altered their 3-4-1-2 to a 3-4-3. By playing three out-and-out attackers in the form of Arjen Robben and Memphis Depay flanking Robin van Persie, van Gaal was attempting to occupy the three Costa Rican centre-backs, in itself justifying Pinto's use of five defenders. 71 Chapter 4 Netherlands Front Three Occupying Costa Rican Centre-Backs Three Dutch forwards, Robben, van Persie, and Depay, were set up to occupy three Costa Rican centre-backs Umana, Gonzalez, and Acosta, affecting their ability to be an attacking force from defensive areas. Predictably the Dutch had the vast majority of the ball – and so they should have. After all a squad littered with title-winning medallists from all over Europe, should have, if nothing else, the technical ability to dominate a game against a group of players who played their club football across the world's lower leagues. We spoke earlier in this book about game-changers – those moments, decisions or players that affect games and either make tactics work or spoil them completely. This game had those in abundance. Costa Rican goalkeeper Keylor Navas was forced into making countless saves, Sneijder hit a post from a well-taken free-kick and van Persie not only missed the ball completely with the goal at his mercy, he also saw a low, driven shot take a deflection off two defenders and rebound back off the crossbar. Although the Netherlands had all these chances, Costa Rica's game plan was being implemented quite nicely. The number of bodies they employed in central areas –72 Back Three and Fives three centre-backs and four central midfield players – saw the Dutch often reverting to playing from side to side, and once the ball came into the likes of Robben, a force of will and force of bodies managed to get blocks in and to frustrate the Bayern Munich man and his colleagues. Although defensively solid (when organised), Costa Rica could offer very little in terms of their counter-attack. Similar to Cameroon and Eto'o, Joel Campbell found himself isolated against three centre-backs, with Costa Rica's only genuine chances coming from set-plays. As the game wore on, the world and television cameras increasingly looked towards van Gaal to see if the much-respected tactician would wield his magic again and turn a frustrating draw against World Cup minnows into a win. On social media people hypothesised whether the Dutch would commit a centre-back forward, like Márquez did for Mexico, or maybe revert to a 4-3-3 to get players in between the Costa Rican back five and midfield four, in a similar way to the games they won against both Australia and Mexico (see following illustration) earlier in the tournament. Netherlands 4-3-3 that Finished v. Mexico 73 Chapter 4 When trailing to Mexico in the World Cup 2014 Quarter-Final, Louis van Gaal chased the game by changing from 3-4-1-2 to his more traditional 4-3-3, something he chose not to do against Costa Rica. Tactically, van Gaal did none of those things – his most notable contribution in terms of changing the game saw him substitute goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen for Tim Krul moments before the penalty shoot-out (a change that although labelled a "tactical" masterclass in the media, was in fact more of a psychological one. Krul could be seen telling Costa Rican players that he "knew" where their penalties would go as the substitution looked to get into the heads of Pinto's team). This wonderful tactical battle was settled on penalties, which eventually saw the Dutch through to the World Cup semi-final. Summary Teams playing with three centre-backs increased dramatically at the 2014 World Cup. Italy reverted to their trusted 3-5-2 in their must-win game against Uruguay. Defensive lines containing three centre-backs often morphed into formations with a back line of three, four, or five, depending on the situation. Teams with three centre-backs are stronger centrally, but can be exploited in wide areas. Wing-backs have a dual-purpose of providing attacking width and defensive cover and balance. Cameroon struggled to cope with the attacking Mexican wing-backs with their wide attackers often dropping into a back-six. The 3-5-2 and its variants allowed teams to use numbers in the vital central midfield area, though teams used different shapes of three and four players. One of the most important outcomes of the rebirth of the 3-5-2 is the resurgence of the strike partnership. At times, three designated attackers were even used, a huge turnaround in the trend towards striker-less formations. 74 5 Players, Players, Players "Tactics don't win games, players do!" (Football cliché) Over recent decades, tactics have changed immeasurably – the abundance of formations we have looked at is testament to that. If team tactics have changed greatly, so too have the roles and responsibilities of players playing within these upgraded and updated systems and strategies. We must remember that it is not tactics alone that decide games. At any one time it is 11 players on the pitch that are making decisions, performing technically, and approaching the game psychologically. A sending off, a goal scored or conceded, or an injury can force a rethink in any game plan. Tactics are obsolete without players who are capable of executing them. Greece, for example, do not have the quality of personnel or creativity to play Spain's tiki-tiki or Chile's relentless attacking style. Likewise expressive, physically diminutive teams like Mexico or Spain could not play the direct and set-play orientated football that the Greeks do. Positions Below, we will look at how the evolution of football tactics has changed the roles and responsibilities of the players who play within them. We will analyse, position by position, the main trends that have altered the way we look at (and stereotype) players positionally. Chapter 5 Goalkeepers – Footballers Not Just Line-Keepers We demand a lot from the modern goalkeeper. It is no longer sufficient for a top level keeper to simply stand on his line, make saves and distribute the ball as far down the pitch as possible. Although he still needs to make match-winning saves (we will look at the importance of goalkeepers' shot-stopping at the World Cup later in this chapter), he needs to have the passing, receiving, and distribution skills to rival his outfield team-mates. The modern goalkeeper now uses his feet seven times more than he did in the early 1990s. In Making the Ball Roll, we looked at the turning point for goalkeepers in the modern game, and ironically this came from the rather dour World Cup Italia '90: In 1992, the "back-pass" rule was introduced into the Laws of Association Football. For those young enough not to remember football pre-1992, it was perfectly acceptable for a goalkeeper to pick up a pass from his teammate. This was often used as the ultimate means to time-waste legally and often led to dull games, which came to a head at the World Cup: Italia 1990. One game springs to mind from that tournament. England were leading Egypt 1-0 in Cagliari, and in the meantime - 400km away in Palermo - the Republic of Ireland and Holland merely needed a draw for both to qualify from Group F. With the scores level at 1-1, the game petered out in the closing stages leading to the Irish goalkeeper, Pat Bonner, constantly rolling the ball out to his defenders, before happily collecting the back pass to kill the game. Against Egypt in the same tournament, Bonner allegedly had the ball in his possession for a total of six minutes! Bonner himself confessed that this new law changed the role of the goalkeeper forever – and noted that those who could not cope with the new technical demands of the goalkeeper's game, quickly faded away. Six World Cups later however, we now have goalkeepers that are more than capable of using their feet as well as their hands, and arguably as well as their outfield team-mates. A FIFA study that analysed 43 games from various competitions between September 2004 and May 2005 found that not only did goalkeepers have to use their feet more than they did, but that they actually used their feet even more than their hands: 76 Players, Players, Players FIFA Study of Goalkeeper Interventions Germany's Manuel Neuer, France's Hugo Lloris, and Chile's Claudio Bravo all showed comfort levels with their feet that saw them consistently exit the safety of their penalty boxes to start or join in the build-up to their team's attacks, or to receive the ball to relieve the pressure on their outfield team-mates. In a frantic game against Brazil in the Round of 16, where both teams relentlessly pressed each other, Chile's Bravo received 16 back-passes to help relieve pressure on the team caused by Brazil's high pressure tactics. Out of possession, modern goalkeepers are quick to leave their goal line to 'sweep' up behind their defenders. This was most evident against Algeria, as we looked at earlier, when German goalkeeper Neuer had 17 touches of the ball outside his penalty area. For Germany to play their modern brand of attacking football, and to maintain a high defensive line, they needed Neuer to play this type of game. There was even a joke that went around football circles that in Germany's quarter-final versus France, Neuer and Lloris would clash for possession in midfield, given their propensities for leaving their box! Centre-Backs – More Than Big and More Than Strong Traditionally, we have looked at centre-backs as defenders only. They tended to be big and strong and were often described affectionately as being "no-nonsense". When dealing with opposition strikers, coaches would instruct these defenders to "let them know you are there", which is basically code for an over-aggressive approach to the duel. Centre-backs are, however, evolving. Sure, for the most part, they are still big, strong and can be aggressive. They are, after all, the last line of defence in front of the goalkeeper, will often take physical charge at set-plays, and they need to defend against direct play. France's Mamadou Sakho for example, has the physique and traits of a traditional centre-back, yet his biggest criticism is that he is not technical enough and liable to make mistakes when in possession.77 Chapter 5 More is now demanded of centre-backs as footballers. Not only are they defenders, they are the starters of attacks, have licence to forage forward, and even influence important games with their forward play. Two of the 2014 World Cup's most iconic images were a technically excellent goal scored from a David Luiz free-kick against Colombia (which was to be the deciding goal in the tie) and Vincent Kompany's defensive interception against the United States, which led to him running the length of the pitch to get on the end of a fast-paced counter-attack – that he himself started! The Belgian's gamble and forward surge in the 89th minute almost won the Round of 16 game for Belgium in normal time (they eventually secured victory in extra-time). Against Australia, while playing at centre-back in a 4-3-1-2, Gary Medel even managed to overlap his wide player and produce a cross into the Australian box. Rather than simply being responsible for launching the ball from back to front, centre-backs now regularly have possession statistics comparable to midfield players. Australian centre-back Matthew Spiranovic, whose team lost all three of their games at the group stages, had a 100% pass completion rate against World Champions Spain. According to FIFA's end-of-competition pass accuracy statistics, four of the top six players were centre-backs (we must acknowledge, however, that the passes defenders are required to make are considerably less risky than, say, a number 10 trying to play a complicated through ball). 2014 World Cup Highest Pass Accuracy Rank Player Nation Position Pass % 1 Garay Argentina Centre-Back 94% 2 Mertesacker Germany Centre-Back 93% 3 Iñiesta Netherlands Centre-Back 91% 4 Luiz Gustavo Brazil Deep-Lying Midfielder 91% 5 Vlaar Netherlands Centre-Back 91% 6 Lahm Germany Midfielder / Full-Back 91% Such are the technical capabilities of modern centre-backs that, along with being trusted in possession, they are also often utilised at full-back. Such was the confidence of German coach Joachim Löw (whose tactics relied on advancing, attacking full-backs) in the ability of his centre-backs that he regularly utilised Jerome Boateng, Benedikt Höwedes and Shkodran Mustafi as the team's full-backs. It was only injuries that forced Germany to redeploy expert full-back Philipp Lahm back into his natural right-back position, having spent the early games of the 78 Players, Players, Players competition as their deep-lying midfielder. Belgium, a recent breeding ground for gifted footballers, also happily utilised natural centre-backs at full-back. Jan Vertonghen's excellent contribution in attacking areas against the U.S.A. in their Round of 16 match saw him have four attempts on goal, and eight attempted crosses. Wing-Backs – Assisting The trend of forward-thinking full-backs is a growing one. In previous generations, we looked at Brazil, with Roberto Carlos and Cafu both powering into attacking areas, as being the exception. Now, almost every team will use their full-backs as offensive as well as defensive players. For this section I have purposefully used the term 'wing-back' rather than 'full-back' in the title. This is not just to include those playing as natural wing-backs like Chile's Eugenio Mena and Mauricio Isla in a 3-4-1-2, but to include those who play as forward-thinking full-backs even when part of a back four. Traditionally those selected to play in full-back positions were small and often technically limited. Their main job was to mark the opposition winger and their attacking threat was generally about feeding the ball to their own winger, or directly into the team's strikers. The modern full-back however is much, much more than that. They attack as much as they defend, they create as well as intercept, they offer offensive options as well as defensive cover. As mentioned in Chapter 2, For France, Didier Deschamps had the choice between selecting either Arsenal's Bacary Sagna or Newcastle's Mathieu Debuchy. With little to choose between the two, Deschamps selected Debuchy because he saw him as being more dynamic in forward areas, and having a better final pass. Netherlands wing-back Daley Blind was the second highest provider of assists at the 2014 World Cup with three, behind only Chile's wide attacker, Juan Guillermo Cuadrado, and German midfielder Toni Kroos 79 Chapter 5 Full-Back / Wing-Back Assists During World Cup Overall Player Team Assists Rank =2 Daley Blind The Netherlands 3 =3 Daryl Janmaat The Netherlands 2 =3 Marcelo Brazil 2 =3 Philipp Lahm Germany 2 =3 Ricardo Rodriguez Switzerland 2 =3 Serge Aurier Ivory Coast 2 With the importance of attacking full-backs to modern tactics, it puzzled me why Russia - in their opening game against South Korea - used an attacking full-back like Yuri Zhirkov in a wide attacking position in a 4-3-3. There is some argument that this tournament left some of the older generation coaches behind, and the feeling in Russia was certainly that Capello's tactics were outdated. Had Zhirkov been German, Croatian or French, he would almost certainly have played as an attacking left-back, giving his side an extra attacking option from deep. Deep-Lying Midfielders – From Defence to Attack One of modern tactics greatest trends has been the introduction and specialisation of the deep-lying midfielder player. By definition these are players that will command a holding position in the central midfield areas. Arguably France's Claude Makélélé popularised the position, although maybe his particular set of attributes suited the defensive role required in formations such as 4-3-3 and 4-2-3-1 once teams had routinely sacrificed a striker in a 4-4-2 for a more defensive midfield player. José Mourinho, discussing the role of the Frenchman in his Chelsea team, stated: "If I have a triangle in midfield – Claude Makélélé behind and two others just in front – I will always have an advantage against a pure 4-4-2 where the central midfielders are side by side. That's because I will always have an extra man. It starts with Makélélé, who is between the lines. If nobody comes to him he can see the whole pitch and has time. If he gets closed down it means one of the two other central midfielders is open. If they are closed down and the other team's wingers come inside to help, it means there is space now for us on the flank, either for our own wingers or for our full-backs. There is nothing a pure 4-4-2 can do to stop things." 80 Players, Players, Players Positions Before Introduction of Specialist Deep-Lying Midfielder 81 Chapter 5 Modern Formation Containing Deep-Lying Midfielder The 'Makélélé Role', as the position affectionately became known, has however evolved as quickly as it was established. There are few 'Makélélés' left – players that are purely defensive and with a focus on destruction rather than construction in a football sense. The 'defensive midfielder' is now definitely a technical, deep-lying midfielder – soccer's version of American Football's 'quarter-back' – a player that looks to control games with the ball, start attacks, and set the tempo for the game. During the 2014 World Cup, more and more technical players took up these types of positions, rather than the 'destroyers' that were previously deployed in these midfield roles. Spain's Sergio Busquets and Argentina's Javier Mascherano are often described in disparaging terms for their destructiveness, and although both are renowned for their tackling and defensive positioning, they are both technically excellent. Let us not pretend that the defensive qualities of these players are suddenly unimportant – they are. Mascherano's role in the Argentine midfield was a major factor in the South American team's journey to the final without falling a goal behind in any of their games (crushingly, the last seven-minute period of extra-time in the Final against Germany was the only time Argentina were a goal behind during any point in the competition). Intercepting the ball rather than making crunching tackles are now the order of the day, and their positioning when out-of-possession remains vital for the smooth running of their teams.82 Players, Players, Players When their team was in possession, we saw these deep-lying midfielders often lying even deeper, dropping into central defensive positions to allow centre-backs to step forward with the ball, and kill teams who tried to press them. Diaz did this frequently for Chile, as did

Germany's Philipp Lahm, amongst other deep midfielders throughout the competition. Deep-Lying Midfielder Dropping Between Centre-Backs In Possession When centre-backs are in possession, the deep-lying midfielder frequently drops in between the two centre-backs, allowing the player in possession to advance forward, offering a support option behind the ball, and offering defensive security should they lose possession. As well as players like Diaz and Lahm in this position, we also found that midfield players noted for their attacking ability, and therefore their excellent technical skills, were used more and more in this position. Johan Cabaye, Steven Gerrard, and Axel Witsel who are just as, or even more, accomplished as attacking midfielders were used as deep-lying players for France, England and Belgium respectively. 83 Chapter 5 We can also add another breed of deep-lying midfielders in the shape of individuals who made their names as diminutive number 10's – Luka Modrić and Ivan Rakitić played together as the deep-lying double-pivot for Croatia, and we also looked at South Korea's Ki Sung-Yueng's capabilities in that position earlier in this book. All made their name in football as clever, attack-minded players who played in pockets of space behind the forward players. In 2001 Roberto Mancini, a former trequartista (number 10) himself, wrote his thesis for his coaching badge with the Italian FA. He noted that the number 10 had "a scarce presence in the defensive phase"1 – how much this has changed in 13 years. Multi-Purpose Midfielders The evolution of more traditional number 10's into more deep-lying positions can be seen as a direct result of the change in the style and requirements of the trequartista. Traditionally a team's number 10 would look to exploit the space on the edge of the opposition's penalty area – known as 'zone 14'. With the large-scale presence of one, if not two, deep-lying midfielders reducing the space in central areas, these players have had to evolve, adapt, and go elsewhere to cause opposition defences damage. The 10 is no longer simply "a player who positions himself in the central zone between the midfielders' line and the attackers' line", as noted by Mancini, he must now have the traits of a winger (we are increasingly seeing number 10s being called "inside wingers") – he must be able to dribble, run with the ball, play centrally or out wide in either left or right areas – and crucially, he will be asked to contribute to the defensive phase of the game. 1 Translation thanks to soccertranslator.com 84 Players, Players, Players Zone 14 Zone 14 is the attacking central area of the pitch located on the edge of the box, and traditionally the source of lots of goal-scoring chances. With Zone 14 being increasingly protected by midfield players, those who traditionally exploited Zone 14 now tend to drift all over attacking areas. Terms like 'Zone 13.5' are increasingly becoming used to describe the shaded areas above to indicate the growing influence of attacking players trying to exploit areas to the sides of Zone 14 and the deep-lying opposition midfielders. There has been a real blurring of the lines between those who play as number 10s and those who play as wide attackers. Natural number 10s have the traits of wingers and wingers have the traditional traits of number 10s – they seek spaces in crowded central areas to exploit, rather than exclusively looking for 1v1 situations, and have more in their technical armoury than simply dribbling and crossing. The blurring of these lines allows teams that play 4-2-3-1 to rotate the specific positions of the attacking midfield three. Brazil, for example, tended to play an attacking midfield three of Neymar, Hulk, and Oscar, although all three consistently appeared in different positions during different games, and often during the same game. The truth is that coaches are now more comfortable in allowing the flair and creativity of their players to be used, along with their evolving honesty and work-rate, much more than used to be the case. 85 Chapter 5 The very best of these attacking players at the World Cup had the ability to appear, and affect games, in various attacking areas of the pitch. They included Hazard, Di Maria, Neymar, Sterling, Messi and a raft of German attackers who consistently showed this capability throughout their time in Brazil. Ángel Di María Individual Possessions v. Switzerland In their quarter-final against Switzerland, Di María was selected to play from the right, although we see from his individual possession chart (via Prozone) that he consistently popped up all over the pitch, particularly in the Swiss half. Not only are attacking midfield players becoming more rounded position-wise, we are also seeing a minor yet significant increase in natural wingers playing as central midfield players. Again Di María and his midfield colleague Maxi Rodríguez are good examples of this, as is the all-round German star Bastian Schweinsteiger. With the growing propensity for 'inside wingers', we may well see more natural wide players evolving into central midfielders. Stereotypical central midfielders would play off two-touches, switching the play and doing most of their 'box-to-box' running without the ball. In contrast now, however, there is a growing trend for midfield players who pick the ball up in central areas and drive forward in possession. Natural 86 Players, Players, Players wide players, like Di María, with these skills already honed, may begin to influence central positions more and more. Non-Goalscoring Strikers When we analyse strikers, the first attribute next to their name is their goal-scoring statistics. Historically, we were told that every team needed a number 9 who scored goals and was judged on little else. It did not truly matter whether they worked hard out-of-possession - putting the ball in the back of the net was their job. Because of the fame and glory of the position, and the exquisite knack needed to score goals by the hatful, kids grew up dreaming of being their team's star striker. The mantle, however, has shifted. At the 2014 World Cup, not only was the tournament's top scorer an attacking midfield player, only three out-and-out strikers, Enner Valencia (Ecuador), Karim Benzema (France) and Robin van Persie (The Netherlands) made the Top 10. Brazil, a nation famed for its number nines, had Fred spear-heading the attack; he managed only one goal in six appearances. Critics were quick to pounce on Fred, and although he provided only a limited contribution to the host-nation during the tournament, he played in a Brazilian team that was set up to allow team-mate Neymar to be the star man. Miroslav Klose (Germany) scored two as did Colombia's Jackson Martínez. Gonzalo Higuaín scored once for Argentina, as did Wayne Rooney for England and other top strikers like Romelu Lukaku (Belgium), Fernando Torres (Spain) and Eden Džeko (Bosnia). 87 Chapter 5 Top 10 Goal Scorers at the 2014 World Cup Rank Player Country Position Goals 1 Rodríguez Colombia Attacking Midfield 6 2 Müller Germany Attacking Midfield 5 3 Messi Argentina Attacking Midfield 4 3 Neymar Brazil Attacking Midfield 4 3 van Persie The Netherlands Centre-Forward 4 4 Schürrle Germany Attacking Midfield 3 4 Robben The Netherlands Attacking Midfield 3 4 Valencia Ecuador Centre-Forward 3 4 Benzema France Centre-Forward 3 4 Shaqiri Switzerland Attacking Midfield 3 As I completed the above table, I must admit I struggled writing the term "attacking midfield" to describe all those wonderful players. It is like I was unduly pigeon-holing wonderfully flexible, versatile, universal midfield players into one category. The description is merely for convenience, rather than a widespread categorisation of players that, frankly, cannot be put into one neat descriptive box. After all, how do you categorise Xherdan Shaqiri, Arjen Robben and Thomas Müller into one opportune position? The False 9 We briefly mentioned Spain's previous use of the False 9 earlier in this book. Cesc Fàbregas, we noted, was utilised in that position for their 2012 European Championships victory. We could argue that Fàbregas was Spain's version of Barcelona's False 9, who of course used Messi so successfully in this position under the reign of Pep Guardiola. In 2014, we saw the German adaptation of the False 9, especially in their utilisation of their top scorer, Thomas Müller, who simply cannot be categorised as a striker, winger or attacking midfielder – he is a combination of them all. Former German international Mehmet Scholl described him best as not a False 9, but a "Wild 13" (Müller's squad number) given his propensity for popping up almost anywhere. Just like our conundrum of pigeon-holing attacking midfielders above, it is difficult to bracket the False 9 also. In the simplest terms, he is somewhat of a hybrid 88 Players, Players, Players between a striker, an attacking midfield player and a winger. His start position may be as a traditional number 9, but he drops off into attacking midfield areas and into wide positions. This leaves a real problem for opposing central defenders and it becomes a significant challenge for defenders to work out who is responsible for picking him up – and when. Arguably the U.S.A. used, or at least attempted to use, Clint Dempsey (the multi-purpose midfield player) as a False 9, though Germany provided, by far and away, the best example from the World Cup in Brazil. Although they did use World Cup goalscoring record-setter Miroslav Klose as an out-and-out number 9, they quickly reverted to a False 9 system when he was not selected, or had been substituted. Indeed it was quite humorous to listen to old-fashioned television commentators scramble to get a grasp of the German shape, once Klose was substituted. Again the pigeon-holing began, when really it was not necessary. Such was the German faith in the striker-less False 9 system that 36-year-old Klose was the only true striker they included in their entire World Cup selection squad. If any goal was to justify this approach it was their most famous of all – Mario Götze's extra-time World Cup Final winner. 89 Chapter 5 Germany's False 9 System and the World Cup Winning Goal The above image highlights the point when Germany's André Schürrle picks up possession from a Tony Kroos pass, before driving forward down the left-hand side of the pitch. As he drives, Müller moves out of his central area, rather than attack the penalty box like a traditional number 9 would. Mario Götze, stationed wide on the left when Schürrle gained possession, makes a run inside and eventually scores the World Cup winning goal from the shaded area in front of goal. 'Special' Players Throughout this book we have noted that it is not just tactics that win games, but players, decisions, twists of faith, etc. In Brazil we also saw that some very high profile games and tactical battles were won by single moments of brilliance from individual players. Winning Games This player may be the 'X-Factor' player – that one who can produce something special to win a game, almost on his own. He can likely do the things that his team-mates cannot, and also produce moments that the opposition simply could not set against Players, Players, Players game plan for. It is a mixture of individual brilliance and, to a certain extent, the tactics that allow these players to flourish. These tactics may involve building the player into a team structure, or building the team structure around the player. Lionel Messi helped Argentina through a very sticky group, with winning goals against very stubborn opponents in Bosnia and Iran – and also a brace against Nigeria. Similarly James Rodríguez secured Colombia's passage from the group stage into the knock-out stages of the World Cup, and was heavily involved in virtually all of their goals, and often in spectacular fashion. In a very even match, it was Uruguay's Luis Suárez who scored two exceptionally well-taken goals to defeat England 2 - 1. Brazil never quite looked the same once they lost their talismanic special player Neymar through injury. The quality of these players, and their ability to change games through technique and sublime finishing, means their position in their respective teams allow them to win games that are otherwise hard-fought and tight. Messi's Last Minute Winning Goal v. Iran The image above is a freeze-frame at the point Lionel Messi makes contact with the ball for his winning goal in the final seconds of their hard-fought group game against Iran. At the point of 91 Chapter 5 contact, all eleven Iranian players were in or around the box, yet remained powerless to stop the goal, including two players in very close proximity to the special Argentine. In an effort to stop special players, teams frequently resorted to negative tactics of either man-marking or double-marking these players, or occasionally bending the laws of the game by consistently fouling them. In the game between Brazil and Mexico, which included an astonishing 54 fouls (a tournament record), both star players, Neymar and Rodríguez, were subjected to frequent, 'rotational fouls' (four on the Colombian, six on the Brazilian). By rotating the players doing the fouling, the players from both teams completely avoided being yellow-carded for their fouls on both number 10s. Saving Games We could argue a case for the effectiveness of any player in any position – we did so above with Javier Mascherano and we could rightly note that it was Germany's collective brilliance all over the pitch that won them the entire competition (with their full-back-cum-deep-lying midfield player, Philipp Lahm, amongst their best). While we can note the effectiveness and worthiness of full-backs and midfielders, there is something more spectacular about players who score goals from very little, and also those who prevent goals when seemingly they should have no chance. The 2014 World Cup was notable for some exceptional goalkeeping performances. We spoke about Neuer, Lloris and Bravo (above) in a 'footballing' context, but we must also note the importance of keepers making excellent saves and preventing goals. As good as Costa Rica were tactically in Brazil, their goalkeeper Keylor Navas kept them in games with inspiring performances and saves. Arguably the most stand-out individual goalkeeping performance came from the U.S.A.'s Tim Howard in their Round of 16 game against Belgium. The American made a World Cup record-breaking 16 saves during the tie, and was therefore the most highly ranked goalkeeper in terms of shots saved. When we look away from the statistics, another goalkeeper, although not on the list below - Mexico's Guillermo Ochoa - made a string of exceptional saves in their Group A encounter against Brazil. 92 Players, Players, Players Top Ranking Goalkeepers – Number of Saves World Cup 2014 Ranking Goalkeeper Country Saves Conceded 1 Howard U.S.A. 27 6 2 Neuer Germany 24 4 3 Enyeama Nigeria 22 5 4 Navas Costa Rica 21 2 5 M'Bolhi Algeria 20 7 5 Benaglio Switzerland 20 7 5 Romero Argentina 20 4 8 Cillessen The Netherlands 17 4 8 Domínguez Ecuador 17 3 10 = Bravo / Ospina Chile / Colombia 16 4 Summary Tactical changes in recent times around formations and strategies have led to a change in the roles and responsibilities of players in different positions. Goalkeepers like Neuer, Lloris and Bravo are as comfortable with the ball at their feet as they are with the ball in their hands. Centre-backs that were traditionally big and strong are now technically proficient and join in attacks. Full-backs behave as wing-backs and are required to be dynamic and forward-thinking, as well as offering defensive balance. Deep-lying midfield players, whether playing as a single or double-pivot, contain players who are creative and not simply destructive. Midfield players have become more multi-purpose. They rotate positions; central players have the skills of wingers; wingers play in central areas; and we see number 10s playing wider and deeper than they traditionally have done. Strikers are required to contribute more than goals and cannot be 'just' goalscorers. Only three of the 2014's World Cup's Top Scorers were out-and-out strikers. 93 Chapter 5 Germany put their faith in a False 9 system which culminated in Mario Götze's World Cup winning goal. Games are frequently not won by tactics but by special attacking or defensive players. 94 6 Possession-Based Football "You want possession, you want to attack. Some teams can't or don't pass the ball. What are you playing for? What's the point? That's not football. Combine, pass, play. That's football" (Xavi Hernández) Since roughly the turn of the century, possession-based football was seen as the driving force behind all successful football – a clear absolute statement that is difficult to justify. Amidst football's admiration for keeping the ball, passing and probing - a search for solutions was taking place behind the scenes. The football fraternity was not just going to sit back and watch teams 'out-of-possession' turn to defeat. Like Sacchi's suggestion earlier in the book – with every revolution, there is a counter-revolution. While Spain had passed the world into submission in recent years, other coaches and teams were looking at a way of adapting or defeating the seemingly undefeatable model. With or Without the Ball? The theory that possession of the ball wins you games, and is the only way of winning games, is now in serious doubt. After the 2014 World Cup, it is clear that there are many ways of progressing through tournaments, whether this is through dominating the possession statistics, as Germany did (we will look at Germany's capabilities in possession more below), playing without the ball and counter-attacking, as the Netherlands did so well, or mixing and matching a possession-based and a defensive game, something that took Argentina to the final. (Incidentally, Argentina topped the possession statistics from the Group Stages, although against Iran - with the Middle Eastern side defending for their lives and Chapter 6 having the competition's lowest possession percentage rates - Messi and co. had almost 80% possession, an outlier that shot their average skywards). Of the four teams that took their place in the World Cup semi-final slots, all four stretched widely across the possession statistics table. While Germany's percentage of possession during the competition was second only to, you guessed it, Spain, The Netherlands came in at 20th, sandwiched between African duo, Nigeria and Ghana. Argentina and Brazil were ninth and eleventh respectively when it came to their possession percentages. Quarter-finalists Colombia (23rd) and Costa Rica (29th), plus Greece (25th) and Algeria (31st) who exited at the Round of 16 stage, failed to reach the top 20. Percentage Possession & Round of Elimination – Top 20 Rank Nation % Rank Nation % 1 Spain 61.4

Group 11 Brazil 53.3 Sem Fin 2 Germany 59.9 Winners 12 South Korea 52.5 Group 3 Japan* 59 Group 13 Belgium 52.3 Qtr Fin 4 Italy 57.6 Group 14 Russia 51.8 Group Poss 9 Argentina 5 France 56.5 Qtr Fin 15 Portugal 51.1 Group 6 Ivory Coast 55.8 Group 16 Croatia 50.6 Group 7 Bosnia 55.4 Group 17 Mexico 49.3 R.16 8 Chile 55.3 55 10 England 54.3 Round Elim. Round Poss Elim. 18 Switzerland 48.9 R.16 Nigeria 48.9 R.16 Netherlands R.16 Final 19 Group 20 48.5 Sem Fin *Japan's game against Greece pushed them higher in the possession standings as they had almost 75% of the ball against a Greek team content to squeeze a positive result playing without the ball. By analysing the possession statistics from the World Cup, we do see a shift in emphasis from how much possession a team keeps, to what they do when they are in possession – a form of quality over quantity. Of the top ten teams in terms of pass percentage, six of them exited at the group stage, three of which – Spain, Japan and Italy – make up the top four. Spain and Italy are amongst the teams highest in the table for percentage possession and pass success rate (85.5% and 89.1% respectively) yet they watched the Round of 16 Possession-Based Football 16 games from home, while Algeria, having completed only 68% of their passes and having attempted 800 fewer passes than Spain and 600 fewer than the Azzurri, not only went further in the competition, but went as close to anyone in overcoming the Germans by utilising a game plan that involved not having the ball. Perhaps the most telling stat of all was how The Netherlands stormed through their “group of death” despite having a total of only 39.5% of the possession – only bettered (if that is the correct word) by Iran's measly 30.4%. Furthermore, Diego Torres, a Spanish journalist who has written about José Mourinho's approach to big games when he was coach of Real Madrid, quoted the Portuguese as saying, “Whoever has the ball is more likely to make a mistake. Whoever renounces possession reduces the possibility of making a mistake.” The idea then of renouncing possession in an effort to win games is a growing one. Is the importance of possession therefore ‘dead’? Tiki-Taka The notion of ‘tiki-taka’ is a recent popularisation, but is not something that is ‘new’. It has been brought back into world focus by the success of Barcelona and Spain over the last decade or so. By definition the tactic involves a team dominating possession by using lots of short passing sequences and combinations. It demands a high level of technical expertise, not just to pass and receive, but to seek spaces, take risks in possession, and stick religiously to a philosophy that was ‘their way’. By dominating the ball, not only could the opposition not score, but it demanded that they stayed physically and mentally alert. If they could not do this, the technical dominance of the team playing tiki-taka would open them up and they could almost score at will. With the tiki-taka style, every footballer or wannabe footballer under five foot ten now had an argument as to why they could have a major place in the game, amongst clubs who insisted that size was the determining factor in becoming a successful player. We now routinely watch diminutive players like Xavi Hernández, Andreas Iniesta, David Silva and Juan Mata dominate games through technique and nous rather than brawn and brute force. Tiki-Taka 2014 The central aspects of tiki-taka are not new. Although it has been made popular in Spain through the rise of Pep Guardiola at Barcelona and the all-conquering national team under Luis Aragonés and Vicente del Bosque, the method has been around for much longer than this. The famous Dutch era in the 1970s, led by figures such as Rinus Michels and Johan Cruyff, popularised a type of Total Football, exporting it to Spain through the Dutch links to Barcelona. 97 Chapter 6 One of the World Cup 2014's pre-cursors was the question around whether tiki-taka had run its course. This followed comprehensive defeats of Barcelona and Bayern Munich in recent European Champions League tournaments. This judgment of the future of tiki-taka, it seemed, was made after just 45 minutes of football where the Spanish were dismantled in their opening Group B game – ironically against its creators, The Netherlands, whose possession statistics were virtually incomparable to the Spanish; effectively they won the game comprehensively without the ball. Spain v. The Netherlands Possession Statistics Spain Netherlands Goals 1 5 Attempts 10 14 % Possession 64.5% 35.5% Successful Passes 540 / 619 276 / 339 Pass % 87% 81% Attacking Third Passes 86 / 124 54 / 79 We need little more than a quick glance at the statistics from this game, one of the most iconic games of the 2014 World Cup. Spain comfortably dominated all of the possession stats – they had vastly more of the ball, played almost double the number of passes, had a higher pass success rate, and had more passes in attacking, scoring areas. Yet the Netherlands not only won the game convincingly, but had more attempts from less of the ball – prioritising the quality of what they did with the ball over the quantity of time they had it. Often we see teams with less possession win games – Switzerland beat Spain 1 – 0 in the 2010 World Cup with only 33% of the ball – but rarely do we see a team beaten so heavily having dominated possession so much. Upon Spain's exit from the World Cup, after two games, there came an extensive hysteria about how tiki-taka was “dead”. I even saw one picture that had circulated social media that showed a gravestone adorned with “tiki-taka”. Guardiola's spell as head coach of Barcelona saw the peak of the football world's admiration for the tiki-taka style of football. The gravestone pictured however seemed to poke fun at the perceived downfall of a style of play that had brought such success to Spain, rather than mourn it. Although Guardiola himself scoffs at the “tiki-taka” label, the thinkers, writers and bloggers of the game heralded it as 98 Possession-Based Football almost the only way the game could and should be played from hereon in. Barcelona and the Spanish national team, we were told, played the game “the right way”. Now, though, the same fraternity are telling us that this is dead. Maybe, however, as tactics inherently evolve, we need to have a clearer look at the bigger picture. It seems only the Spanish ideals of possession football are being criticised and eulogised. If the winners write football history, and this generation of Spanish players have undoubtedly been mass-winners, then their fall is documented almost as dramatically. What we must acknowledge, therefore, which we have done elsewhere in this book, is that it was sequences of short passes that created the penalty to allow Spain to take the lead against the Netherlands, and that short passes created a glorious opportunity for David Silva (which he missed) to put the Spanish 2 – 0 up. If they had gone 2 – 0 up we may well have witnessed another strong tournament from the Iberians. Tiki-taka is not dead – we may simply see it go into hibernation as other forms of game play begin to take the headlines. The German Revolution During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, a new breed of German football was introduced to the world. Young, versatile and clever players like Thomas Müller, Mesut Özil and Sami Khedira had taken the tournament by storm with their team's attacking fervour and incisive networks of passing and quick play – surprising even the German public whose expectations going to South Africa were low. A rebirth of German football has been a long time coming, forced into existence by tough Deutscher Fussball-Bund (German FA) regulations about the production of youth players and how club academies were to be operated. By the time these young players were professionals in the game they were a part of the principles and system below. 99 Chapter 6 Plan A, B, C, and D Certain comparisons can be made between the possession-style of the Germans during the World Cup, and that of the Spanish national team in their pomp. Both had goalkeepers that were keen to play out from the back and the intelligent Philip Lahm compared favourably to Sergio Busquets. They both had an abundance of multi-purpose, diminutive attacking midfield players, and their intent to dominate the ball and press opponents high up the pitch was key. The Germans, however, took their version of tiki-taka to new heights, extended its reach, and added power to its punch. While we have argued that the Spanish team's only recent evolution was the inclusion of an expert central striker in Diego Costa, the Germans were keen to be add many more strings to their bow, and put the “tactical variability” they wrote about into practice on the field of play. As a default they indeed played out from the back, with goalkeeper Neuer happy to play short to defenders to start attacks from the back. When required, though, they were also happy to play direct football into front players like Müller and Miroslav Klose. They pressed and kept a very high defensive line against Algeria in the Round of 16, but were happy to let the French have the ball in their quarter-final – it is unlikely Spain would ever have seen a game out at 1 – 0 up like the Germans did against France. As Bayern Munich expert, Louis Lancaster would say, they took Spain's Plan A, and added a plan B, C, and D. 100 Possession-Based Football Germany Possession Statistics Per Game 101 Chapter 6 As much as they dominated possession in Brazil, their version of possession football was very much based on passing the ball, rather than dribbling. Much of their success has since been attributed to their data collection software that allowed them to get their average possession time down from 3.4 seconds in 2010 to 1.1 seconds per player - thus reducing their use of dribblers (Germany were ranked 27th of the 32 teams at the World Cup in terms of successful dribbles). The German side did not insist on keeping possession, as the Spanish do. They thoroughly dominated games against teams who allowed them possession – against Ghana, the U.S.A. and Algeria – and they also did so in the final against the Argentinians. Even during these games, where they had 60% plus of possession, they did not dominate on the scoreline – in fact three of those games were level after 90 minutes and a single goal separated them and the U.S.A. in the final group game. Their biggest wins however were resounding – a 4 – 0 win against 10-man Portugal and their famous 7 – 1 demolition of hosts Brazil. Their closest game possession-wise was a close scoring, but comfortable, win over another possession-based team, France. Playing Out From the Back Possession-based teams are characterised by a tactic of playing short to middle distance passes, and starting attacks by playing from their goalkeeper, through their defensive players, then midfielders, before working the ball into attacking areas to score goals. Below we will look at the manner in which this is done, and how this philosophy can evolve and change completely mid-game. France The French, through goalkeeper Hugo Lloris had a strong philosophy of playing out from the back and through the thirds of the pitch at the 2014 World Cup. Their opponents, as much as any other team in Brazil, varied in terms of quality and reputation. France resoundingly beat minnows Honduras in Group E and exited the competition to eventual champions Germany. Along the way they played competent teams in Ecuador, Nigeria and Switzerland. Although their philosophy remained similar, they often changed tack and how they played out from goalkeeper Lloris. Once Lloris was in possession, whether through a back-pass, goal-kick, or kick-out, the team would form a shape aiming to use as much of the pitch as possible. The full-backs, normally Evra and Debuchy, would place themselves in wide positions and move towards the halfway line. France's central defenders, normally Varane and Sakho would go towards the corners of the penalty area to receive. Once they did receive, the deep-lying midfielder Cabaye would drop into the space between them to offer support. Their main striker, either Benzema or Giroud (the player who 102 Possession-Based Football played in this position had a big bearing on the decisions Lloris made) would play as far forward as possible. Valbuena would keep some width on the right, while whoever played from the left would tuck into spaces infield. The two advancing midfielders, normally Pogba and Matuidi would also push forward to allow more space for the defenders and Cabaye to receive. France Playing Out From Lloris (Honduras) Against Honduras, in a game that saw the South Americans reduced to 10 men in the first half, France's game plan of playing out from Lloris through the two French centre-backs was noticeable, and was something that remained a constant throughout their campaign. Rarely did Lloris choose to play out through his full-backs or through his deep-lying midfielder, Yohan Cabaye. Once the centre-backs were in possession, they would feed mainly Cabaye who would play forward or offer diagonal passes to build their attacks. 103 Chapter 6 France Playing Out From Lloris (Germany) Against Germany, we again see the frequency of Lloris' distribution to the central defenders, but at 1 – 0 down and chasing the game, Deschamps changed the team shape and added attackers Loïc Rémy and Olivier Giroud to the mix (both in black in the diagram as the substitutes were not straight swaps position-wise). Once both these men entered the game after 73 and 85 minutes respectively, and with the French still trailing by a goal, Lloris began playing more directly than usual - into these replacement front players. 104 Possession-Based Football France Playing Out From Lloris (Switzerland) Giroud's presence on the pitch tended to change the approach from Lloris, or at least he varied his distribution a lot more. While playing into Varane and Sakho (who was replaced by Koscielny) was a consistent theme, the French number one also played more directly into Giroud, much more than he would do when Benzema played as a central striker. Direct Football Today's culture of analysing football has marginalized direct football as a legitimate match tactic. We deem those who look to go from back to front quickly in uncompromising terms, because of a perceived lack of technique, flair and imagination. To praise it is almost slanderous. In the popular mindset, direct football is seen as a defender or a goalkeeper lofting the ball forward either in behind defenders or towards a tall, big, strong striker. We saw, above, from the frequency of passes from Lloris into Giroud that even possession-based teams will – depending on the situation - play directly. This may be because they are losing and chasing a game, or because it plays to the strengths of a team-mate like Giroud. Or, of course, direct play can be used to vary a short-passing approach. The Spanish, for example, have been accused of being slow in evolving their possession-based style and that it has arguably become quite predictable. 105 Chapter 6 Direct football, however, may be this and more. It may be a midfield player running directly with the ball, or using the space in behind the opposition to launch quick counter-attacks. It is not the intent here to defend or overly-criticise teams that use a direct style of football. At the top level of the game, like at a World Cup, a coach's job is to devise a way of playing that utilises a team's strengths, masks their weaknesses, and ultimately wins games. What disappoints football enthusiasts is when technically able teams opt to play unimaginative, direct football, rather than a style where they play through the thirds of the pitch and offer a more creative approach when attempting to win games. Effective Direct Football Although direct play has a tarnished reputation, it can be an effective tactic. As much as we praise the Germans for their possession statistics at the 2014 World Cup, arguably their greatest strength was their ability to mix this with direct football, counter-attacking football, and effectiveness at set-plays. When we analysed the Dutch performance, above, against the Spanish, we also noted their contentment with playing directly in behind the Spanish centre-backs or by playing longer passes on top of Piqué and Ramos as a clear tactic to put the duo under pressure. Direct from Belgium The 2014 World Cup was the stage where Belgium was supposed to announce itself to the world as a major power, and a worthy contender for future international tournaments. Much of the build-up to the competition saw their development programmes highlighted for producing a raft of technically excellent players, based around their favoured 4-3-3 / 4-2-3-1 formation. With all the attacking options available to them, using a 4-2-3-1 was not a surprise, and even less of a surprise considering how they modelled their whole development programme around the system. One could not help but be a little disappointed in the Belgians and how they utilised their array of available attacking talent. Goalkeeper Courtois was happy to play direct, and if they got into trouble, such as in their opening game against Algeria, they resorted to using the height and heading power of Manchester United's Marouane Fellaini (brought on from the substitute's bench). After their early scare against Algeria, when they had to come from 1-0 down to win 2-1 late in the game, Fellaini became a constant starter in the tournament, and as we see from the graphic below, central to their attacking strategy. It was only in extra-time of their Last 16 106 Possession-Based Football encounter against the USA that they really began to take risks, although the open nature of the game assisted them in doing so, and the game would have undoubtedly been finished long before the extra period, but for a string of fine saves from American goalkeeper Tim Howard. Courtois Direct into Fellaini v. Russia From Belgium's second game against Russia onwards, they began to utilise the height of Marouane Fellaini much more. With goalkeeper Courtois in possession, they pushed the number 8 into a much higher position, playing high and direct into him to win headers. The forward players around him would look to pick up the second balls. Although unimpressive aesthetically, this tactic helped Belgium to go further in the tournament than maybe their performances warranted. Summary With the success of the ultra possession-based Spanish national team, other coaches began looking at ways of adapting and defeating the model. 107 Chapter 6 There is notable evidence from the 2014 World Cup that more games are being won, and more teams

are being successful, without the need to thoroughly dominate possession. Only four of the top 10 possession teams made it beyond the group stage. The Netherlands and Algeria made it impressively through their group stages with less possession than their opposition. The Spanish Tiki-taka is not dead, it may well just go into hibernation. Germany took Spain's possession model and improved it – adding further strings to its bow. France used playing out from their goalkeeper as a tactic, but did play direct at times, especially when Giroud was on the pitch. Although direct football is popularly criticised, it can be a very effective tactic. Belgium's game plan at the 2014 World Cup was based around playing direct from back to front and utilising the big, strong Marouane Fellaini. 108 7 Attack, Attack, Attack! “The trend is to play positively and do everything to win a game rather than merely ‘not lose’. Pushing up the field to score was considered more important than playing for safety. Their [the teams] attempts and desire to score were more important than focusing on defensive safety.” (2014 FIFA World Cup Technical Report) From the outset of this book we have looked at the formations and shapes of many of the teams that took part in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. These formations and approaches, of course, shaped the attacking and defensive strategies (and transition phases – we will look at these momentarily) of the teams that employed them. When I roughly outlined the chapters of this book before writing it, and prior to the World Cup itself, I placed the defending chapter before the attacking one. Not that I felt that defending would have greater importance, it just seemed like the right place to start. A handful of games into the competition, however, things changed! The FIFA document quoted above showed that attacking football and “risk taking” were a major trend seen in the tournament, much to the organisation's relief after the 2010 competition was remembered for being quite a dull, reserved affair. The 2014 World Cup saw attacking play catapulted to the fore, in particular during the early group stage matches. These sets of games, compared to their 2010 counterparts, were largely based on teams playing with an attacking intent. The play in South Africa, in 2010, was pretty negative overall by comparison. Throughout this Chapter 7 chapter, we will have a look at the goals, how they were scored, and how teams ‘transitioned’ into attack. Introducing Transitions Traditionally, and in some quarters this still exists, we have looked at football as having two phases. The first being when the team is in possession, and secondly when the team is out of possession. Football was simply defined as attacking and defending, when you either had the ball, or you did not. When we look deeper, however, we find that in-between these moments of possession, there exists third and fourth phases of the game. They are at the immediate points when possession changes hands – or the ‘transition’ phase. The team that has just lost the ball is in defensive transition, where their shape, tactics and outlook must change immediately from attacking to defending. The team that has just won the ball is in attacking transition, where their focus changes from defending to attacking in one moment. Transitions are now seen as so important that certain football coaching schools will openly state that the whole game is based around how a team deals with the 110 Attack, Attack, Attack! moments when possession shifts from one team to another. In the following chapter we will look at defensive transition, and in this current chapter, along with analysing the attacking trends in Brazil, we will look at how teams approached attacking transition. Goals, Goals, Goals Data from the 2014 World Cup shows a substantial number of positive statistics in relation to goals scored. There are some straightforward statistics that we will draw on here – like how many goals were scored, those scored by substitutes, and what time of the game the ball was put into the net. Other stats, though, are a little more unclear – to the point where various sources differ in the information they produce. For example, whoscored.com quotes there having been 35 goals from set-pieces, whereas FIFA's official stats claimed 38. Differences in data from several sources also include different interpretations of goals from ‘open play’ and what constitutes a ‘counter-attack’. For consistency then, we will analyse the goal-scoring statistics that are presented in FIFA's Official Technical Report and Statistics and also the research from Sports Path's World Cup Technical Report 2014 (unless otherwise stated), although both reports contain their own variance. Both reports incidentally are available online. Number of Goals Overall the tournament saw the joint-highest number of goals ever scored in a single World Cup Finals with 171. This equalled the number scored four tournaments ago when France were victorious on home soil in 1998. That tournament produced an average of 2.67 goals per game (previous World Cups that contained fewer teams have averaged more goals per game, but this is the highest in the 32-team format). 171 goals equates to a scoring rate of just over 13% of shots on goal, which was also the highest percentage at a World Cup. More goals (32) were scored by substitutes in Brazil than at any other World Cup, the most famous of which was Mario Götze's celebrated winner in the Final at the Maracanã. Incidentally, Götze was also the first substitute to score a World Cup winning goal. The previous record of goals scored by replacements was 23 in Germany in 2006. There may be several reasons for the proliferation of substitutes' goals in Brazil, none of which can be substantiated tangibly or with a neat statistic to prove it. Modern footballers are now more comfortable with big squads at club level, meaning the role of substitute is more readily accepted and they enter games focused 111 Chapter 7 and able to make a significant contribution. Another possible reason is that coaches made good decisions and could identify the individual who could impact upon games best (again this is rather difficult to quantify). Comparing Brazil 2014 and South Africa 2010 Attacking Statistics Brazil 2014 South Africa 2010 Number of goals scored (total) 171 145 Number of goals scored (group games) 136 101 Number of goals scored (knockout) 35 44 Average goals per game 2.67 2.27 Number of matches that ended scoreless 5 7 Number of matches with a single goal 10 17 Goals scored by substitutes 32 15 The data above shows quite clearly how there was a greater focus on attacking play in Brazil, which will surprise nobody who watched both tournaments. What is useful to note, however, is how the early 2014 games started with attacking intent, but became cagier as the tournament progressed. It is likely that the pressure of knock-out football – where one mistake can eliminate you – was greater than for group games, where you typically have other games to rectify any mistakes. Timings of Goals In traditional punditry, not a lot of focus is given to the time that goals were scored, unless they are scored exceptionally early or exceptionally late in games. This, maybe, is as much to do with the drama of the goals or the significance of what may be a last-gasp winning goal or equaliser. The USA's time at the competition was at risk of being undone when Portugal equalised in the last minute of the game to earn a 2-2 draw, a late goal that threatened to ruin the US's progression in the tournament. In the Switzerland-Ecuador match, an injury-time winner from Haris Seferović saw the Swiss come from one down to beat the Ecuadorians. Greece forced extra-time 1 While we wondered how Dutch goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen would react following his substitution immediately prior to their penalty shoot-out with Costa Rica, he was actually the first player to jump from the sidelines to celebrate their shoot-out victory. 112 Attack, Attack, Attack! against the ten men of Costa Rica with an injury-time Sokratis Papastathopoulos equaliser, having piled pressure on the tiring Costa Ricans. Götze's winning goal against Argentina was scored in extra-time with only seven minutes remaining. As mentioned previously, heartbreakingly for the Argentine side – it was the first time during the whole competition that they fell behind in a match. World Cup 2014 Time Breakdown of Goals Scored 33 35 30 25 20 15 10 5 0 29 25 24 18 19 12 3 3 5 Minute 1 - Minute 16 - 30 Minute 31 - 45 1st Half Add. Time Minute 46 - 60 Minute 61 - 75 Minute 76 - 90 2nd Half Add. Time 1st Half Extra- Time 2nd Half Extra- Time As the chart above shows, a huge percentage of goals were scored in the last fifteen minutes (plus additional time) of games (36 goals, 21% of the total number). Extending that time to reflect the last 30 minutes of games and extra-time, we find that 82 (48% of total) goals were scored in that period. There are several reasons why goals are so frequent in latter periods. From a tactical point of view, teams may take more risks in an effort to win the game, or indeed will commit more resources to attacking in an attempt to equalise. Physically and mentally, teams may also begin to tire and consequentially lose concentration in these periods. Having defended so resolutely against Argentina, Iran were eventually beaten by a 94th minute Lionel Messi winner (as examined in a previous chapter). Conversely, both the USA and Algeria scored late extra-time consolation goals when 2 – 0 down to Belgium and Germany respectively. We can deduce that both European teams became complacent, allowing their opponents to score when the match result was virtually decided. It is therefore important that, even late in games, even top teams must be physically fit to ensure they can defend, attack, and transition successfully. A high level of physical fitness also helps teams remain mentally fit and retain high levels of concentration and focus. 113 Chapter 7 Goals Win Games Those driven by statistics in football will point to certain trends (note the use of the