THE QUESTION:

THE GUARDIAN'S REGULAR IN-DEPTH LOOK AT FOOTBALL TACTICS

By Jonathan Wilson

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THE QUESTION: POSITION OR POSSESSION?

THE FLAW OF SPAIN'S TIKI-TAKA IS THAT A TEAM CAN CONTROL POSSESSION OR IT CAN CONTROL POSITION, BUT IT CAN'T DO BOTH

Andrés Iniesta runs into trouble during the game against Italy, where Spain once again were the proactive side. Photograph: Alex Grimm/Getty Images

When Herbert Chapman took charge of Northampton Town in 1907, he realised that dominating the ball was not in itself enough to win matches. What was more important was where you had it and in what circumstances. Accordingly he had his side sit deep, looking to spring forward and attack the space behind their opponents.

He was the first theorist of counterattacking football, a principle he went on to employ with great success at Huddersfield and Arsenal. His style wasn't popular. Many thought his sides were simply lucky; others thought to play like that was unmanly, somehow improper, a betrayal of the spirit of the game. Chapman's revelation continues to shape football today.

A clear pattern has emerged from the first round of group games at Euro 2012. Holland against Denmark, Germany against Portugal, Spain against Italy, Ireland against Croatia, France against England, the first half of Poland against Greece: each have featured one proactive team taking the game to the opposition; one reactive team sitting deep with compact lines absorbing the pressure, trying to restrict the opposition and looking to score either from counter-attacks or set-plays.

Usually, particularly in a tournament in which the quality is as uniform as the European Championship, most teams would hover somewhere around the middle of the spectrum between proactivity and reactivity: what has been striking here is how readily each team has accepted its role.

TACKLING TIKI-TAKA

The tiki-taka of Spain and Barcelona is perhaps the cause. Against proactivity of that magnitude – even when used defensively – there is little the opposition can do other than to sit back and try to close the space. Some have tried to take Barcelona on, but the tendency has been for them to flare briefly and then crash, as Espanyol and Shakhtar Donetsk, among others, have found. Chile came closest at international level – for their coach at the 2010 World Cup, Marcelo Bielsa, is the high priest of proactive football. They were troubling Spain despite the dismissal of Marco Estrada when it became apparent that a 2-1 defeat for Chile took both sides through, at which time the game fizzled away.

It may be grating to hear every defensive display being described as a team "doing a Chelsea" – defending deep in compact lines has been going on since long before April – but it may be that Chelsea's displays against two highly proactive sides in Barcelona and Bayern Munich (who had the first and second best highest possession and pass-completion stats in any of the five top European leagues) confirmed in the minds of others that reactive football can be successful. (The claim defensive football is catenaccio is equally as annoying for a host of reasons, but let's start with the fact that catenaccio in its true form is funded on man-to-man not zonal marking and every side at this tournament is playing zonally).

It's not even that the teams who played reactively were particularly negative. Italy were extremely lively once in possession. With Michael Krohn-Dehli swooping in from the left Denmark posed a persistent threat. England even, in the first half at least, had patches in which they moved the ball neatly in the French half. Reactive football can be thrilling, as Germany, who have become much more proactive over the past two years, showed at the last World Cup (actually Germany might have intended to be more proactive; it's just that against Australia, England and Argentina they faced opponents who defended so stupidly against them that it made sense to sit back and hit them on the break). What has been exposed over the past few months, though, is the flaw of tiki-taka, which is that a team can control possession or it can control position, but it can't do both. Or rather, can't guarantee doing both.

This isn't to say that tiki-taka is finished, for all styles of play have their weakness. But for a couple of years it seemed invincible. What after all could you do when the ball was being pinged about midfield at 25 passes a minute? Real Madrid under José Mourinho tried unsettling Barcelona by pressing, but that left space behind the back four. He tried spoiling, but Barcelona are adept at making sure referees know when they have been fouled.

And so finally he went back to what he had done with a far inferior side at Inter; go into the bunker. Chelsea did it in an even more extreme way, working on the principle that the ball will hurt you, but only in certain areas. England restricted Belgium almost entirely to long-range efforts and got away with one when Guillaume Gillet's 25-yard half-volley clipped the post. They restricted France a little less successfully, but still kept it mainly to long shots; it's just that Samir Nasri was good enough to fire one of his efforts inside the post.

USA did it in the Confederations Cup in 2009, giving Spain the flanks, essentially gambling that Jay DeMerit would be able to dominate Fernando Torres in the air and that the rest of Spain's forwards and midfielders were too short really to threaten. Notably when Germany did finally break through against Portugal it was from a header: one of the assets Mario Gomez brings is his aerial ability – and a powerful centre-forward is a weapon that will make opponents wary of defending too deep.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

Essentially a team in establishing its philosophy must pick a point between two extremes. It can try to control the ball, in which case it is forced to an extent to play where the opponent will allow it. Or it can decide to defend its box by packing men in its defensive third in which case it will probably have to accept it will not see much of the ball. The former is proactivity, the latter reactivity. Proactive sides can defend by cycling the ball away from opponents; a reactive team will attack by looking to lure the opposition on and then hitting the space behind it. Rinus Michels's Ajax, Arrigo Sacchi's Milan and Pep Guardiola's Barcelona were overtly proactive. Chapman's Arsenal, Helenio Herrera's Internazionale and Roberto Di Matteo's Chelsea were overtly reactive. Most sides opt for a compromise somewhere in between the two extremes.

"Great teams all have the same characteristic of wanting to control the pitch and the ball," Sacchi said (and I thank Paolo Bandini for putting the question to him). "Then, the players need to know when they are better off marking, and when they should be occupying space. And the point of reference should never be their opponent, but their team-mate. Football is very complicated. When you are on the attack you need to keep the right distances, have the right timing, the right methods for losing a marker. If you don't have this, the football you produce will never become that harmony. Football is a sport for teams

that are in harmony. Very often teams aren't teams at all, they are just groups. And they struggle to move together.

"The desire might be there, but that is not enough. The magic that transforms a group into a team, is the play. A system of play that has to include everyone in both the attacking and the defensive phase. And in this context, it is clear that whoever is closest will have the most solutions. And by close I mean a compact team. In the defensive phase it means that you will you will burn less energy, because 10-metre runs don't wear you out like 20-, 30-, 40-metre runs.

"The team will get there first, it will be calmer because it can apply pressing, have more collaboration. And during an attacking phase it will have lots of alternatives because everyone can move. This is the difference between a very organic team, a team with great understanding, and a team that has a collective ... many teams have soloists, and these break the harmony. Barcelona don't have soloists, we didn't have soloists, Ajax didn't have soloists. We had people who played with the team, for the team, all over the pitch, for the whole game."

The great reactive teams, of course, also defend as a unit. They also have a harmony. It may even be that, as Sacchi suggests, the great proactive teams are greater than the great reactive teams (depending, of course, how you define greatness: Gipo Viani's Milan, a reactive side, for instance, won three scudetti to the one of Sacchi's Milan, but are remembered less fondly even by those with an acute sense of the game's history).

And Sacchi is talking of great teams. His Milan might have been able to defend with Marco van Basten and Ruud Gullit coming deep, to within 20 or 30 yards of their own box, but only because his side was technically proficient enough not to lose the ball if forced to play a string of short passes when breaking. Roy Hodgson's England or Morten Olsen's Denmark, probably rightly, go for something simpler and more direct.

The other point, surely, is that at least some of the options players need in the attacking phase must be forwards. Both Barcelona against Chelsea and Spain against Italy experienced a number of instances when a player received the ball 30 yards from goal and had only sideways or backwards passes available; what is needed then is players to make runs from deeper to burst beyond the line of the ball. That's precisely how Cesc Fábregas won the penalty against Chelsea and precisely how he scored his goal against Italy. The introduction of Fernando Torres, meanwhile, while it might not have done much for Spain's harmony, certainly disrupted Italy, not least because it made Daniele De Rossi attempt to defend.

There's an irony there, of course, that it may be better for a proactive side to introduce a player that disrupts its own harmony because of the greater disruption he causes to the harmony of a reactive opponent. On the other side of the equation, Chris Waddle, perhaps remembering his own days with England when Bobby Robson repeatedly instructed him to hold his position rather than go wandering as he would at club level, commented on Monday that England had held their shape "too well" – that they were, in other words, too rigid to be creative.

That's the balance all teams must strike. Football is a game of relatives not absolutes: strategy is determined not merely by the resources available but also the opponent to be faced (and external factors such as climatic and pitch conditions). Had England been less rigid, they would have been more likely to score but they might also have been even more likely to concede. Had Spain introduced Torres earlier – or Fernando Llorente for that matter – it might have disrupted their possession-controlling rhythms but made them more likely to score. That's also why sides who eschew compromise and pursue their ideals to the maximum, such as Barcelona or Sacchi's Milan, are so memorable; it's very rare and very difficult. With Bielsa at times (and perhaps Guardiola and Arsène Wenger as well) the sense is that he can be idealistic to the point of fundamentalism.

Harmony is key, but only in relation to the harmony of the opponent.

THE QUESTION: HOW DID BAYERN MUNICH OUTFLANK REAL MADRID?

BY TAKING FLIGHT DOWN THE WINGS BAYERN PREYED ON RONALDO'S POOR TRACKING AND EXPOSED A BACKLINE NOT USED TO DEFENDING

Cristiano Ronaldo, right, struggled to make an impact as Bayern Munich's full-backs advanced at every opportunity. Photograph: Carl Recine/Action Images

There can be tactical errors and miscalculations, of course, but it's rare that things are as black and white as that. More often there are options, choices of emphasis and at times what is usually a strength can become a weakness. Even the very best players can, on occasion, become a liability.

Cristiano Ronaldo doesn't defend. He doesn't track his full-back. In most games, Real Madrid have enough possession that he doesn't need to. It could even be argued that he shouldn't: better to keep himself fresh and alert to produce the explosive bursts that have brought so many goals. But that unwillingness or inability presents coaches with a dilemma.

When winger or wide forward meets attacking full-back, there is no right or wrong way of dealing with it. When England beat Croatia 4-1 in a World Cup qualifier in Zagreb in 2008, for instance, Fabio Capello's solution to the threat of Croatia's attacking left side was to station Theo Walcott high up the pitch. Danijel Pranjic, the Croatia left-back, happily surged past him again and again, and again and again England broke and played the ball into the space behind the full-back. Walcott ended up with a hat-trick and by the end Pranjic was the picture of confusion, caught between the two stools of overlapping Ivan Rakitic and sitting back to defend.

But that doesn't mean that the best way to counter an attacking full-back is always to play the opposing winger high up the pitch. Manchester United deployed David Beckham high on the right away to Real Madrid in the Champions League in 2003 and he barely touched the ball, Roberto Carlos zooming past him again and again, helping Real to a 3-1 win. It helps, of course, that Walcott is so much quicker than Beckham was, that Roberto Carlos had the chance get back, but really it comes down to possession. In Zagreb, England had enough of the ball to take advantage of the space behind the full-back; in Madrid, United didn't. But then, one of the reasons Real Madrid dominated possession that night was precisely that Roberto Carlos gave them an extra man in midfield.

Ronaldo frequently poses this problem for coaches. In 2009, for instance, he had such a poor game tracking the left-back Aly Cissokho in a 2-2 draw against Porto at Old Trafford that Sir Alex Ferguson switched him to the centre for the return, using Wayne Rooney as the wide man. Ronaldo scored the only goal of the game. In the final against Chelsea that year, he was again deployed on the left. He scored the opening goal of the game, but from around the half-hour mark he was dominated by Michael Essien, whose untracked surge and shot just before half-time led to Frank Lampard's equaliser.

In the 2010 Champions League final, José Mourinho, then the coach of Internazionale, neutralised the link-up between Arjen Robben and Philipp Lahm, which is so vital to Bayern's play, by sitting Cristian Chivu deep at left-back and having Goran Pandev shuttle back from the left side of the 4-2-3-1. On Tuesday night, there was no similar option available to him. Lahm did his defensive job well – although he had less to do against Ronaldo than anybody could reasonably have expected – but was also arguably Bayern's most effective attacking player. Not only did he put in a number of dangerous crosses, but the threat of his overlaps also created doubt in the mind of the Real left-back Fábio Coentrão, who was left exposed and had an awful game.

That was, presumably, a risk Mourinho was aware of and accepted, and the number of long diagonal passes Xabi Alonso hit in behind the full-backs suggested a side trying to hit precisely the space England exploited in Zagreb – or at the very least to make Lahm and David Alaba aware of the danger of pushing too high up the pitch. Alaba, noticeably, got forward far less than Lahm. That may be because he is only 19 and, as yet, nothing like the player Lahm is; or it may be that Angel Di María is a very good tracker of a full-back – the one real surge forward the Austria international had came after Di María had moved into the middle and Ronaldo had switched to that flank.

Yet in the first quarter of an hour or so, until the incident in which Franck Ribéry found that a brush of his chest caused temporary paralysis of his legs (a moment that highlighted what we already knew: Ribéry is a serial feigner and Sergio Ramos is vulnerable when he's actually asked to defend), Real Madrid seemed not merely comfortable but in control.

The issue was possession. By leaving out Thomas Müller for Toni Kroos, Bayern's 4-2-3-1 was equipped with two relatively mobile midfield holding players plus, in Kroos, an attacking central midfielder more than capable of dropping back. By contrast, Mesut Ozil, playing in the centre of the trident for Real, tended to stay high, leaving Luiz Gustavo free – at least until Mourinho switched him and Di María midway through the first half; he changed them back at half-time. That meant Bayern were able to pressure Alonso, who looked exhausted, and Sami Khedira, which explains both the number of long balls they hit (not all of them calculated diagonals behind the full-back) and why Real Madrid's passing was so unusually sloppy. With Ozil, Ronaldo and Karim Benzema staying high, Bayern were able to pin Real Madrid back for long periods.

Bastian Schweinsteiger, just feeling his way back from injury, didn't have his best night and he too misplaced a number of passes, but he still had a positive impact in ensuring Bayern never became broken, as they had done when he wasn't on the field, against Borussia Dortmund last week. He was also caught in possession in the buildup to Real Madrid's equaliser. That was, admittedly, following a free-kick rather than from open play, but it still highlighted the danger of Bayern's midfield pushing up, leaving the back four unprotected – again we see the difficulty of assessing "good" and "bad": the tactic won Bayern the game but it cost them a goal.

In the end, it was basic defensive errors that cost Real Madrid. Ramos failed to deal with a corner, presenting Ribéry with the opener – and very nearly laid on a goal for Mario Gomez in similar fashion in the second half. Then Coentrão was beaten far too easily by Lahm for the second, while neither Alonso

nor Ramos made any move to intercept the full-back's cross at the near post. This, of course, is the danger for sides used to dominating; when they do meet a resistant opponent, they've forgotten how to defend.

Had Coentrão or Ramos had better games, Real probably would have held on. But the issue of how Bayern were able to force those errors was tactical: they won the battle on the flanks, particularly their right, and they were able to do that because Schweinsteiger's advanced position (despite his errors) and Kroos's deep position gave them control in the middle. Mourinho claimed that Bayern's winner came "out of context" but that was true only in the sense it should have arrived earlier.

THE QUESTION: WHAT MARKS PEP GUARDIOLA OUT AS A GREAT COACH?

THE BARCELONA COACH TINKERS AND REVISES, RECOGNISING THAT WHAT IS GOOD NOW WILL NOT NECESSARILY BE GOOD IN A YEAR'S TIME

Pep Guardiola is determined to prevent Barcelona ever becoming predictable or complacent. Photograph: Gustau Nacarino/Reuters

There is a strangely persistent idea that Pep Guardiola is not a great coach, that a great side somehow fell together beneath him for which he bears about as much responsibility for it as, say, the man who turns the lights on at the Louvre does for the Mona Lisa. He has fine players of course, but you wonder how many of them would truly prosper away from the Camp Nou. Even the greatest of them, Lionel Messi, looks a different player when he turns out for Argentina.

Barcelona are a triumph less of the players than of a philosophy, one laid down 40 years ago and refined to near-perfection in the modern era. Crucially, Guardiola is not a blind devotee. He does not simply write the same names on the team sheet and expect them to go out and do the same thing over and over again. He tinkers, revises and, like a watchful gardener, seems engaged in a constant battle against the entropic imperative.

What marks Guardiola out is his awareness of the future, not in the sense of positioning himself for a move to another club or even in terms of youth development – although he is clearly acutely aware of that – but in terms of understanding the sweep of history, of recognising that what is good now will not

necessarily be good in a year or two's time. Dress it as the lesson of Bela Guttmann ("the third year is fatal") or Karl Marx ("all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" *), but that awareness marks Guardiola as a true dynastician. Not for him the club-hopping of Guttmann or even José Mourinho: he wants to erect an edifice for the ages, something, paradoxically, strengthened by his refusal to commit to more than a 12-month rolling contract; he will not become a weary leader, governing by convention, but leaves open a perpetual route to step down for a fresher man when the occasion calls for it. (As examples from Tony Blair to Abdoulaye Wade indicate, though, leaving the door open does not necessarily mean he will still be willing to step through it when the time is right.)

In football terms, Guardiola is clearly determined to prevent Barcelona ever becoming complacent or predictable, to make sure they always have a second line of attack. The signing of Zlatan Ibrahimovic was intended to give them height, the option of going aerial if the usual tiki-taka didn't deliver and, when that didn't quite work, he began experimenting with the back three.

What is interesting about that is the way that it has changed the mindset. Barcelona often don't play a back three or a back four, but a hybrid – a back three and a half, perhaps. In the *Clásico*, that meant Sergio Busquets dropping deep to become an extremely deep-lying playmaker.On Tuesday, against Milan, it meant Dani Alves being given freedom to charge down the right flank, operating most of the time as an attacking midfielder. When they use a back four it is with the knowledge of a back three; when they play a back three it is with the knowledge of a four. It is neither one thing nor the other, but both simultaneously, gloriously protean and so are all but impossible to counter.

Given Milan's narrowness, the odd thing is that Alves didn't operate higher in the first leg as well, but perhaps the issue there was that Barça became a little narrow themselves. That is always the danger (admittedly not an especially big one) when Messi starts in a nominal right-sided role, as Argentina have often found; when Uruguay frustrated them in the quarter-final of the Copa América last summer after having Diego Pérez sent off, it was by vacating their left flank and trusting Messi to wander into congested areas.

The surprising introduction of Isaac Cuenca, who has started only nine league games, seemed specifically designed to ensure Barça retained their width: he is a natural winger – whereas Pedro and Christian Tello are modern wide forwards prone to cutting infield – and his value was almost entirely tactical. With Alves pushing so high that Barcelona's shape often resembled a 3-3-4, Messi and Cesc Fábregas drifting vaguely in central areas, it meant that Milan's two full-backs were kept wide, stretching the back four and so increasing the possibility of spaces opening up.

The other effect of Alves playing so high was that it took Barcelona as a whole farther up the pitch. Busquets, who so often drops in to become an additional centre-back, played in a much more orthodox holding midfield role, pushing far higher than is usual. To an extent he was able to do so because of Robinho's reluctance to track back – non-tracking forwards have been a feature of Milan for years and have arguably played some part in their exits from the Champions League in each of the past five seasons, most particularly against Manchester United in 2010.

That, of course, is something of a gamble because it means that the forward can be left free if the opponent breaks quickly, as happened when Robinho, dropping away from the defensive line, found space to initiate the move that led to Milan's equaliser (although the person most at fault for that goal, of course, was Javier Mascherano, inexplicably 10 yards deeper than his team-mates and so playing Antonio Nocerino onside as Ibrahimovic picked him out with a finely weighted through ball). It could be argued that, with a one-goal lead, Barça had no need to be playing in such an offensive way, but that would be to deny what they are and what has made them so great.

Yet while they were better than Milan and deserved winners – the ludicrous "debate" over the second penalty notwithstanding – Barça were not great on Tuesday. They were adequate. They did enough, but not a huge amount more. They could have won by much more – Messi missed two decent early chances and Christian Abbiati made an excellent save to deny Xavi in the first half – and that Milan over four games against Barça this season lost by an aggregate score of only 8-5 was largely down to greater productivity in front of goal (Barça had 67 shots in the four games, Milan only 20), but Barça were far from

their most fluent, something borne out by the fact they had only 61% possession, as opposed to the 65-70% they commonly enjoy.

To an extent that is credit to Milan. Their midfield four stayed narrow, worked diligently and even, when they had the ball, caused problems as Clarence Seedorf and Nocerino attacked the space afforded them on the flanks. With Fábregas dropping back, it was effectively four on four in the middle, which, even for a side with Barcelona's close technical skills, makes for a congested game, especially when the use of a false nine denies them the option of bypassing the midfield by going long. Hércules, similarly, played a flattened midfield diamond when, 53 games ago, they were the last side to beat Barça at the Camp Nou.

Fatigue, physical and mental, may be a factor – which must be a concern for Spain in the summer – but it's important to keep these things in context. Barcelona have beaten a decent Milan side 3-1 on aggregate with barely a scare; it's a measure of how good they are, how high expectations, that that should bring a slight sense of disappointment.

Yet for Guardiola the relative lack of fluency must be troublesome. Is it a blip, the sort that is inevitable, or is it an indicator of longer-term decay? An awareness of entropy and putting in place measures to combat it is one thing; winning that battle is something else.

**Given that Marx categorised the "bourgeois epoch" as being distinguished by "everlasting uncertainty and agitation", you wonder if that epoch has found its apogee in modern football.*

THE QUESTION: WHY IS BALANCE MORE IMPORTANT THAN SYMMETRY IN LINEUPS?

VASCO DA GAMA'S UNORTHODOX BUT BALANCED TEAM PROVES THAT SYMMETRY IS NOT ALWAYS NECESSARY IN FORMATIONS

Vasco da Gama players celebrate after scoring the winning goal during their 3-2 victory against Alianza Lima. Photograph: Buda Mendes/STF/LatinContent/Getty Images

Humanity seems to have a built-in regard for symmetry. It was what William Blake admired in the tiger and it explains, various surveys have claimed, why certain faces are considered more attractive than others (Denzel Washington and Cate Blanchett, apparently, have the most symmetrical faces in Hollywood). The instinct with football teams and formations has always been to set them out symmetrically – a 4-3-3 with the shuttling players neatly flanking the anchor and the wingers placed

precisely on their touchlines, or a blockish 4-4-2 that becomes two lines with a line half the length set centrally atop them.

That's natural: the numerical designations of formations are the fundamentals, crude basics that give a general picture. But it doesn't map reality. It never has: football is far more about balance than it is about symmetry.

Take, for instance, Brian Clough's Nottingham Forest. After they had won promotion in 1977, Clough toyed with the idea of playing a 4-2-4 with Terry Curran on the right and John Robertson on the left. He and Peter Taylor were concerned such an approach might leave them open, and so in a pre-season friendly against Shepshed Charterhouse they replaced Curran with Martin O'Neill, whose tendency was to tuck in and provide a third man in midfield (alongside John McGovern and Archie Gemmill).

Immediately there was balance. Robertson operated as a playmaker on the left, backed up by the experienced defensive left-back Frank Clark. With O'Neill giving an extra layer of protection in the middle, Robertson's lack of defensive covering was accommodated, while Viv Anderson provided attacking width on the right, breaking forward from full-back.

For years that style was almost a default in the English game: one attacking wide midfielder covered for by a narrower, more defensive player on the other flank. Even as late as 1999-00, Sunderland finished seventh in the Premier League with Nicky Summerbee as a bona fide winger on the right, balanced by Stefan Schwarz tucking in on the left and Michael Gray overlapping from left-back. But how to you denote it? As a 4-3-3? As a 4-4-2? It's both and neither, somewhere in between.

Or take England under Fabio Capello in qualifying for the World Cup. It's in breach of the Rustenburg protocol to say anything positive about the Italian, of course, but as they hammered Croatia twice and scored seven more goals than any other European side in qualifying, England were genuinely impressive. Capello even solved the twin problems of the lack of left-sided players and previously intractable Gerrard-Lampard conundrum (which has become such a potent symbol of England's malaise that, after I'd interviewed the former Brazil goalkeeper Valdir Peres on Saturday, he set down his coffee cup and said, "But before you go, tell me, why can Gerrard and Lampard not play together?")

He played Gerrard on the left of a 4-2-3-1, his natural tendency to drift infield compensated for by the fact that Wayne Rooney often drifted left to replace him on that flank, and by Ashley Cole's forays from left-back. Theo Walcott or Aaron Lennon, meanwhile, provided genuine width on the other flank. (The major tactical problem at the World Cup came because Rooney's role had changed at Manchester United, from support striker to out-and-out centre-forward, and he seemed to struggle to readapt to the deeper position so played too close to Emile Heskey. In turn that meant Gerrard came too far infield, and so England ended up with a bus queue down the middle of the pitch.)

The classic Brazilian 4-2-2-2, similarly, usually involves one of the attacking midfielders pulling out to one flank, and the support striker playing a little to the other side of the main striker, ideally on the side on which the more attacking full-back plays. When Santos won the Libertadores last season, for instance, they had Neymar pulling left off Ze Eduardo with Elano shuttling on the right to provide cover.

Still, even allowing for the fact that an asymmetry is built into Brazilian football, the system Vasco da Gama set up with against Alianza Lima in the Libertadores last week was extraordinary. The back four was orthodox enough: Fagner at right-back, the elegant Dede and Rodolfo at centre-back and Thiago Feltri at left-back. Eduardo Costa and Nilton sat in front of the back four, with the former Lyon midfielder Juninho creating the play just in front of them and to the right. So far so normal. But the front three featured Barbio, an out-and-out winger more blessed with pace than technique, on the right, Alecsandro as a centre-forward and then Diego Souza tucked just behind him and fractionally to the left.

The result was that every attack came down the right. The first half felt like an endless loop of Juninho drifting into space and laying a pass outside him to Barbio, a lopsidedness compounded by the fact that Fagner is a far more attacking full-back than Thiago Feltri. A better side than Alianza – or at least one

less torn by disputes over unpaid wages — would surely have been able to check Vasco with relative ease.

As it was, Vasco, having conceded a ludicrous first goal as Rodolfo missed a long clearance, dominated utterly. Even then, they were being held 1-1 when, three minutes into the second half, Giancarlo Carmona picked up a harsh second yellow for a supposedly deliberate handball in the box. Alecsandro struck the bar with his penalty but the game was turned Vasco's way as the Alianza coach Jose Soto took off the left-winger Jorge Bazan for the defender Edgar Villamarin.

He needed to replace Carmona, of course, but removing Bazan simply opened up the flank Vasco were favouring anyway, something Soto tacitly acknowledged when, 13 minutes later, he then took off the centre-forward Jonathan Charquero for the left winger Joazhino Arroe.

By then, though, Alecsandro had had an effort cleared off the line, Juninho had hit the bar and Dede had headed Vasco in front.

Vasco ended up missing another penalty before Juninho, taking over from Alecsandro, converted their third spot-kick of the game, before a late Walter Ibanez goal made it 3-2. Vasco should have won much more comfortably, but the lopsidedness of their play raises concerns for the stiffer challenges to come – such as on Wednesday against Libertad in Asuncion.

Symmetry isn't essential in football, but balance is.

THE QUESTION: WHY IS THE BACK THREE RESURGENT IN ITALY?

NAPOLI'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE VICTORY OVER CHELSEA WAS JUST PART OF A WIDER RETURN TO A FORMATION THAT HAS SUDDENLY BECOME FASHIONABLE AGAIN

Ezequiel Lavezzi celebrates after scoring Napoli's third goal in the first-leg Champions League victory over Chelsea on Tuesday. Photograph: Giampiero Sposito/Reuters

Given everything in football – tactically speaking – is relative, perhaps nothing can ever truly be dead. Systems and styles of play that have seemed to have outlived their usefulness drift away, fade from consciousness and lie dormant, waiting for the game to forget about them so they can be triumphantly

reintroduced. For a long time, playing three at the back seemed finished, but Napoli's victory over Chelsea on Tuesday night was just part of a wider resurgence.

The reasons for the decline of the formation are understandable. Against a two-striker system, two of the three centre-backs act as markers (whether in a rigid way in a man-to-man system, or more flexibly in a zonal system), with a spare man there to mop up loose balls or, in possession, to step forward into midfield. As two-striker systems yielded to single-striker systems, though, rather than two markers and a spare man, teams were left with one marker, a spare man and a redundant man. If the opposing side, whether playing 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1, could then force the wing-backs deep, it effectively guaranteed itself an extra man in midfield. It's not that one formation is better than the other; it's just that in certain combinations one tactic tends to prevail over the other.

It's not coincidence that the resurgence of three at the back began in Italy. Partly that's to do with cultural inheritance: in the mid-60s, European football split. In the most general terms, the north and west went for a flat back four, a pressing game and an offside trap, while the south and east opted for a libero, man-marking and a spare man. Until Arrigo Sacchi turned up and upset the tactics boards of the orthodox like Christ throwing the moneylenders from the temple, that was the way it remained. Sacchi taught Italy the value of pressing and a back four, but the lessons of Gianni Brera (see James Horncastle's piece in The Blizzard issue two) cannot be unlearned in a generation. Italian football feels comfortable with three defensive players in central areas.

Even when sides played with a back four, the desire to pack the centre was clear: the narrow 4-3-1-2 last season was almost a default in Italy. That meant a series of fascinating tactical battles in Serie A as sides sought space in a crowded centre. The problem came in Europe, as opponents simply shifted the ball into the vast unoccupied autostrada of the flanks. That lay behind Gareth Bale's evisceration of the isolated Maicon (he might not have needed that taxi if somebody had only thought to give him a lift and stood in front of him on that touchline, at least slowing Bale down so he didn't approach the full-back at full pelt), behind Tottenham's impressive performance against Milan in the San Siro and behind Schalke 04's ultimate demolition of Internazionale in the quarter-final, when Hans Sarpei and Atsuto Uchida, two generally unexceptional full-backs, were made to look like world-beaters.

Domestically, the narrowness of much of the league meant that those sides who did play with width prospered: not only Napoli and Udinese with their wing-backs, but also, for instance, Cesena, who exceeded expectations by staying up by seven points. The result this season has been a reaction against narrowness, but a typically Italian one. Rather than an influx of wingers, suddenly three at the back has become fashionable again.

On one weekend in January, 11 of the 20 sides in Serie A deployed it. The reasons are psychologically consistent: a 3-4-3 offers width, while still leaving a back three protected by two screening midfielders. Even the front three which, aping the trend of the late 90s, is often broken from the back seven, can effectively arrange itself in the way it would have done in a 4-3-1-2, meaning clubs can shift to that system without the need for a huge influx of personnel.

That said, not all back threes are the same. There's the back three that operates like a back four, pushing high, pressing and trying to play offside – what might be called a bielsista back three after the way Marcelo Bielsa played with Argentina and Chile (although he, confusingly, has reverted to a back four this season with Athletic). That, for instance, was how Genoa played – and Inter failed to play – under Gian Piero Gasperini.

And then there is the less radical version which, understandably, is the one more generally employed, the back three that recalls the one that Alberto Zaccheroni deployed at Udinese and Milan. Napoli are an odd hybrid. They are capable of pressing, of pushing high and at times looking like a Bielsa side, but their default mode is to sit deep with Gökhan Inler and Walter Gargano patrolling in front of the back three, looking to get the ball forward to the hugely gifted front three as quickly as possible.

Against a side that, like Chelsea, played with a lone central striker, the man who would otherwise be redundant becomes effectively an additional spare man, another body to pick up runners from midfield. If

the opponent has an extra man in midfield, so be it. Napoli don't particularly care if the opposition dominate possession. The issue is to hold them at arm's length, prevent easy chances and then strike on the break. That's why Napoli's record is comparatively so much better against the top sides than the bottom: in a mini league of the top seven teams in Serie A they would be second, precisely because they want their opponent to take the initiative.

And that, of course, is dreadful news for Chelsea ahead of the second leg. This Napoli are by no means impregnable. They are susceptible at set-plays and even with three centre-backs they looked far from comfortable against a fairly muted Didier Drogba. The deployment of Juan Mata centrally disrupted them, his movement twice in the first half creating channels that first Ramires and then Branislav Ivanovic nearly exploited with runs from deep.

But this Napoli are devastating on the counterattack. In the second half last night, as Ivanovic advanced, pushing Juan Zúñiga, the left-back, deep, contributing to a spell of pressure in which Chelsea had five decent chances in the space of around 15 minutes, Ezequiel Lavezzi sat in the space behind him and waited for the counter. He wasted his first chance, dragging his shot wide, but after Edinson Cavani had capitalised on a David Luiz slip, he added the third goal, Ivanovic unable to get back.

That's the problem Chelsea face at Stamford Bridge in the return leg. They must take the initiative, but they must do so against a team that wants them to do exactly that.

THE QUESTION: IS THE 3-1-4-2 FORMATION ON THE RISE?

FROM WORD OF MOUTH TO A MEMORABLE TURNING POINT, A NEW SET OF TACTICS ARE EMERGING AND, SURPRISINGLY, WERE EVEN ON SHOW DURING BARCELONA'S LATEST WIN OVER REAL MADRID

Barcelona's Pep Guardiola, left, and Real Madrid's José Mourinho both experimented with 3-1-4-2 on Saturday. Photograph: Lluis Gene/AFP

Something very odd happened at the end of last week. Historical changes in tactics usually happen incrementally over time: there would be rumours of a side doing something unusual ("and they say the centre-forward plays in midfield …") followed by a pivotal game in which that tactical change proves decisive and is accepted as a new phase in football's development (Nandor Hidegkuti picks England apart while scoring three in Hungary's 6-3 win at Wembley in 1953).

More recently, perhaps, with the blanket televisation of football, it's been possible to trace the evolution, but still, there tends to be one moment, one game in which everything snaps into focus (Lionel Messi, for instance, ripping Real Madrid apart from the false nine position).

Last Thursday night, we saw something highly unusual: a 3-1-4-2 from Universidad de Chile as they won the first leg of the Copa Sudamericanaaway to Liga de Quito (they're likely to revert to orthodox 3-4-3 for Wednesday's second leg). We'd seen 3-3-2-2 and 3-3-1-3 before – usually from Marcelo Bielsa sides – but this, with the wing-backs pushed so high up they were midfielders and the deep-lying midfielder such a holder he was effectively an auxiliary centre-back, was new.

THREE-AND-A-HALF MEN AND THE RWANDA PROTOCOL

But then Tom Legg, whom I'm going to go out on a limb and describe as east Africa's leading tactical analyst, got in touch to say that earlier the same Thursday, Rwanda had switched to a 3-1-4-2 in the second half of their Cecafa Cup semi-final against Sudan. Rwanda had contained a narrow Sudan relatively comfortably in the first half to lead 1-0, but Sudan's half-time switch from a 4-4-2 diamond to 4-2-3-1 gave them more attacking width and led to them equalise after 68 minutes.

Rwanda's Serbian coach, Milutin Sredojevic, promptly withdrew the 17-year-old centre-back Emery Bayisenge and replaced him with a 17-year-old midfielder, Andrew Buteera. Buteera is usually thought of as a creator, but here was deployed deep as Rwanda shifted to a 3-1-4-2. As Legg points out, this was counterintuitive: if your opponent is winning the battle on the flanks, making your own team even more narrow seems like the last thing you should do. As it turned out, though, Rwanda retook control of the centre, cutting the supply to Sudan's wide men. Buteera and the two wide men, Jean-Claude Iranzi and Eric Gasana, found space to create attacks and Olivier Karekezi lashed in the winner from a narrow angle with 13 minutes remaining.

That was surprising enough – an unexpected formation popping up on the same day in Ecuador and Tanzania. But the biggest surprise came on Saturday as it, in slightly mutated form, appeared again in Spain, and specifically in Madrid, not in a regional African tournament or South America's secondary competition, but in the biggest game of them all: *El Clásico*. It was as if M Night Shyamalan were directing a documentary on football, the 3-1-4-2 virus sprouting uncontrollably across the globe.

As has now been well-documented, *El Clásico* turned on Pep Guardiola's decision midway through the first half to abandon the slightly odd 4-3-Cesc Fábregas-2 with which he had begun. He pushed Dani Alves from right-back to right midfield, so he could check the runs of Marcelo and cut off the support for Cristiano Ronaldo, a move that also spared him from having to pretend he is a full-back which, as anybody who has seen him play for Brazil will know, he is not.

That meant Carles Puyol moving to right-back, with Sergio Busquets dropping in to become a second centre-back. Gerard Piqué became the right-sided centre-back, allowing him to double up on Ronaldo when required, while Alexis Sánchez moved to become a highly mobile centre-forward (a false nine, if you like, but with lateral rather than longitudinal movement). Messi operated as an orthodox 10, with Andrés Iniesta shuttling on the left and Fábregas brought back much closer to Xavi Hernández. At first, the formation looked like a highly fluent 4-2-3-1, as though Barça were going to match Real Madrid shape for shape, but then the real benefit of the system became clear.

It is often overlooked just how key Busquets is to initiating Barça attacks, but he is always there as the get-out: if a player gets into trouble, he can go back to Busquets. Block off the escape route, though, and anxiety can be induced. Attack the metronome and the whole orchestra loses rhythm. José Mourinho surprised many by opting for a 4-2-3-1 rather than a 4-3-3, but what it allowed him to do was press with five men, leaving Lassana Diarra to protect the back four. That brought the opening goal, but it also rattled Barça.

Moving Busquets back, though, gave him time and space. Withdrawn from the front line, he could begin again to shape the battle. It was a risk, because it left Mesut Ozil free, but he is a slightly old-fashioned

playmaker, somebody who is adept at finding time amid the hubbub to measure a pass. Usually that is an asset, but here it gave Busquets time to close him down. We are used to seeing Busquets dropping back from midfield to become a centre-back; but here he was doing the opposite, stepping out from the back four to become a midfielder. Perhaps this is the logical outcome for a side that flips so often between a back three and a back four: it ends up playing a back three-and-a-half.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

But there is a deeper logic, and one that could be predicted. When Jack Charlton made his famous comment after the 1994 World Cup about full-backs being the most important position on the field, he was specifically referring to the fact that when two 4-4-2s clash, the full-backs are the players with a direct opponent. They are special not because of anything inherent in being a full-back, but because they are the players with the time and space to shape the game.

Football has moved on, though, and the prevalence of 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-3 means that full-backs often do have a direct opponent. That can create fascinating tactical duels – Roberto Carlos v David Beckham as Real Madrid beat Manchester United 3-1 in 2003, Theo Walcott v Danijel Pranjic as England won 4-1 in Croatia in 2008, Michael Essien v Cristiano Ronaldo in the Champions League final in 2008, Gareth Bale v Maicon as Tottenham beat Internazionale last season – but it also means that the space that was once the full-back's birthright is no longer guaranteed.

So where is that space? If a team plays a back four against an opponent with a lone central striker (or a false nine), then at least one of its centre-backs should be spare. It's not quite the same as a full-back being free in that it's clearly far easier for a single striker to shuffle 10 yards to close down the other centre-back than it is for him to run 30 yards to close down a full-back, but two centre-backs faced with one forward trying to close them down should be able to work space for one of them to step forward with the ball, at least until a potential presser from the opposing midfield comes into play.

Two years ago, I suggested we would increasingly see Piqué start to step forward with the ball to join Busquets in midfield; actually the reverse has happened and we have seen Busquets drop back to join Piqué (the clue was in the influence of Bielsa on Guardiola; the Argentinian visionary, also an inspiration for Universidad de Chile's coach Jorge Sampaoli, has a habit of pulling midfielders back into defence, as he has done with Javi Martínez at Athletic Bilbao). The effect is the same, a central defender who steps out from the back, a playmaker from the centre of defence.

Of course that is not entirely new. You could go back to Martim Francisco, the coach of Vila Nova, a club from Nova Lima, a town about 20 miles from Belo Horizonte, in the early 1950s. He pushed his left-half, Lito, back to play as the *quarto zagueiro* – the fourth defender – a term still used in Brazil for a centre-back with a responsibility to step up into the midfield. More obviously, there is Franz Beckenbauer and a whole generation of *liberi* stretching through the 70s and 80s all the way to the likes of Miodrag Belodedici and Matthias Sammer in the 90s. Sammer, though, was very much the last of his kind, and the *libero* has not really existed for 15-20 years, squeezed out by the influence of Arrigo Sacchi and the love of the hard press.

Germany, generally, was slow to respond to the rise of high pressing with a back four, which was why Volker Finke had such success with Freiburg. Christoph Biermann argued in Der Ball ist Rund that, for all Berti Vogts's faults, he did at least reconcile the Germany national team to the modern world of pressing (Borussia Dortmund, of course, pressed ferociously last season, yet Bayern were clearly unsettled by Augsburg's high line in their defeat there two weeks ago).

AN ENVIRONMENT OF CHANGE

And that is what makes Busquets's role so fascinating – it facilitates a back three-and-a-half in a system that presses. Again, there is a precedent, and perhaps it is not surprising that it should be found in the heritage of this Barça: Johan Cruyff's Barcelona Dream Team of the early 90s, although they also lined

up in a 4-3-3 or a 4-4-2, often played a 3-1-3-3, as did the Holland of Guus Hiddink. In Cruyff's variant, Ronaldo Koeman was often the one, although Guardiola himself operated there on occasions; but at Euro 96 Hiddink was playing Clarence Seedorf in the role.

So Guardiola, to an extent, has gone back to his roots, although there is a difference between the roles of Koeman and Busquets, if only in how opponents line up against them. Where Cruyff's 3-1-3-3 was rooted in the Rinus Michels belief that you played as many defenders as the opponent had forwards, plus one, and so Koeman was effectively free until there was an attack down the flank at which he had to drop back to become a second centre-back, Guardiola's – on Saturday at least – was predicated on Busquets staying deep (like Koeman deeper than the opposition midfield, but actually deeper than Koeman because the general trend from three-band to four-band systems means the first wave of opposing midfield tends to play higher) and stepping up when the opposing playmaker came into the game.

And that brings us to the other recent sighting of the back three-and-a-half, which was in the Spanish Super Cup. Applying first principles to the issue of tackling a false nine, it makes sense to play a back three and track the opposing false nine with the player who would have been the second centre-back, whether a defender or a holding midfielder. That was precisely how Mourinho deployed Ricardo Carvalho against Messi, with some success, even if the result ended up going against Real Madrid – again, the result being a back three with a player who often played in the back line but did not remain there.

So that gives us four examples this season, of teams playing a 3-1-4-2. All had different motivations. For Real Madrid, it was to free a player to man-mark. For Universidad de Chile, it was to provide the cover that allowed the wing-backs to engage Liga de Quito's wing-backs high up the pitch. For Rwanda it was to wrest control of the midfield through weight of numbers in the centre. For Barcelona it was to create space for their conductor. If there are four separate routes to a single solution, that suggests there is not a sole cause.

So, why now? It comes back, as tactics always do, to space. The prevalence of systems with one or no central strikers means that for much of the last decade, one of the centre-backs has been spare. To an extent, that's quite useful in itself, providing additional defensive cover. But there are more interesting things that can be done with him, and it is that that football is only just beginning to explore.

THE QUESTION: SHOULD A MANAGER USE TACTICS UNSUITABLE FOR HIS PLAYERS?

INTERNAZIONALE APPOINTED GIAN PIERO GASPERINI WHO HAS A TACTICAL OUTLOOK ILL-SUITED TO THE SQUAD. THE RESULT SO FAR IS THREE DEFEATS OUT OF THREE

Gian Piero Gasperini expresses his frustation in Internazionale's Champions League play-off against Trabzonspor. Photograph: Olivier Morin/AFP/Getty Images

Three games played; three games lost. Already Gian Piero Gasperini must be fearing that that distant tolling of bells is meant for him. He was, in truth, always an odd fit for the Internazionale job, just as Marcelo Bielsa, who was interviewed before him, would have been. Gasperini may not be quite such an idealist as the Argentinian but, like him, he has a clearly defined preferred style of play. Imposing that on an established squad of players, many of whom have the egos that come with success, is never easy even if it is desirable and, given the pressures inherent at a club the size of Inter, the demands for instant success, it may not even be possible.

Bielsa at least seems to have recognised that. He is a brilliant exception, a man so wedded to his philosophy of the game that his main question when he applies for a job is whether he will be able to apply it unopposed. He spoke to River Plate and to Inter, and ended up at Athletic Bilbao, a club with an equally idiosyncratic approach. One point from two league games (plus a home draw against Trabzonspor in a Europa League play-off that was abandoned after Fenerbahce's expulsion from European competition and Trabzonspor's subsequent elevation to the Champions League) suggests an awkward start, but at least he has begun better than Gasperini, whose first three games have brought three defeats.

Gasperini's Genoa played a vibrant, exciting style of football in a 3-4-3. He is wedded to that. That's what he's good at; it's what he does. To appoint him and expect him to play something different is akin to signing Niall Quinn and expecting him not to play as a target man. Inter's squad, though, doesn't look suited to the system.

I confess I assumed when Gasperini was appointed that it meant Wesley Sneijder was on his way, for he is a player who doesn't readily fit into the midfield four. Nor does he fit on to the left of the front three, which is where Gasperini has tried him so far. Sneijder, in fact, is a confusing player, because he seems to have turned himself into an anachronism. In the final months under José Mourinho, he played at the centre of the trident in a 4-2-3-1, a very mobile, modern attacking midfielder, a creator – perhaps even a playmaker - who was prepared to drop back and play a little deeper if required. Then he scored five goals at the World Cup and seemed to believe he was a classic number 10. He had played at times as the one in a 4-3-1-2 under Mourinho – although notably in the earlier, less successful part of the season – and

spent the majority of last season in the role, something that contributed to the fatal narrowness so thrillingly exposed by Schalke 04 in the Champions League.

Gasperini as good as admitted Sneijder's unsuitability to his tactical shape by leaving him on the bench for Sunday's 4-3 defeat to Palermo, only to bring him on midway through the first half to replace Mauro Zárate. Diego Forlán, another who seems unsuited to the 3-4-3 – and less explicably so than Sneijder given he was signed after the appointment of Gasperini – switched from left to right, and Sneijder spent the next hour chugging unenthusiastically and ineffectively up and down the left, then drifting infield and looking the dazzling player he can be.

When he and Forlán did cross paths in injury time as both wandered into the centre, the possibilities of the combination were apparent. It was a Sneijder pass to Forlán that brought about the corner that led to the penalty that restored Inter's 2-1 lead, and Sneijder then laid in the Uruguayan to score Inter's third. Having two such intelligent players working in tandem, surely, is a must, although when Sneijder, having begun on the left of a 4-3-3 against Trabzonspor, switched into the centre after 12 minutes, creating a 4-3-1-2, it had little effect.

Only the two wing-backs, Maicon, who is injured, and Yuto Nagatomo, look a natural fit for the 3-4-3. The 3-4-3 shape was being questioned even before the defeat to Milan in the Super Coppa. Inter's owner, Massimo Moratti, last month said that he thought Gasperini would "eventually change" to a back four, but that seems the wrong way round. Surely a new coach should take the existing squad and mould them gradually towards his ideal, whether by coaching or transfer activity, rather than taking his ideals and gradually diluting them? That, of course, is assuming he has an ideal; some coaches – Fabio Capello, for instance – are almost entirely pragmatic, fitting the system to the players rather than the other way round.

As it turned out it took Gasperini just one league game to move away from his 3-4-3. Seemingly preparing the ground for his change of shape against Trabzonspor, Gasperini said that he thought it natural to play three at the back against a team that operates with two forwards, and four against teams who play with three (by which he clearly means those who play with a lone central striker, however advanced their wingers are). That thinking is entirely orthodox: Rinus Michels believed his sides should always have one defender more than the opposition had forwards, and Barcelona's use of a back three against Villarreal followed the same logic.

What is a little puzzling about his claim is that, before last night, he had employed a back four in only 20.4% of games since taking over at Genoa in 2006; it also raises the question of whether, had Palermo set out with the 4-3-2-1 they used last season rather than a 4-4-2, they would have played a back four. Even in Italy, in which variants of 4-3-1-2 remain the most common system, significantly more than one in five teams play with a lone central striker. This, fairly evidently, was a response to criticism.

It failed. As the Gazzetto dello Sport noted, the change of shape brought a reversal of faults. "Messy, reckless, exposed and beaten 4-3 on Sunday," its report read. "Ordered, immobile, lacking ideas and defeated 1-0 tonight. Which one do you prefer? It's like choosing between a stomach ache and a headache."

Order, though, at least is a start; the immobility and lack of ideas were perhaps down as much to anxiety after the disappointing start as to any intrinsic failing. What the shambles in Sicily – and it was a shambles; Palermo were far more dominant than the 4-3 scoreline might suggest – exposed was that certain key individuals are not the players they once were. Júlio César has slipped from the supreme standards he set two to three years ago, and admitted a measure of responsibility for the third and fourth goals; the third, in particular was a worry, stemming from his strange habit of going for even relatively low balls with the outside arm in the dive (i.e., the left as he dives to his right).

Lúcio, meanwhile, has never been quick, but has come to look slow, something that was evident in the Copa América, in which Brazil's 2-2 draw with Paraguay was just as much to do with his failure to cover Dani Alves as with the right-back's adventurous positioning. In theory a three at the back system should help him, allowing him to get on with marking and winning headers with an extra player to cover, but Gasperini's interpretation of the 3-4-3 is Dutch in style; it's not a libero and two markers, but three

defenders spread across the pitch, with the wing-backs more midfielders than attacking defenders. Lúcio was poor against Palermo, and it was his hesitation in pushing out that led to Ondrej Celustka's winner.

More generally, given the age and general lack of pace among his central defenders, Gasperini may have to reconsider how high up the pitch his back line, whether a four or a three, plays. His style at Genoa was based on hard-pressing and a high offside line; at Inter his defenders are so slow on the turn that they look vulnerable to any ball over the top.

Again, given the make-up of the squad, you wonder why Gasperini was ever appointed. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with his 3-4-3 or his high-tempo style, but tactics do not exist in isolation; they must always be fitted to players, opposition and circumstances. There is no "best" system or formation; although there are styles of play that, thanks to other developments, become outmoded. It would be wrong to say that it makes no sense for a coach to have a preferred system, but there must always be a compromise between theory and resources.

An obvious interim solution would be to use Sneijder as a playmaker in a 3-4-1-2, which would restore Forlán to a more central role, but this, surely, is the case of a bad appointment. Giving Gasperini, a man stylistically antithetical to most of the squad, the job made sense only if Moratti was going to give him time to oversee a long-term evolution. Undermining him by publicly questioning his tactics almost before he had begun is bafflingly self-destructive.

THE QUESTION: HOW BEST FOR MANCHESTER UNITED TO COMBAT BARCELONA?

SIR ALEX FERGUSON IS A TINKERER, SO WHAT WILL HE COME UP WITH TO HELP UNITED STIFLE BARÇA IN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

The Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson will be looking to devise a winning formula for the Champions League final against Barcelona. Photograph: Tom Jenkins for the Guardian

Talk to Arsène Wenger or Arrigo Sacchi and they'll tell you that it was the Ajax of the early 70s that shaped their philosophy. The basic tenets are simple: pass and move when in possession, squeeze the play when out of it. As Sacchi's Milan cut through Italian preconceptions in the late 80s, and Italy were beaten by Valeriy Lobanovskyi's USSR in the semi-final of Euro 88, Marcello Lippi acknowledged that "everybody plays a pressing game now".

That has long been true at Barcelona, to where Rinus Michels and Johan Cruyff exported their philosophy 40 years ago. The Ajax theory has underpinned their thinking ever since, through the Dream Team days of Cruyff in the early 90s to the present side of Pep Guardiola who, of course, played for Cruyff. In the past two decades, though, that style of play pioneered by Viktor Maslov with Dynamo Kyiv and by Michels at Ajax in the mid-60s had become, at the highest level, a universal default, at least for proactive teams.

Even those, such as the British long-ball theorist Charles Reep, who favoured a more direct approach, began to press, recognising the value of winning the ball back high up the pitch. Essentially the difference between the Reepian and Maslovian models was in what was done with the ball when it was won. Reep wanted the ball played forward quickly, believing each additional pass was the potential source of error. Maslov and Michels trusted the technique of their sides and looked to treasure the ball. After all, when you're in possession it takes spectacular bad luck or incompetence to let the opposition score.

It is possible, of course, to be successful with a reactive side, as José Mourinho was with Internazionale last season, for instance. Sit deep, absorb pressure and strike on the counterattack. The sense, though, is that the truly great sides, the 10 or a dozen who live not only in the record books but in the folk memory of the game, must be proactive.

Which is not to say they may not be defensive. There is a tendency in England to believe that defending means retreating to the edge of the penalty area and digging in for a protracted siege, but there are few better ways of defending than holding the ball in the opposition half. Look at Ajax's three successive European Cup wins: in the latter two, in 1972 and 1973, they took early leads and essentially passed the game into submission. At the World Cup, as every team bar Chile bunkered down against Spain, they opted for a policy of control, knowing that at some point the goal would come. And Barça can do that as well; often they are so superior to their opponents that they can attack almost without fear, but in big games – as in the Champions League final two years ago – they have proved themselves more than capable of protecting a lead by protecting the ball – the "sterile domination" of which Wenger spoke.

Manchester United were made to look very ordinary in that final in Rome, yet the truth is that until Samuel Eto'o put Barça ahead after 10 minutes, they were the better side. Once Barça had the lead, they simply kept the ball. The bad news for United is that the stats suggest they're getting better and better at doing so. In 2006-07, according to Opta, Barcelona had on average 61.1% possession in Champions League games. Since then that has gone up each year: to 63.2 then to 65.6 then 70.6 and this season 73.3. United will have to get used to spending long periods without the ball and will know there is an even greater imperative than normal not to concede the opening goal.

The suggestion, in fact, is that Barça have grown a little more cautious than they were two years ago, scoring 2.25 goals per game as opposed to 2.46, and conceding 0.67 per game as opposed to 1.00. It may be that you can't prioritise both position and possession, and Barça have opted to control the latter, the result being that they end up playing a little deeper. Their control of games is greater than it was, but their goal threat is lessened. Their pass completion rate is staggering: 89% at home and 90% away. United manage 82% at home and 80.2% away.

That is partly related to United's style of play. They do play the occasional longer pass partly because, having the ball less than Barcelona, they counter-attack more frequently. Similarly, United are more effective when crossing the ball – their cross completion rate is 21.7% as opposed to 17.4%. Given Gerard Piqué's occasional disquiet under aerial balls – which may have been why Sir Alex Ferguson sold him in the first place – and the possibility that Javier Mascherano will play in central defence if Carles Puyol has to cover at left-back, it is safe to assume that crosses, whether from open play or dead balls, will be one of United's two major modes of attack.

The other will be the counter-attack. United have always been adept on the break, but they are unlikely to have played many games in which they have had to rely upon it so completely. Barca hog the ball like nobody before them. How best, then, to combat them?

THE PRACTICAL HOUR-GLASS

The best way – from a theoretical point of view anyway – may be something so radical as to be unthinkable. Given Lionel Messi plays as a false nine, dropping deep from his centre-forward's position, there is an argument to be made that a side requires only one central defender – no markers and a spare man, effectively – and that Messi is best tracked by a defensive midfielder, with the full-backs slightly tucked in to deal with the incursions from wide of Pedro and David Villa. That suggests a 3-3-3-1 shape, although not the three centre-backs, wing-back plus a holder, played by Marcelo Bielsa's Chile in the World Cup, but something more like an hour-glass: wide three, narrow three, wide three, centre-forward.

Ferguson is a tinkerer, and often comes up with something unexpected for major games, but the chances of him using an untried formation and breaking up the Rio Ferdinand-Nemanja Vidic partnership are nil. So taking the 3-3-3-1 paradigm and pushing the Messi-tracking defensive midfielder to centre-back, we're left with a 4-2-3-1, which is the shape all three sides to have beaten Barcelona in league or Champions League this season – Hercules, Arsenal and Real Sociedad – have used. That said, 27 teams have lined up in a 4-2-3-1 against Barça this season, and while three have won, 20 have lost. (The worst formation to use, statistically, is straight 4-4-2, which has a seven defeats out of seven record). What United must do at all costs is protect that space in front of the two centre-backs; Xabi Alonso did not have the best game for Real Madrid in the first leg of the semi-final, but it was after he had been forced by Pepe's red card to abandon his position just in front of the back four that Messi, granted a couple of yards of acceleration room, produced the second goal that effectively settled the tie.

United may draw hope, even, from the performance of Shakhtar Donetsk against Barça. Luiz Adriano wasted three presentable chances with the score at either 0-0 or 1-0 in the Camp Nou, before Shakhtar's defensive inadequacies were exploited. And that's part of Barça's strength; Espanyol, also playing a 4-2-3-1, really troubled them in the league game at Nou Sarria this season, pressing high, effectively taking them on at their own game, and they ended up losing 5-1. When that is the prospect for those who challenge them, it's little wonder many sides prefer simply to retreat and accept a two- or three-goal beating. The ferocity and effectiveness of United's pressing in the early stages of the recent league game against Chelsea suggest United intend to try to drive Barça back.

THE KEEGAN PROTOCOL

It will come as little surprise that the player in the Champions League to have averaged the most passes per game is Xavi with 106.9 (Michael Carrick is United's best with 74.4 – the ninth most in the Champions League this season). He is also the player to have had the most touches – 121.27 per game (United don't have a player in the top 10) – and to have received the most passes – 98.27 (again, there is no United player in the top 10). Trying to stop him settling is an obvious priority – and may persuade Ferguson to use Darren Fletcher rather than Ryan Giggs in one of the central midfield positions.

What is perhaps a little more intriguing is that second in those three categories is Sergio Busquets. Claude Makélélé's influence at Stamford Bridge began to wane after Kevin Keegan, while Manchester City manager, showed that Chelsea could be disrupted by sitting a player – in his case Antoine Sibierski – on the midfield holder. His role was ostensibly defensive, but he was also a metronome setting the tempo for everything Chelsea did. Busquets is similar, the conduit through whom almost every Barcelona move must pass; he is vital to their rhythm, something demonstrated by how much less fluent Barça have appeared when Mascherano has been used at the back of midfield.

That means Wayne Rooney has a vital role from a defensive as well as an attacking point of view, and also is a strong argument in favour of the 4-4-1-1-cum-4-2-3-1 shape United used in both quarter-finals against Chelsea. The alternative is a 4-3-3 with Rooney as a lone central striker, but that would mean breaking up his blossoming partnership with Javier Hernández, and would deny United the Mexican's pace, which could be of supreme value if they end up playing a counterattacking game. The danger is that Rooney snapping around Busquets sounds like a red card waiting to happen, but it's hard to see any other way of disrupting the metronome.

BEHIND THE FULL-BACKS

One of the outstanding memories of Sevilla's Uefa Cup final victory over Espanyol in 2007 was of the recklessness of Dani Alves's sorties, which left Christian Poulsen, nominally the holding midfielder, operating as an auxiliary right-back. That meant there was either space high on the left flank or in front of the two centre-backs, and it was from those areas that both Espanyol's goals resulted. Barça's way of dealing with the surges of Alves, who astonishingly lies fourth in the table of most touches in the opponent's half per game, is more effective, with Busquets dropping in to become effectively a third centre-back, and one of the centre-backs edging wide.

Logic suggests that the space behind Alves should be exploitable, but no side has managed that. It would be fascinating to see Ferguson leave Nani high up the pitch on that flank and try to hit him early, but more realistically Park Ji-Sung, perhaps the best defensive forward in the game will be deployed to track and perhaps check him. United's attacking chance comes on the other flank, where Antonio Valencia, who has returned from his broken leg with enhanced strength and stamina, can both drop off to help out in midfield, and run at whoever plays at left-back. Eric Abidal, Adriano and Maxwell are returning from illness or injury, so it may be that Puyol operates there. His performance at right-back in the 2009 final was clear enough evidence that he is not as clumsy as some would suggest, but neither is he a natural full-back.

For the most part, though, United are likely to be on the back foot. The cavalier style of tradition and stereotype was abandoned long ago but, even so, for United Saturday is likely to be a game of unusual containment.

THE QUESTION: IS THREE AT THE BACK THE WAY FORWARD FOR LIVERPOOL?

KENNY DALGLISH'S LIVERPOOL AND STEVE BRUCE'S SUNDERLAND HAVE BOTH MADE ELOQUENT RECENT CASES FOR THE OLD PLOY OF THREE CENTRE-BACKS AND A DIAMOND FORMATION

Liverpool's triangle of steel Martin Skrtel, left, Daniel Agger and Jamie Carragher keep an eye on their old team-mate, Fernando Torres of Chelsea. Photograph: Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images

It was a strangely retro weekend in the Premier League, with scorelines from the 1950s and tactics from the 1990s. Three at the back has rather gone out of fashion over the past decade, but it has returned with a startling suddenness and effectiveness over the past week. Liverpool played with three at the back (by which I mean a system with three centre-backs, irrespective of the positioning of the full-backs) against Stoke last Wednesday, Sunderland used it against Stoke on Saturday, and then Liverpool used it against Chelsea on Sunday.

It was that use at Stamford Bridge that was most successful, although whether it would have been had Chelsea stuck to the way they have been playing for most of the past seven years and fielded a 4-3-3 rather than a diamond is debatable – then again, Kenny Dalglish probably would not have fielded his 3-5-1-1 against a 4-3-3.

The reason the deployment of three central defenders has largely fallen out of use is that it is set up to deal with two central strikers. Two of the centre-backs mark, with the other as a spare man to provide cover. Facing a lone central striker formation (most commonly 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1), one of the centre-backs marks, there is a spare man, and then there is a redundant player. Worse, the wing-backs who are supposed to provide attacking width end up pinned back, dealing with a wide forward.

Of course, there are circumstances in which having two spare men is desirable. If a team have little intention of attacking and are looking for a 0-0 draw, then it makes a lot of sense to have two extra players plugging gaps. That was how, for instance, Estudiantes played at Velez Sarsfield in October, when they successfully got the draw they wanted to preserve their lead at the top of the *Apertura*. Uruguay did something similar against France at the World Cup, as did Algeria against England (although Wayne Rooney played so high, England were approaching a 4-4-2) and, slightly less successfully, North Korea did it against Brazil.

Liverpool's outlook against Chelsea was cautious, but it was not that negative. Its use, in fact, was little different to how the formation was employed in the 90s; it was there to combat an old-fashioned variant on 4-4-2. On Sunday, Chelsea played, as they had at Sunderland last Tuesday, with two central strikers and Nicolas Anelka tucked behind at the point of a midfield diamond. Anelka was superb at the Stadium

of Light, but Sunderland's midfield – especially in the absence of Lee Cattermole – has a tendency to be very open.

Against Liverpool, Anelka found himself up against the perpetually under-rated Lucas Leiva and was negated, while the three of Jamie Carragher, Martin Skrtel and Daniel Agger neutered Didier Drogba and Fernando so successfully that they managed only one meaningful shot between them (and that a chance bestowed not created as Maxi Rodríguez squandered possession). Torres, in fact, had only 29 touches of the ball in the 66 minutes before he was substituted.

Where Liverpool really won the battle, though, was in midfield. Against Stoke, Dalglish had played a 3-4-2-1, with a square of midfielders in the middle – two in defensive positions and two attacking. Against Chelsea, he tilted the square to become a diamond, matching Chelsea's midfield shape exactly, so as well as Lucas picking up Anelka, Steven Gerrard dealt with Frank Lampard, Maxi matched up to Michael Essien and Raul Meireles faced Mikel John Obi. Only Maxi could be said not to have won his individual duel decisively.

At the same time, Chelsea faced the problem the diamond will always have against a side playing with three centre-backs plus wing-backs. The great flaw of the diamond is that it lacks attacking width; the full-backs have to get forward and if they do not, everything becomes funnelled through the player at the diamond's tip.

José Bosingwa and Ashley Cole are ideally equipped to offer that attacking threat wide, but on Sunday they weren't able to get forward. Rather than meeting a conventional full-back 30 or 40 yards from the opponents' goal, they were engaging with Martin Kelly and Glen Johnson on halfway, and so only rarely got into areas to offer a creative outlet.

That problem for diamonds is even worse against a 4-3-3 or a 4-2-3-1, or even a 4-4-2 with wide midfielders who play high up the pitch, as the full-back is left with a choice of pushing on, hoping his side retain possession long enough that his absences from defensive duties do not matter, or sitting back offering no attacking width. The diamond tends to prosper only as a defensive formation, or in a culture where so many teams field a diamond that the lack of width does not matter because everybody has the same weakness. It is notable, for instance, that in Serie A this season, where 4-3-1-2, a variant of the diamond, predominates, Milan's three defeats have come against Cesena and Juventus, sides with attacking width, and Roma, who had Jérémy Menez pull wide from his usual central *trequartista* role.

Other teams may see Liverpool's success and decide to copy that against Chelsea. Even when they played a 4-3-3, it had been apparent for a while that blocking in Cole (something Kieran Richardson did superbly in Sunderland's 3-0 win at Stamford Bridge) severely restricted their attacking options. It may also be that, following the examples of Liverpool and Sunderland, opposing sides opt for three centre-backs against Stoke City.

Both Liverpool and Sunderland presumably made the decision to try to add height to the side. Liverpool could have come unstuck with Stoke fielding a lone central striker in John Carew, and the need for Agger to step up and become an auxiliary midfielder perhaps explains why they were significantly less fluent against Stoke than they have been in probably every other game since Dalglish's return.

The Sunderland centre-back pairing of Anton Ferdinand and Titus Bramble, meanwhile, have been bullied at times in the air this season, a situation not helped by Craig Gordon's lack of command of his box. The addition of John Mensah – who would surely be a first choice were he ever fit for more than a game at a time – was designed to give Sunderland an additional solidity and, set-plays aside (a fairly big aside, admittedly), the tactic worked, combating not merely Sunderland's relative aerial weakness but also the lack of a ball-winner in midfield, with both Cattermole and David Meyler injured. Sunderland's problem was that they conceded too many free-kicks in dangerous areas, and then got too deep in defending them, meaning Gordon, never the most commanding goalkeeper for all his shot-stopping abilities, was too often hemmed in (and, of course, they got the rough end of offside decisions for Stoke's first two goals).

For both Liverpool and Sunderland, it seems likely the switch to three centre-backs was a temporary measure undertaken in specific circumstances. It would be a major surprise if Sunderland were to use a similar tactic against Tottenham, or Liverpool against Wigan, on Saturday. That said, given Liverpool's lack of attacking width – and glut of good centre-backs – it is perhaps something to which Dalglish will be more open than other managers.

If nothing else, though, Liverpool and Sunderland have shown in the past week that there is still a place for three centre-backs in certain circumstances, and that it's often a good idea to set opponents a puzzle they have forgotten how to solve. It may, in a strange way, be that Dalglish's time away from day-to-day management, far from restricting his tactical options, has actually broadened them.

THE QUESTION: HOW DID TACTICS DEVELOP IN 2010?

THE WORLD CUP WAS MERELY REFLECTIVE RATHER THAN INNOVATIVE, SHOWING HOW INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL HAS BEEN ECLIPSED

Spain had a lot to celebrate after winning the World Cup but the tournament lacked a great game. Photograph: Jasper Juinen/Getty Images

In August, I wrote a piece for the Guardian's pre-season supplement in which I speculated that, after the World Cup and Internazionale's success in the Champions League, we may be about to witness a return to reactive football. Since when we've seen probably the most attacking Premier League in living memory, which goes to show two things: first, never believe anything anybody writes when trying to predict the future of football; and second, the World Cup is no longer a bellwether.

That, perhaps, has been the most shocking aspect of the year; the realisation of just how far international football lags behind club football. It used to be that the World Cup served almost as a conference at which delegates arrived from all round the world and exchanged ideas: Brazil suddenly sprang 4-2-4 on the world at the 1958 tournament, for instance; England showed the effectiveness of 4-4-2 in 1966; Total Football, although Ajax had already won three European Cups, caught the imagination in 1974; and the success of Argentina in 1986 marked the beginning of the development of three at the back. The main lesson of this summer's tournament, though, was that 4-4-2 has been superseded by 4-2-3-1 as the universal default, something that has been apparent in club football for several years.

The formation was blamed by many for the defensiveness of the tournament, but that is to put the cart before the horse. Formations are neutral; it is their employment that gives them positive and negative characteristics. Numerous coaches preferred 4-2-3-1 because they were already set on playing defensively and it allowed them to flood the midfield while still posing a level of attacking threat through the line of three; but if the line of three consists of two wingers/wide forwards and a playmaker, it can be exhilarating, though if the three are deep-lying, it isn't.

The question then is why the mind-set was so negative, and the worrying thing is that it is probably inherent in international football. With limited time available to develop mutual understanding, most coaches focus on developing defensive cohesion. Equally, the limited number of games played in international football – around a dozen a season, of which half are friendlies – means the stakes are higher for each, and that makes managers more cautious. The result is coaches packing men behind the ball and hoping for an individual to change the game.

At the World Cup, only Spain – who have had a stable side for three years and whose players are drawn largely from two clubs and so have an understanding – and Chile – who were coached by the idiosyncratic and brilliant Marcelo Bielsa – were genuinely proactive and, as Arrigo Sacchi said, it is proactivity that makes for true greatness. Even Germany, for all the goals they scored, were essentially reactive, a very good counterattacking team. Most disappointing were the sides with a great tradition of proactive football, such as Brazil and the Netherlands, who relied on a solid base and hoped individuals could turn the game their way.

There were those who accused Spain of being boring, but what were they supposed to do when opponents sat 10 men behind the ball against them? As Peter Taylor once said in answer to criticism of Nottingham Forest: "A team cannot be boring if it has the ball." They weren't taking it into the corners or time-wasting; they were passing it around waiting for the opposition to try and get it back, something only Chile really attempted. The general negativity, resulting in a lack of quality and drama, is a serious issue for the World Cup. There hasn't been a great game since 1998 – finals might just about qualify as very good – and if that trend continues you wonder how long public interest will hold up.

What the World Cup does do, though, is to reflect pre-existing trends. The decline of 4-4-2 has probably been overstated – although when Michael Owen starts publicly doubting it, you know its days of absolute hegemony are over – but the use of it now is more knowing and it, too, has frequently become a defensive tactic, with two banks of four sitting deep, looking to hit two forward men with long direct passes. Even when used in a more progressive way – as, for instance, Manchester United have deployed it this season (although notably not against Arsenal or Manchester City), there has often been one striker dropping off and one of the midfielders pushing on to make a de facto fourth band, three bands having become too few with the stretching of the game brought about by the liberalisation of the offside law.

Playing three central defenders, having all but vanished with the emergence of lone striker formations, is now back as a defensive strategy, offering the security of two spare men. Uruguay used it against France at the World Cup and Algeria did so against England, while Estudiantes effectively secured the Argentinian apertura by drawing 0-0 away to second-placed Velez Sarsfield with a defensive 3-4-2-1. In the Champions League, Rangers, similarly, stymied opponents with a 5-4-1 and might, with slightly better luck and better finishing at home against Valencia, have taken second place in their group behind Manchester United.

Three at the back has also become a holding position for sides with attacking full-backs, something Chelsea began doing under Luiz Felipe Scolari, with Mikel Jon Obi often dropping in between the two central defenders as José Bosingwa and Ashley Cole pressed on. Mexico did something similar at the World Cup, but it is Barcelona who have perfected the system, Sergio Busquets regularly sitting deep between Carles Puyol and Gerard Piqué to allow Dani Alves and Maxwell the freedom to attack, providing width to outflank sides that sit deep against them. Perhaps Spain could have tried something similar with Sergio Ramos and Joan Capdevila at the World Cup, but such ploys take time to effect.

Barcelona also show the effectiveness of two of the other tactical trends in club football: the false nine and the inverted winger. Again, their absence at national level probably suggests the relative lack of

sophistication in the international game. When Lionel Messi plays in the middle of a front three, he persistently drops off, leaving David Villa and Pedro to cut in from wide positions, so they are perpetually working on a diagonal, operating in the space between centre-back and full-back. When it works, as it has done over the past few weeks, it is devastating, and the 5-0 win over Real Madrid is likely to stand in their history as Milan's in the 1989 European Cup semi-final does in theirs.

That game was a joy, not least because eight of the 11 players who started for Barça had grown up through their academy (which does raise the question of how they have managed to accumulate quite so much debt). The greatest football is still that played by teams that have been nurtured and developed from an early age, so that players have an almost organic understanding of where they should move and where their team-mates are moving, and, in a world of billionaire owners looking for shop-bought success, that is a consoling thought.

Even Roman Abramovich seems to have realised that, if it is true that he approach Txiki Begiristain and asked him to turn Chelsea into Barcelona. Whether the Russian has the patience to wait the decade or so it would take for an ethos as strong as Barça's to be instilled is debatable. At national level, meanwhile, the sort of time it takes to create a team like Barça's simply doesn't exist. If there has been one lesson from 2010, it is that the gulf between club and international football is vast, and getting wider.

THE QUESTION: ARE BARCELONA REINVENTING THE W-W FORMATION?

TO COUNTER TEAMS WHO SIT DEEP, BARÇA PUSH BOTH FULL-BACKS UP THE PITCH – ECHOING THE 2-3-2-3 FORMATION OF THE 1930S

Barcelona players celebrate yet another goal. Photograph: Manu Fernandez/AP

Football is a holistic game. Advance a player here and you must retreat a player there. Give one player more attacking responsibility and you must give another increased defensive duties. As three at the back has become outmoded as a balanced or attacking formation – though not as a defensive formation – by the boom in lone-striker systems, coaches have had to address the problem of how to incorporate attacking full-backs without the loss of defensive cover.

For clubs who use inverted wingers, as Barcelona do, the issue is particularly significant. For them, the attacking full-back provides not merely auxiliary attacking width but is the basic source of width as the

wide forwards turn infield. The absence of an Argentinian Dani Alves figure in part explains why Lionel Messi has been less successful at national level than at club level. For Barcelona, as he turns inside off the right flank, Alves streaks outside him, and the opposing full-back cannot simply step inside and force Messi to try to use his weaker right foot. Do that, and Messi nudges it on to Alves. So the full-back tries to cover both options, and Messi then has time and space to inflict damage with his left foot.

It is the same if Pedro plays on the right flank, and the same when David Villa plays on the left. Barcelona's wide forwards are always looking to cut inside to exploit the space available on the diagonal, and that is facilitated if they have overlapping full-backs. Traditionally, if one full-back pushed forwards the other would sit, shuffling across to leave what was effectively a back three.

Barcelona, though, often have both full-backs pushed high, a risky strategy necessitated by how frequently they come up against sides who sit deep against them. With width on both sides they can switch the play quickly from one flank to the other, and turn even a massed defence. They still, though, need cover in case the opponent breaks, and so Sergio Busquets sits in, becoming in effect a third centre-back.

That, of course, is not especially new. Most sides who have used a diamond in midfield have done something similar. At Shakhtar Donetsk, before they switched to a 4-2-3-1, Dario Srna and Razvan Rat were liberated by Mariusz Lewandowski dropping very deep in midfield. At Chelsea, Luiz Felipe Scolari would often, when sketching out his team shape, include Mikel John Obi as a third centre-back. And Barcelona themselves had Yaya Touré dropping back to play as a centre-back on their run to the Champions League trophy in 2008-09.

What is different is the degree. It is not just Barcelona. I first became aware of the trend watching Mexico play England in a pre-World Cup friendly. Trying to note down the Mexican formation, I had them as four at the back, then three, then four, then three, and I realised it was neither and both, switching from 4-3-3 to 3-4-3, as it did during the World Cup.

Ricardo Osorio and Francisco Rodríguez sat deep as the two centre-backs, with Rafael Márquez operating almost as an old-fashioned (by which I mean pre-second world war) centre-half just in front of them. Paul Aguilar and Carlos Salcido were attacking full-backs, so the defence was effectively split into two lines, a two and a three. Efraín Juárez and Gerardo Torrado sat in central midfield, behind a front three of Giovani dos Santos, Guillermo Franco and Carlos Vela. The most accurate way of denoting the formation, in fact, would be 2-3-2-3: the shape, in other words, was the W-W with which Vittorio Pozzo's Italy won the World Cup in 1934 and 1938.

OF THE SAME SPECIES AS POZZO

Pozzo first latched on to football while studying the manufacture of wool in Bradford in the first decade of the last century. He would travel all around Yorkshire and Lancashire watching games, eventually becoming a fan of Manchester United and, in particular, their fabled half-back line of Dick Duckworth, Charlie Roberts and Alec Bell. All centre-halves, he thought, should be like Roberts, capable of long, sweeping passes out to the wings. It was a belief he held fundamental and led to his decision, having been reappointed manager of the Italy national team in 1924, immediately to drop Fulvio Bernardini, an idol of the Roman crowds, because he was a 'carrier' rather than a 'dispatcher'.

As a result, Pozzo abhorred the W-M formation that his friend Herbert Chapman, the manager of Arsenal, developed after the change in the offside law in 1925, in which the centre-half – in Arsenal's case Herbie Roberts – became a stopper, an 'overcoat' for the opposing centre-forward. He did, though, recognise that in the new reality the centre-half had to take on some defensive responsibilities.

Pozzo found the perfect player for the role in Luisito Monti. He had played for Argentina in the 1930 World Cup but, after joining Juventus in 1931, became one of the *oriundi* – those South American players who, thanks to Italian heritage, qualified to play for their adopted country. Already 30 when he signed, Monti

was overweight and, even after a month of solitary training, was not quick. He was, though, fit and became known as *Doble ancho* (Double wide) for his capacity to cover the ground.

Monti became a *centro mediano* (halfway house) – not quite Charlie Roberts but not Herbie Roberts either. He would drop when the other team had possession and mark the opposing centre-forward, but would advance and become an attacking fulcrum when his side had the ball. Although he was not a third back, he played deeper than a traditional centre-half and so the two inside-forwards retreated to support the wing-halves. Italy's shape became a 2-3-2-3, the W-W. At the time it seemed, as the journalist Mario Zappa put it in La Gazzetta della Sport, "a model of play that is the synthesis of the best elements of all the most admired systems", something borne out by Italy's success.

FOOTFALLS ECHO IN THE MEMORY

To acknowledge that modern football's shape at times resembles the 1930s, though, is not to repeat Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, and lament the futility of a world without novelty: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time." Nor is it to argue that tactics are somehow cyclical, as many bewilderingly do.

Rather it is to acknowledge that fragments and echoes of the past still flicker, reinvented and reinterpreted for the modern age. Like Mexico, Barcelona's shape, at least when they use only one midfield holder, seems to ape that of Pozzo's Italy. Those who defend three at the back argue that, to prevent the side having two spare men when facing a single-striker system, one of the centre-backs can step into midfield, to which the response is few defenders are good enough technically to do that, and why not just field an additional midfielder anyway? What Barcelona and Mexico have done is approach the problem the opposite way round, using a holding midfielder as an additional centre-back rather than a centre-back as an additional midfielder.

But the style of football is very different. It is not just that modern football is far quicker than that of the 30s. Barcelona press relentlessly when out of possession, a means of defending that was not developed until a quarter of a century after Pozzo's second World Cup. In the opening 20 minutes at the Emirates last season when Barcelona overwhelmed Arsenal, the major difference between the sides lay not in technique but in the discipline of their pressing.

Inverted wingers, similarly, would have been alien to Pozzo: Enrique Guaita and Raimundo Orsi started wide and stayed wide, looking to reach the byline and sling crosses in. Angelo Schiavio was a fixed point as a centre-forward – no dropping deep or pulling wide for him. The two wing-halves, Attilio Ferraris and Luigi Bertolini, would have been too concerned with negating the opposing inside-forwards to press forward and overlap.

Nonetheless, the advantages of the W-W for a side that want to retain possession, the interlocking triangles offering simple passing options, remain the same. Having Busquets, the modern-day Monti, drop between Carles Puyol and Gerard Piqué is not just a defensive move; it also makes it easier for Barcelona to build from the back. Against a 4-4-2 or a 4-2-3-1, Busquets can be picked up by a deeper-lying centre-forward or the central player in the trident, which can interrupt Barcelona's rhythm (just as sides realised after Kevin Keegan had deployed Antoine Sibierski to do the job, that – counter intuitively – Chelsea could be upset by marking Claude Makélelé); pull Busquets deeper, though, and he has more space to initiate attacks.

There is a wider point here, which relates to notation. Looking at reports from the early 70s, it seems bizarre to modern eyes that teams were still listed as though they played a 2-3-5, which had been dead for the best part of 70 years. Yet that, presumably, was still how journalists and their readers thought. Future generations may equally look at our way of recording formations and wonder how we ever thought it logical that a team playing "a back four" could feature fewer defensive players than a team playing "a back three".

We understand that full-backs attack and that in a back four the two centre-backs will almost invariably play deeper than their full-backs, but the formation as we note it does not record that. Barcelona tend to play a 4-1-2-3 or a 4-2-1-3, according to our system of notation; heat maps of average position, though, show it as a 2-3-2-3. Barcelona, like Mexico, play a W-W, but not as Pozzo knew it.

THE QUESTION: WHAT IS A PLAYMAKER'S ROLE IN THE MODERN GAME?

A CREATOR NOT A SCORER, WHO CAN PLAY DEEP OR INTERCHANGEABLY AS A SECOND STRIKER, IT IS A POSITION THAT'S DIFFICULT TO DEFINE

Despite his age, Boca Juniors have paid $5m to Juan Román Riquelme to play in the revered No10 role Photograph: Tom Jenkins for the Guardian

Playmakers re-emerged at the World Cup, largely because of the development of 4-2-3-1 as the most common formation: it's impossible to play the system successfully without at least one creator in the line of three. As I tried to trace the lineage of the playmaker though, to map his rise and fall, it became increasingly difficult to define exactly what constitutes a playmaker, and when Barney Ronay asked me whom the first playmaker had been, I found it difficult to answer.

I'm in Argentina at the moment and here the question seems facile. The playmaker is the *enganche*, the hook, the No10, the player who operates behind the front two in the 4-3-1-2 or the 3-4-1-2 that around half the teams still favour. So revered is the position that Boca Juniors have just agreed to pay Juan Román Riquelme $5m over the next four years – including half his tax – despite the fact that he is 32 and increasingly suffers injury problems.

But elsewhere the question is more fraught. In Croatia, for instance, Luka Modric would be considered a playmaker, and when he was at Dinamo Zagreb he played as an *enganche* in a 3-4-1-2. Yet on Saturday for Tottenham he operated as one of the two central players in a 4-4-2 and he has played on the left: is he still a playmaker even if he is not playing in a formation with a 1 in it? Can a playmaker play anywhere other than the centre? And, for that matter, given how Tom Huddlestone sprays the ball around, isn't he also a playmaker, although one of a very different type to Modric?

ORIGINS

The playmaker is his side's prime creator, the hook that joins midfield and attack. When football was in its infancy and formations were slowly emerging from the chaos of the mob game, the creators were the inside-forwards whose job was to take the ball from the wing-halves and feed the centre-forward or the wingers. In the first international, a goalless draw in 1872, England seem to have played a 1-2-7 formation and been flummoxed by the 2-2-6 used by Scotland.

It is difficult to be sure how England arranged their forward-line, largely because contemporary accounts suggest they operated with two left-wings, but a fair guess would be that their two inside-forwards were Cuthbert Ottaway and Arnold Kirke-Smith, although as England eschewed passing it is hard to see how they could be considered creators.

Of Scotland, with their revolutionary 2-2-6, there is a little more evidence and we can be reasonably sure their two inside-forwards were Robert Leckie and James Begg Smith. They did pass, so perhaps they can be considered the first playmakers, although it was only really when the 2-3-5, into which 2-2-6 soon evolved, reached South America that the inside-forwards began to drop deeper towards the midfield and take on the role of linking midfield and attack. The Uruguay side of the 1920s, Olympic champions in 1924 and 1928, were probably the most effective at that, so perhaps the first playmakers were Pedro Cea and Héctor Scarone.

Yet it feels odd to talk about a side having two playmakers (although it is commonly said that River Plate's *la Máquina* side of the late 1940s had five, even after the departure of Alfredo di Stéfano). As 2-3-5 became W-M (or 3-2-2-3), it seems one of the two inside-forwards took on a more creative role, as, for instance, Alex James did for Herbert Chapman's Arsenal. His job was to gather the ball from defence and initiate sweeping counterattacks with long, low, through-balls to the wingers, and so he was, in a sense, the first British playmaker.

4-2-4 AND BEYOND

The process was formalised in Brazil in the late 1940s with the development of the diagonal. A form of the W-M had been implanted at Flamengo in 1937 by the Hungarian Dori Kruschner and, after he was sacked, his assistant Flávio Costa took charge. Costa had been scathing about Kruschner's tactical innovations but, recognising their worth, modified them, nudging the central square of the W-M so it became a rhombus, with either the inside-left pushed higher up the pitch and the right-half dropped deeper, or vice-versa.

The advanced inside-forward became known as the *ponta da lança*(point of the lance) and had a clearly defined function in joining midfield and attack. Even when the rhombus was nudged a little further and 3-2-2-3, having become 3-1-2-1-3, became 4-2-4, the *ponta da lança* tended to drop deep from the frontline as a playmaking second striker: a role Pele shone at in the 1958 World Cup.

But in Europe the evolution towards 4-2-4 came via a different route as the centre-forward began to drop deep. Matthias Sindelar was the first to do that, for Hugo Meisl's Austrian *Wunderteam*, pulling away from the other four forwards and focusing less on scoring than on creating. In the modern sense, he was probably the first playmaker against whom England played but he would probably not have recognised the description. Certainly by the time Nandor Hidegkuti destroyed England at Wembley in 1953 the deep-lying centre-forward was a common ploy: England had been just as befuddled by Alfred Bickel against Switzerland in 1947 and by Jose Lacasia against Argentina in 1953. Even in that Hungary side, though, it would be difficult to say whether the true playmaker was Hidegkuti or the inside-left, Ferenc Puskas.

After the success of Brazil with 4-2-4 in 1958, other nations took up the formation and tinkered with the distribution of the front six. By the time Argentina got to the 1966 World Cup, they were operating with Antonio Rattín as a deep-lying anchor, Luis Artime as a centre-forward, Oscar Más as a forward on the

left-wing, Alberto Gonzalez and Jorge Solari as shuttling midfielders, and Ermindo Onega as a playmaker. That shape, a basic 4-3-1-2, remained the template in Argentina for the next two decades.

While most – including Brazil and England – found an extra midfielder from the 4-2-4 by withdrawing a winger, in the Netherlands, West Germany and the USSR it was more common to withdraw a centre-forward, leaving two wingers in a symmetrical 4-3-3. For those sides, the key was flexibility, and if there was a playmaker he tended to be the *libero* – although Johan Cruyff, almost by force of personality, is an obvious exception. The midfield three, though, was flexible enough to incorporate a playmaker, and when West Germany beat England 3-1 at Wembley in 1972, Günter Netzer was obviously operating as such. The *liberi* – Franz Beckenbauer in particular – were probably the first of the deep-lying playmakers, who by the 1980s were emerging in midfield. In 1982, Brazil had Falcao and Cerezo as deep-lying playmakers with Zico and Socrates as playmakers in the more advanced role.

THE BILARDO PROTOCOL

What really confused the issue, though, was the tactical switch made by the Argentina manager Carlos Bilardo during the 1986 World Cup. It was not so much the shift to a back three – for playmakers it makes little difference whether the seven players behind him are arrayed as a 3-4 or a 4-3 – as the decision to play Diego Maradona as a second striker in the quarter-final against England.

Bilardo admits he made the move purely for practical reasons because he did not believe the centre-forward Pedro Pasculli, who had scored the winner in the second round against Uruguay, could cope against physical English defending. The switch, though, proved probably the most significant tactical change of the decade. Once a playmaker had been used as a second striker, the roles bled into each other. Was Dennis Bergkamp a playmaker or a second striker? Roberto Baggio? Gianfranco Zola?

They were neither and both, and that ambiguity has been formalised by the spread of 4-2-3-1. One of the system's many advantages is that it allows for a deep-lying playmaker – a Xabi Alonso figure – to operate as one of the holding two, so a team can have two creative hubs while retaining a solid defensive structure. It is intriguing too that the emergence of 4-2-1-3 seems to hint at the playmaker/second striker hybrid once again becoming something akin to the playmakers of the 1980s, but operating behind a front three rather than a front two. In that the playmaker is returning to his origins: Scarone, James and Pele, at least in 1958, were similarly creating the play for a central striker and two wingers.

None of this truly defines what constitutes a playmaker: given the range of what people consider playmakers, perhaps the truth is that playmaker is not a position at all but a state of mind.

THE QUESTION: IS 4-2-1-3 THE FUTURE?

ALTHOUGH LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM 4-2-3-1, IT IS SIGNIFICANT IF THE CENTRAL CREATOR PLAYS DEEPER, FOR A WHOLE NUMBER OF REASONS

David Villa, a more natural forward, can then be played in a wide position. Photograph: Christophe Simon/AFP/Getty Images

Evolution never stops. As the World Cup showed, 4-2-3-1 has come to replace 4-4-2 as the universal default (18 of the 32 teams played some form of 4-2-3-1 at some stage, with another three fielding a 4-4-2 that perhaps should have become 4-2-3-1) so the system at the very highest level has already begun to mutate. Spain, by the end of the World Cup, had followed what Barcelona did at times last season, what Arsenal seemed to be reaching towards, and set up in a 4-2-1-3.

Now clearly the distinction between 4-2-3-1 and 4-2-1-3 is minimal. It entails nothing more than the central player in the trident pulling a little deeper and the two wide players advancing slightly. In practice, as the wide players look to escape the attentions of full-backs, their depth of position may not alter greatly, but to refer to the system as 4-2-1-2-1 and start introducing a fifth band is probably to begin to confuse the simplicity that gives value to the practice of assigning numerical codes. The shape, if anything, resembles a diamond sitting on a plinth. As I've said before, the designations are of course crude, but they have a use in providing a broad explicatory template.

THE KEY DIFFERENCES IN THE FORMATIONS

Yet it is significant if that central creator plays deeper, for a whole number of reasons. To begin with, if the playmaker operates close to the holding pair, the team cannot be "broken" into attacking and defensive sections as Holland and Argentina were at the World Cup (which is an advantage for those sides that believe in a possession-based approach). By definition, by being only a short pass away from the creator, the two midfield holders are more involved in the attacking aspect and at least one of them can be encouraged to press forwards at times, as Xabi Alonso did for Spain, and as Seydou Keita does for Barcelona. So immediately the range of attacking options is increased.

There is also an impact on the creator himself. Playing a touch deeper offers him three advantages. He is nearer the two holding players, who can be considered his protectors, which makes it harder physically to intimidate him, while his more withdrawn position means he is farther from the opposing holding midfielders, harder to pick up and thus likely to have more time on the ball (not that Xavi or Cesc Fábregas really needs more time on the ball; one of the joys of watching Spain or Barcelona recently, or

Holland or West Germany of the 70s, is their willingness to give the ball to a man under pressure, trusting his technique to release it and change the angle of attack).

The creator is also more likely to receive the ball facing goal – or at least to have time to turn so he is facing goal – with three team-mates ahead of him (as opposed to one ahead and two alongside) and the potential of others breaking from deep, and so he becomes something more like an old-fashioned playmaker than a second striker who tends to receive the ball with his back to goal. That, in theory, should make the transfer of ball from back to front quicker and thus make a side more penetrative (the example of Chile's 3-3-1-3 at the World Cup suggested that leaving players perpetually high up the pitch helps in terms of pressing and regaining the ball quickly, but can lead to the retention of possession at the expense of penetration). As Juan Román Riquelme points out, a playmaker is only effective if he has players available for whom to make the play.

WHICH TEAMS HAVE ADOPTED THIS TACTIC?

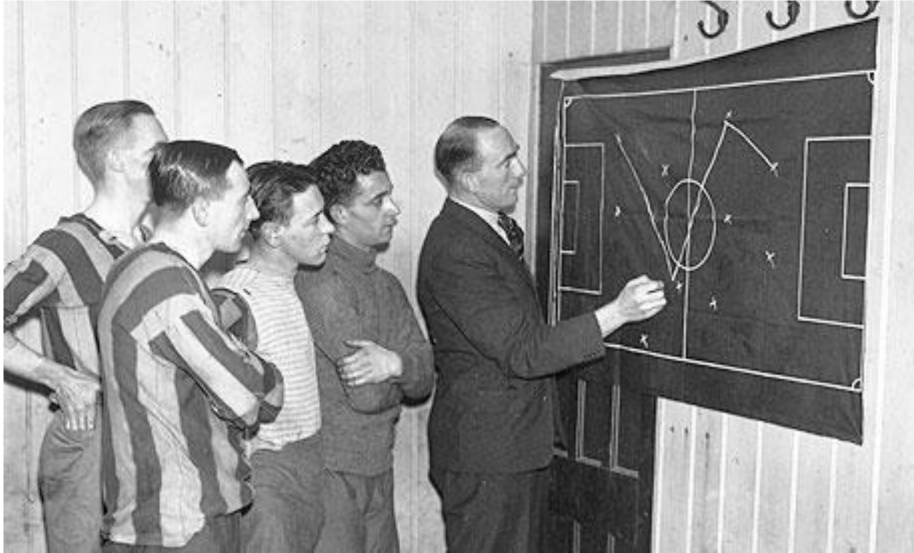
Just as significant, though, is the effect withdrawing the central creator has on the two wide forwards. Rather than having to stay wide to offer a passing option and so as not to intrude on the central player's space, they can drift infield, as Pedro and Andrés Iniesta did regularly for Spain, and as both and Lionel Messi do for Barcelona. That draws them away from the full-back into more awkward areas, and opens space on the overlap for attacking full-backs, who are liberated by the presence of four essentially defensive central players (two centre-backs and two holding midfielders), plus the creator, who can tuck in if necessary.

If Iniesta is included on the left, Messi on the right and Xavi in the middle, Barcelona effectively have a trident of playmakers, all able to interchange and all operating in positions that drag opponents out of their comfortable lines. Or, a more natural forward can be played in one of the wide positions – David Villa, perhaps, with Zlatan Ibrahimovic as the centre-forward – which offers effectively two playmakers (one of whom, Messi, is devastating as a forward anyway), with a central striker adept with his back to goal, and a forward, one of the best finishers in the world, cutting in from the left, able to take advantage of the space available on the diagonal. And all that with Dani Alves and Maxwell overlapping from full-back.

Although Arsenal seem likely to attempt something similar this season, with Fábregas in the Xavi role, backed up by Abou Diaby and Alex Song, Andrei Arshavin and Robin van Persie wide, and Marouane Chamakh offering some muscle at centre-forward, it may prove a formation of limited application, purely because the demands on the playmaker are so great: he must combine the ability to see and execute with at least some of the physicality of a central midfielder, even with two protectors. But when a team has a player like that, 4-2-1-3 may be the way to get the best out of him.

THE QUESTION: WHAT NEXT FOR 4-4-2?

BRITISH FOOTBALL'S FAVOURITE FORMATION ISN'T DEAD – BUT THE WORLD CUP PROVED THE FUTURE OF 4-4-2 LOOKS BLEAK



Is 4-4-2 set to become a thing of the past? Photograph: JA Hampton/Getty Images

This was a bad World Cup for a lot of old favourites – anybody who appeared on the Nike ad, Marcello Lippi, preconceptions about Africa – but none of them had quite such a miserable tournament as 4-4-2. When even its old friend Michael Owen starts doubting it, the future for the formation that has ruled British football for 40 years looks bleak.

Johan Cruyff got stuck in as well last week – not particularly surprisingly given his lifelong ideological insistence on 4-3-3 – pointing out that "the numbers don't match up" and explaining that a system of three straight bands doesn't lend itself to the creation of passing triangles. This has always been an axiom: all else being equal, a triangle will always beat a line, and the Cruyff mode of play has always been predicated on the creation of triangles. A 4-2-3-1, with its W shape in midfield, is essentially comprised of interlocking triangles.

Which raises the question of why, if 4-4-2's disadvantages are so obvious, it has survived for so long? To start with, it should be made clear that Cruyff is speaking about his particular vision of football, which is rooted in ball possession and pressing, something that caused him, even before the game, to align himself with Spain rather than Holland in the World Cup final. That is one way to play – and the recent success of Barcelona and Spain shows it is a successful way to play – but it certainly isn't the only way. That a short-passing, technique-based game isn't for everybody was demonstrated very clearly in a tournament in which many people preferred the more dynamic, if more reactive, football of Germany.

Those passing triangles are only important for a side looking to dominate possession. For a side looking to disrupt that, 4-4-2 can be extremely effective – the famous "two banks of four" that for a long time seemed to be such a feature of any English team playing an away game in European competition. Fulham showed last season how effective the style can still be. Sit the midfield line deep on the back four so there is minimal space between the lines for attacking midfielders or deep-lying forwards to exploit, and it becomes very hard to penetrate. It doesn't matter how many triangles you create if you never get the ball closer than 35 yards from the opposition goal.

Think of Gérard Houllier's Liverpool away to Roma in the Uefa Cup in 2001, with Owen and Robbie Fowler left high upfield, often 50 yards and more from the midfield: keep it tight, make sure of the clean

sheet, and if, as in that case, Owen can pilfer two goals, that's a bonus. Think of Fulham in the Europa League semi-final against Hamburg.

Slovenia's method both in qualifying and at this World Cup, although slightly more possession-based, wasn't dissimilar, particularly after Zlatan Ljubijankic had replaced Zlatko Dedic. Ljubijankic is a more technical player and a better finisher than Dedic, but he doesn't drop off and doesn't forage which, at least against England – a game in which Slovenia played with such trepidation you wondered if anybody had told them Stan Mortensen and Tom Finney had retired – left Valter Birsa's occasional forays on the right as the only bridge between midfield and attack.

SACCHI'S SQUEEZE AND THE MODERN STRETCH

So 4-4-2 has a future as a reactive formation, yet it was also the preferred formation of Arrigo Sacchi, probably the most proactive coach of all. It was the system's defensive attributes, though, that made it work for him. The great strength of the Milan of the late 80s was its pressing, with Sacchi demanding an ideal of 25 metres from centre-forward to centre-back when his side were out of possession. They squeezed high up the pitch, and so 4-4-2 made sense because a four-man midfield meant each member of the back four was protected by a midfielder and so was less likely to be isolated (which, with acres of space behind him, was a real concern).

Possession was less of a concern for Sacchi. I recently watched Milan's 5-0 victory over Real Madrid in the second leg of the semi-final of the 1989 European Cup, and was struck by how often (comparatively speaking) they gave the ball away. Madrid, for long periods, looked the better side on the ball, but were undone by the dynamism of Sacchi's side (although 5-0 was still a freakish scoreline). It's probably the case that, as Egil Olsen posited in a more pragmatic context, a team have to choose between prioritising possession and position on the field.

Pressing is still part of the game, and Barcelona and Spain both perform the high press excellently, but it has been made harder to execute because of the liberalisation of the offside law. The effective playing area has been stretched, and as a result, three-band systems have increasingly been replaced by four-band systems.

Perhaps it is just about conceivable that, if players could be persuaded to put their egos to one side (and that could be an issue for Roy Hodgson if he attempts to apply the Fulham system at Liverpool this season), a club team could still be drilled into an effective pressing 4-4-2, but achieving that level of discipline is an exhausting, demoralisingly boring process that became too much even for Milan after three seasons; it was very hard to implement then, with the change in the offside law and players enjoying greater freedom to change clubs it is even harder now. At international level, anyway, where the time available to work with players is limited and they are fatigued by club commitments, it is impossible, something even Sacchi was forced to acknowledge.

4-4-2 ISN'T DEAD

What the World Cup has done is to expose the problems 4-4-2 without hard pressing faces, and not just in terms of being outnumbered in midfield; with the stretching of the effective playing area, the midfield band can become exposed, with space in front of it and space behind it. That gap between defensive and midfield lines was precisely the space Mesut Ozil exploited so well in the first half of Germany's victory over England (this space, as Matthias Sindelar, Alfred Bickel, Laszlo Kubala, Nandor Hidegkuti, Pelé, Günter Netzer,Diego Maradona, Ruud Gullit, Zinedine Zidane, Rui Costa and Juan Román Riquelme and countless others have demonstrated, has always been a problem for England, and that weakness is one of the reasons Eric Cantona, Dennis Bergkamp and Gianfranco Zola were so successful in the Premier League in the 90s). Quite apart from the furious search for immediate justice that followed the non-award of a goal after Frank Lampard's shot had crossed the line, it may be that a desire to compress that area was partly behind England's suicidally high line in the second half of that game.

And yet when the Premier League begins again next month, probably around half the sides will be playing 4-4-2, and not all as a stifling tactic. That is not because of a lack of tactical sophistication, or at least not just because of a lack of tactical sophistication: 4-4-2, to those brought up in Britain, is the default; it's what every player is brought up to understand. A five-man midfield, however it is arrayed, brings its own problems, perhaps most obviously that it can be difficult, particularly for less technical teams, to get men forward to support the lone striker.

Below the very highest level, it may be that it is better simply to let players do what comes naturally. Then there is the issue of personnel, particularly at clubs with a relatively limited budget. At Sunderland, for instance, Steve Bruce may like the idea of 4-2-3-1, but when he has Kenwyne Jones and Darren Bent forming a potent partnership, it makes little sense to disrupt it, even if the corollary is that he occasionally loses control of midfield. Sunderland's form last season notably improved when Steed Malbranque moved to the left and began cutting infield, effectively giving Sunderland an auxiliary central midfielder and bringing them greater control in the centre.

So 4-4-2 isn't dead, but the World Cup confirmed that the trend of the past decade at the highest level is against it.

THE QUESTION: WHAT HAVE BEEN THE TACTICAL LESSONS OF WORLD CUP 2010?

SPAIN HAVE ADOPTED THE BARCELONA FORMULA, WHICH SEEMS TO BE THE WAY CLUB FOOTBALL IS GOING

Spain's Carles Puyol, centre, celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Germany during their 2010 World Cup semi-final. Photograph: David Gray/Reuters

This has been the tournament of 4-2-3-1. The move has been apparent in club football for some time; in fact, it may be that 4-2-3-1 is beginning to be supplanted by variants of 4-3-3 at club level, but international football these days lags behind the club game, and this tournament has confirmed the trend that began to emerge at Euro 2008. Even Michael Owen seems to have noticed, which is surely the tipping point.

Formations, though, are one thing, their employment something else, and what has been noticeable in South Africa has been the vast range of 4-2-3-1s. Spain, when they finally adopted it against Germany, and stopped trying to squeeze Fernando Torres and David Villa into the same side, fiddled with the line of three, pulling Xavi back and pushing Andrés Iniesta and Pedro forward so it almost becomes 4-2-1-3,

which seems to be the route club football is taking. It has had very attacking full-backs and has pressed high up the pitch, essentially using the Barcelona formula.

There are those who protest at their lack of goals (no side has reached the final scoring fewer) but they are a classic example of a team that prefers to control the game than to become obsessed by creating chances. Perhaps they at times become mesmerised by their passing, perhaps there is even something attritional about it, wearing opponents down until they make the mistake, but it is beautiful attrition. Those who have protested at the modern Holland, and their supposed betrayal of the heritage of Total Football, which is being painted as the ne plus ultra of attacking football, should perhaps look back at the European Cup finals of 1971-73 when Ajax expressed their mastery by holding the ball for long periods. Frankly, if they ever faced a side who took them on rather than sitting eight men behind the ball, we may see a more overtly attacking Spain.

Which brings us to Germany. They too play a 4-2-3-1 and, although Philipp Lahm breaks forward occasionally, theirs is essentially a defensive set-up. Here again goals are the great betrayers; it was bewildering how much praise was heaped on their supposedly fresh, open approach just because they scored four goals in three games. This Germany was superb on the counterattack, and the interaction of the front four of Miroslav Klose, Thomas Müller, Lukas Podolski and Mesut Ozil was at times breathtaking. But this was reactive football.

In three games, Germany scored an early first goal – against Argentina and England, it was essentially handed to them – and in those games they ruthlessly took advantage of the space opponents left behind them as they chased an equaliser. England, Argentina and Australia all defended idiotically against them, and were severely punished. In the other three games, teams defended decently against them and the early goal didn't arrive surrounded by watercress on a silver salver. In those games Germany managed one goal, and that a wonder-strike from Ozil. Against Spain their poverty of ideas was such they ended up sending the lumbering centre-back Per Mertesacker forward as an auxiliary striker, an idea so bereft of subtlety that the only time I remember it working was when Dennis Smith once sent Gary Bennett forward for Sunderland against Oxford in 1990.

Reactivity, in fact, has been a feature of this World Cup, which is one of the reasons the proactivity of Spain is so welcome. It's probably too early to highlight it as a definite trend, for the world seemed headed in a similar direction in 2004 when José Mourinho's Porto won the Champions League and Greece won the European Championship, only for attacking football to return the next season, but with Mourinho's success with Inter, it may be that the great creative boom of the past decade is drawing to a close.

Holland and Argentina both effectively played broken teams, the former in a 4-2-3-1, the latter in a 4-3-1-2. Certain players were clearly designated to defend, others to attack, with very little to link them. The allure of the approach is understandable, for with the limited time available to managers it is difficult to develop sophisticated systems (Spain benefit from the fact that so many of their players play for the same club, and that they have essentially played the same way, with minor evolution, for four years), and simplification is desirable.

It can be effective, and the way Nigel de Jong and Mark van Bommel have protected Holland's shaky back four has been admirable, but it can render a team static and reliant on the ability of a couple of individuals (Arjen Robben and Wesley Sneijder; Lionel Messi and Carlos Tevez). And if the forwards do no tracking back at all the system can very easily be unsettled by a breaker from midfield, as for instance Bastian Schweinsteiger showed against Argentina.

Even Brazil had an element of reactivity about them, often sitting deep, pressing only when the opponent had crossed halfway, and then hitting the space behind them. They played an angled 4-2-3-1 that had the advantage of getting Robinho into an area other 4-2-3-1s found difficult to counteract. Although they capitulated miserably in the second half against Holland, and although they have an utter disregard for the samba stereotype, they have been arguably the strongest side in the world over the past four years, winning the Copa América, the Confederations Cup and finishing top of Conmebol qualifying. That they and Spain never met feels like one of the great missed games.

Then there was Ghana's 4-2-3-1, with the five midfielders packed deep and Asamoah Gyan the lonest of lone strikers, only in bursts breaking free with the sort of passing that suggests they might actually be a force in years to come. Japan played a 4-2-3-1 with a false nine, almost embracing their historical lack of midfield flair (and no, two free-kicks, brilliant as they were, plus a goal on the break against Denmark doesn't suddenly make them a creative force, even if Keisuke Honda offers great hope for the future).

The rise of 4-2-3-1 has had knock-on effects. Attacking full-backs have become rarer – and the difference in attitude of the respective pairs of full-back is arguably the major difference between the two 4-2-3-1s that will meet in the final. It had seemed that the advance of lone-central-striker systems would spell the end for three at the back, for who needed two spare men? Well, it turns out that teams intent merely on surviving, playing for goalless draws, do, and that's what Uruguay did against France, North Korea did against Brazil, and New Zealand did on a regular basis.

Again, that suggests a preparedness to absorb pressure that it's hard to believe wasn't in some way, if not inspired then at least encouraged, by Inter's success in Barcelona. There was evidence that a technically inferior side could, though discipline and industry, endure a prolonged assault. It is that same battle between proactivity and reactivity that will be fought on Sunday; and for once, it is the Dutch who find themselves cast as the destructive force.

THE QUESTION: HOW IMPORTANT IS POSSESSION?

WILL INTER'S SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE AT BARCELONA, WHEN THEY HAD 16% POSSESSION, BE SEEN AS A TURNING POINT IN FOOTBALL?

José Mourinho celebrates at Camp Nou after his possession-starved Inter reached the Champions League final. Photograph: Filippo Monteforte/AFP/Getty Images

One of the beauties of football is its capacity for reinvention, without great rewriting of the rules. Unlike certain other sports – for instance Aussie Rules, which I pick on for no reason other than that the issue was brought to mind by this piece in the Sydney Morning Herald – football seems to have (historically justified) faith that coaches and players will be able to mediate their own way away from predictability or, worse, unwatchability.

Yes, there has been tinkering with the offside rule, and the backpass and the tackle from behind have been outlawed, but essentially a player from a century ago could be parachuted into a game today and

would need no more than a two-minute tutorial to get him up to speed on the modern rules. He'd be gasping for the Woodbines after 10 minutes, admittedly, but he would at least know what was going on.

When a rigid W-M seemed dominant, fluid 4-2-4 rose up to overcome it. As *catenaccio* threatened to strangle the game, along came Total Football. As Johan Cruyff was accusing 3-5-2 as being "the death of football" because it killed the winger, single-striker systems emerged to reintroduce them. Football constantly evolves, and watching Internazionale frustrate Barcelona two weeks ago, it was hard not to wonder whether tactical historians of the future will look back on that game as a turning point as significant as, say, Hungary's 6-3 win over England in 1953, Celtic's 2-1 win over Inter in the 1967 European Cup final or Italy's 3-2 victory over Brazil at the 1982 World Cup.

It rather depends, of course, on what happens next as to whether this is confirmation of a trend or a blip, but what Inter's victory has done is to challenge the assumption that the "best" way to play is to maintain possession and pass a side to death – as Barça have, as Spain do and as, in a slightly less aesthetically pleasing way, Brazil do.

IN CONTEXT

Now, some caveats. Inter still lost at Camp Nou, and but for a handball decision against Yaya Touré that could have gone either way, would have gone out on the away goals rule. Although they were themselves wronged in losing Thiago Motta to a red card (the continuing unwillingness of the authorities retroactively to punish those, like Sergio Busquets, who have blatantly cheated is bewildering), they also had the benefit of two key decisions in the first leg, in that Diego Milito's goal was offside and Dani Alves should have had a penalty (although it's hard to have sympathy with somebody who cries wolf so often). And, of course, Barça were disadvantaged in having had to make the journey to Milan by bus, which perhaps left them leggy and not quite so sharp in their pressing as they had been, for instance, at the Emirates.

So their 3-1 lead was fortuitously obtained, and without it, Inter would not have had the platform on which to build their rearguard action, and even then it might have meant nothing had Bojan's late strike been allowed to stand. And yet, for all that, to make Barcelona look so toothless when they had 84% – 84%! - of possession is remarkable, and shows what can be achieved with rigorous organisation allied to immense mental strength.

José Mourinho's claim that his side deliberately gave the ball away so as not to lose focus may have been exaggeration for the sake of bravado but, whether purposeful or not, to prosper having had so little of the ball seems almost the definition of anti-football. (Earlier this season, a frustrated Arsène Wenger asked how his side were supposed to play properly when other teams persisted in playing anti-football against him, and raised the thought of the former Estudiantes coach Osvaldo Zubeldía, an evangelist for "anti-fútbol", storming into a press conference in La Plata demanding to know how his side were supposed to spoil and break the game up when the opposition persisted in playing "fútbol" against them, passing and dribbling, having shots and generally disrupting his team's game plan.) At the very least, Inter's success must make football ask whether possession is really all that important.

THE BRITISH DEBATE

Nobody likes to talk about it, of course, what with the instinctive British distrust of anything resembling a theory, but English football in the 1970s and early 80s went through a philosophical battle every bit as keenly fought as the clash between Bilardisme and Menottisme. Where the Argentinian debate was essentially a moral one – was football about beauty or about winning? – the English debated the importance of maintaining possession. For them, the divide between winning and beauty seemed almost artificial: football was just played, and – to exaggerate slightly - it was assumed that everybody accepted that cheating was bad, kicking people was acceptable and that skill, rooted in the sort of powers of deception that seemed worryingly close to cheating, was largely to be distrusted.

On the side of possession was Allen Wade, the technical director of the FA, whose coaching course was such an influence on the likes of Roy Hodgson. Arguing against that was Charles Reep, whose ideas would become FA policy under Charles Hughes, Wade's successor as technical director.

Reep is a much-maligned figure, and to an extent that is understandable. He was, as Howard Wilkinson said, "a zealot", a fussy, rather pompous figure, unsubtle of thought, and intolerant of any criticism. To dismiss him out of hand, though, would be wrong, for he was the British pioneer of match analysis – touchingly, he would record games from the stand at Plymouth's Home Park wearing a miner's helmet to illuminate his notebook – and, however questionable his conclusions may have been, they were at least honestly held and based on meticulous research, if not rigorous analysis. When he fell out with Hughes, accusing him of plagiarising his ideas to write his hugely popular coaching manual, The Winning Formula (something Hughes vehemently denied), his dismissal of the book was rather magnificent, pointing out that its conclusions were based on a study of 202 goals, while he had analysed 9,175.

In 1973, he wrote League Championship Winning Soccer and the Random Effect: The Anatomy of Soccer under the Microscope, a book outlining his theories that remains unpublished. In it, he analysed England's 3-1 home defeat to West Germany in the first leg of their 1972 European Championship quarter-final. Most regarded the game, in which a Günter Netzer-inspired West Germany passed and passed and passed and made England look lumberingly Neanderthal by comparison, as England's most crushing setback since the 6-3 defeat to Hungary. But not Reep.

"Many managers," Reep said, "still seem to believe that, if they scorn the long forward pass, and play 'cultured', 'smooth flowing' football, they will not only please the crowd, and be praised by the Press, but also score enough goals to win promotion too… The very meagre use of the long pass by West Germany recently, will doubtless cause much imitation in the Football League… several first division teams have been observed… to be apparently imitating West Germany's extreme elaboration. The Press call it 'playing total football'."

Long passes may not find their intended target, but for Reep that was irrelevant. "While the intention should always be to find a team-mate with each long forward pass," he wrote, "the long pass not received brings valuable gains, and is by no means wasted." His figures, he claimed, showed that in terms of effectiveness of chance creation five long passes not received are the equal of four long passes received. "Passing has become such a fetish that when watching 'modern' play one sometimes has the impression that goal-scoring has become the secondary objective, with 'stroking the ball about' in cross-field moves, taking first place."

Reep was largely protesting against what he saw as pointless sideways passing, and to an extent he had a point. Mourinho has introduced English football to the notion of "resting with the ball", and ball retention in itself can be a way of wearing down an opponent, even if there is not a lead to be protected, but there is a danger that possession becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to opening space or running down the clock. There are times when sideways passing is simply a means of offloading responsibility, and there were spells last week when Barça's passing, usually so incisive, seemed like passing for passing's sake. As Hughes adapted Reep's ideas, and applied them at the FA's Centre of Excellence at Lilleshall, direct football became the explicit tactical philosophy of the English game, and the emphasis came increasingly to focus on long diagonals and effort.

POSITION OR POSSESSION?

Egil Olsen, who had played 16 times for Norway, and was a lecturer at the Norwegian University of Sport and Physical Education, took Wade's theory, dissected it and presented a revised model. His statistical analysis suggested that the probability of scoring again before the ball goes dead is greater when the ball is with the opposing goalkeeper than with a side's own, which led to his conclusion that the position of the ball is more important than who is in possession. Accordingly, after becoming national coach in 1990, he demanded that balls be played as often as possible into the "bakrom" – that is, the space behind the opposition's defensive line. Norway ended up being ranked second in the world.

There are reasons to be cautious with the work of Reep in that he pays no attention to the quality of the teams involved. It seems, for instance, a reasonable assumption that the poorer a team is technically, the greater the risks when it attempts to play possession football and, equally, the better an opponent, the less likely they are to be undone by a simple long ball. Hughes's figures, insubstantial as they are, tend to support the theory that the higher the level, the less effective direct football is (very briefly, if you separate goals scored in internationals in his sample, 63% resulted from moves of five passes or fewer, as opposed to an overall figure of 87%).

Where the analysis of Reep and Hughes seems deficient is that they seem to have assumed teams should constantly be trying to score. Inter last week had little intention of doing so. Other sides in a similar position – Brazil against England in the 2002 World Cup, for instance, or Liverpool in the away leg of their Champions League quarter final against Juventus in 2005 – may have defended their advantage by holding possession; Inter preferred to surrender possession and hold a position just outside their own box. It worked, and while they may have had a touch of fortune, it is also the case that they frustrated Barça as well as anybody has done this season, so in that regard it must be regarded as having been a successful tactic.

GENERAL APPLICATION

Perhaps, though, this was a special case. Inter proved themselves a team with great tactical discipline – as they had in holding Fiorentina when down to nine men earlier in the season – and they were playing a side who pose a special set of problems in a game in which they knew narrow defeat would be enough.

Opta statistics, produced in conjunction with Castrol, show that over the past two seasons in the Premier League in only around a third of games did one side have 60% of possession or more, and when they did they won 52% of the time, and lost 25%. If a side had 70% possession or over (which happened in 4.7% of games), they won 67% of the time and lost 17%. Only once in the past two seasons did one side have over 80 per cent possession – Liverpool, in their 3-2 win at Bolton last August.

In the closer games, having 50-59.9% possession meant a side won 43% of the time and lost 31%. So there is a clear correlation between dominating possession and winning matches. Intuitively, we know that there are sides who are successful at counter-attacking, which logically means accepting a lower percentage of possession.

What Inter showed last week, is that there are specific cases in which a radical disregard for possession can succeed. At Milan, Arrigo Sacchi got fed up of players moaning about his obsession with team shape, and so proved its worth with a simple drill. "I convinced [Ruud] Gullit and [Marco] Van Basten by telling them that five organised players would beat 10 disorganised ones," he said. "And I proved it to them. I took five players: Giovanni Galli in goal, [Mauro] Tassotti, [Paolo] Maldini, [Alesandro] Costacurta and [Franco] Baresi. They had 10 players: Gullit, Van Basten, [Frank] Rijkaard, [Pietro Paolo] Virdis, [Alberigo] Evani, [Carlo] Ancelotti, [Angelo] Colombo, [Roberto] Donadoni, [Christian] Lantignotti and [Graziano] Mannari. They had 15 minutes to score against my five players, the only rule was that if we won possession or they lost the ball, they had to start over from 10 metres inside their own half. I did this all the time and they never scored. Not once."

There are times when possession matters less than organisation.

THE QUESTION: WHY IS PRESSING SO CRUCIAL IN THE MODERN GAME?

BARCELONA AND BAYERN MUNICH BOTH DEMONSTRATED THE VALUE OF PRESSING THE OPPOSITION TO REGAIN POSSESSION QUICKLY LAST WEEK

Cesc Fabregas is tackled by Sergio Busquets: Barcelona's pressing game caused problems for Arsenal in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final. Photograph: Shaun Botterill/Getty Images

After Valeriy Lobanovskyi's Dynamo Kyiv had beaten Zenit Leningrad 3-0 in October 1981 to seal their 10th Soviet title, the report in Sportyvna Hazeta lamented that Viktor Maslov was not alive to see his conception of the game taken to such heights. It's a shame both weren't still with us to have seen those ideas taken to another level again by Barcelona against Arsenal last Wednesday.

As many have noted over the past week, Barcelona's rapid interchange of passes, the relentless attacking and the marauding full-backs perhaps recall one of the great Brazil sides, but the underlying process by which they play comes through the line of Maslov, Rinus Michels and Lobanovskyi.

"Without the ball," Pep Guardiola said after last season's Champions League final, "we are a disastrous team, a horrible team, so we need the ball." It is a sentence that could equally be used of Arsenal: of course they are much better in possession than out of it. The difference is that Barcelona are much better at regaining possession than Arsenal.

After 20 minutes last Wednesday, Barcelona had had 72% of the possession, a barely fathomable figure against anybody, never mind against a side so noted for their passing ability as Arsenal. Their domination in that area came not so much because they are better technically – although they probably are – but because they are better at pressing. In that opening spell, Barça snapped into tackles, swirled around Arsenal, pressured them even deep in their own half. It was a remorseless, bewildering assault; there was no respite anywhere on the pitch, not even when the ball was rolled by the goalkeeper to a full-back just outside the box.

Arsenal buckled. Again and again, even players for whom composure in possession is usually a default gave the ball away. It's hard to believe Cesc Fábregas, who was admittedly possibly hampered by injury, has ever passed the ball as poorly as he did in the first half. Andrey Arshavin was so discombobulated he did a mini-Gazza and crocked his knee lunging at Sergio Busquets.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR

This is the unspoken strength of Barcelona: they aren't just majestic in possession themselves; they also make other sides tentative in possession. Think not just of Arsenal, but of Michael Carrick and Anderson haplessly misplacing passes in Rome last May. Partly that is because Barça are so quick to close space; but it is also psychological. Barça are so good in possession, so unlikely to give the ball back, that every moment when their opponents have the ball becomes unbearably precious; even simple passes become loaded with pressure because the consequences of misplacing them are so great.

Although less spectacular in possession, Dunga's Brazil do something similar, aided, as Rob Smyth noted, by having conned the world into believing they still play in a way that they haven't since 1982. That's why so many pundits seem baffled by Brazil's recent successes in the Confederations Cup and the Copa America. John Terry, having watched from the stands as they beat England 1-0 in Doha last year, was still talking about them having "individuals who can frighten anyone one-on-on" while insisting "I don't think Brazil are anything really to worry about".

Their individuals probably aren't, but individuality is no longer their strength; their strength is their cohesion, and the discipline of their pressing which, allied to their technique when in possession, means their opponents almost never have the ball, something Wayne Rooney pointed out in a post-match interview in which his bright red face paid eloquent testament to just how much fruitless chasing he had done.

Notably, Brazil's worst recent performance came in their 1-1 draw in World Cup qualifying away to Ecuador, when only a string of saves from Julio Cesar preserved them from heavy defeat; in Quito, of course, the altitude makes the physical effort required for hard pressing far more difficult.

SHOCK AND AWE

Even in the context of their own excellence, though, Barça were exceptional in that opening 20 minutes. Which raises the question of why then, why not every game, and why not in the final 70 minutes. Perhaps an element of complacency crept in, perhaps Arsenal slowly shook themselves out of their daze and began to play, perhaps the replacement of Arshavin with Emmanuel Eboué gave them a greater defensive presence on the right; certainly those seemed to be the commonest explanations.

It is, anyway, a historical truth that when sides strike a period when everything clicks perfectly as it did for Barça in that early period, it rarely lasts more than a few minutes, even in performances held up as the greatest of all time. West Germany, for instance, only really played brilliantly for the first 35 minutes of their 3-1 win over England at Wembley in 1972. Even Hungary, in their 6-3 demolition of England in 1953, were done after 65 minutes, and had dipped towards the end of the first half. Transcendence is, by definition, very difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain.

But it may also be that Barcelona's early surge was part of a calculated plan, and that is why the comparison with Lobanovskyi seems apt, even though the more direct line of influence is through Michels and Johan Cruyff. Pressing with the intensity Barcelona achieved on Wednesday is exhausting, and cannot be kept up for long periods.

In The Methodological Basis of the Development of Training Models, the book he co-wrote with Anatoliy Zelentsov, Lobanovskyi lays out three different kinds of pressing. There is full-pressing, when opponents are hounded deep in their own half; half-pressing, when opponents are closed down only as they cross halfway; and there is false pressing, when a team pretends to press, but doesn't – that is, one player would close down the man in possession, while the others would sit off.

Particularly against technically gifted opponents, Lobanovskyi would have his sides perform the full-press early to rattle them, after which false pressing would often be enough to induce a mistake – and often, of course, his side would be comfortably ahead after the period of full-pressing.

Whether Guardiola has quite such a structured theory is unlikely, but it does seem probable that there was a conscious effort from Barcelona to impose themselves early. The only problem was that, mainly through excellent goalkeeping, and partly through ill luck and poor finishing, Barça were not ahead after 20 minutes, and Arsenal, this season, as their catalogue of decisive late goals suggests, are rather more resilient than they used to be.

PRESSING BACK

Arsenal's attempts to respond with pressing of their own were, frankly, dismal. Allowance should be made for how shaken they were in the early minutes, but the gulf between the sides was still obvious. For pressing to be effective the team must remain compact, which is why Rafael Benítez is so often to be seen on the touchline pushing his hands towards each other as though he were playing an invisible accordion. Arrigo Sacchi said the preferred distance from centre-forward to centre-back when out of possession was 25m, but the liberalisation of the offside trap (of which more next week) has made the calculation rather more complicated.

Again and again, Arsenal's forwards would press, and a huge gap would open up between that line and the line of the midfield. Or the midfield would press, and a gap would open in front of the back four. What that means is that the player in possession can simply step round the challenger into space, or play a simple pass to a player moving into the space; the purpose of the pressing is negated. Or, if you prefer, it was as though Arsenal were false-pressing, without having achieved the first stage of the hustle which is to persuade the opposition you are good at pressing.

Even worse followed after Arsène Wenger apparently attempted to address the issue at half-time, and encouraged his back four to push up. The problem, though, is that if the timing and organisation of the step-up are amiss, a side becomes vulnerable to simple balls over the top such as led to the first goal, or through-balls such as led to the second. This has been a recurring problem for Arsenal over the past couple of years, Gabriel Agbonlahor's goal for Aston Villa at the Emirates last season being a classic example.

THE WALCOTT PROTOCOL

What turned the game towards Arsenal – although even in the final 25 minutes when they scored twice, it would be a stretch to say they took control – was the introduction of Theo Walcott. When England beat Croatia 4-1 in Zagreb 18 months ago, he was a key player not just because he scored a hat-trick, but because his pace hit at Croatia's attacking system on their left. At Euro 2008, they had got used to Ivan Rakitic cutting in on to his right foot, with the full-back Danijel Pranjic overlapping, but Pranjic, aware of the danger of allowing Walcott to get behind him, became inhibited. He was neutralised as an attacking threat, while Rakitic became predictable, always turning infield without anybody outside him to draw the full-back – which is the downside of the inside-out winger.

By the nature of how they play, Barcelona, similarly, are vulnerable in the full-back areas. Dani Alves, in particular, is a sham of a defender – which is why Dunga prefers Maicon – but so long as Barcelona control possession it doesn't matter because his job is to be an extra man in midfield and to overlap for Messi (it may have been fear he would not be able to get forward as usual that led Guardiola to use Messi not on the right but as a false nine).

That is one of the reasons Barça's pressing is so awesome; with the full-backs pushed on, their system often appears as, effectively, a 2-5-3. To press with so many so high is a gamble, but one that has tended to be effective. Florent Malouda's performance against Alves in the second leg of the semi-final last year is an indication of what happens when the gamble fails and Barça do not control possession.

The arrival of Walcott disrupted Barça's pressing because Maxwell, like Pranjic, suddenly began looking over his shoulder (in a similar way, Charlie Davies's diagonal runs behind the full-back were a key to

USA's victory over Spain at the Confederations Cup because they prevented Sergio Ramos pushing forward and so made Spain very narrow in midfield).

Samir Nasri had earlier had some success against Alves – almost all Arsenal's attacks in the first hour came through him, or through space he had created – and once Arsenal had weathered Barça's initial surge and begun to have some possession, it may be that Arshavin could have done something similar against Maxwell. Real pace, though, adds another dimension, because it means the full-back knows that as soon as the wide-man has got behind him, he has no chance of catching up. Perhaps that is an argument for Walcott starting, but then again, without Eboué last week, maybe they wouldn't have got any grip on possession.

And that, really, is the dilemma for Arsenal: attack Barcelona where they are vulnerable, by playing two out and out attacking wide-men, and the danger is you never have enough possession to make the most of that potential advantage. Concentrate on winning possession by playing more cautiously, and you may have no damaging way in which to use it.

The bigger problem, though, is the issue of pressing. Even if all else is equal, the fact remains that Barça are far, far more adept at winning the ball back than Arsenal, and that makes it all but certain they will dominate possession, and thus the game. Maslov and Lobanovskyi would have approved.

THE QUESTION: WHY ARE SO MANY WINGERS PLAYING ON THE 'WRONG' WINGS?

THE TACTIC OF PLAYING RIGHT-FOOTERS ON THE LEFT WING, AND VICE VERSA, IS INCREASING WIDESPREAD AND EFFECTIVE. WHY?

Lionel Messi: the perfect example of the new breed of winger. Photograph: Susana Vera/Reuters

Football used to be an easy game. The big lads played at centre-half and centre-forward, the hard lads played at full-back, the bright lads played at inside forward, the hard lads who were a bit bright and the bright lads who were a bit hard played at wing-half, and the little, quick lads played on the wing. Left-footers played on the left and right-footers played on the right. And the one with no mates went in goal.

Eight decades on, and it's all rather more complicated, and not just because not all goalkeepers these days are entirely socially dysfunctional. Wingers disappeared for a while, and became a luxury item,

almost a museum piece, but now they're back, all over the place, and the tendency is for them to play on the opposite flank.

There have always been a handful who did that. Tom Finney, for instance, played as a right-footed left-wing in the greatest English forward line there has ever been – along with Stanley Matthews, Stan Mortensen, Tommy Lawton and Wilf Mannion – but that was only because Matthews was already installed in his preferred position. Later, players such as Dennis Tueart, Chris Waddle, Marc Overmars and Robert Pires, operating on the opposite side through preference, were highly effective coming in on to their stronger foot.

But now these inside-out wingers are everywhere. At Barcelona, Leo Messi is proving himself probably the greatest individual talent since Diego Maradona, cutting in from the right on to his stronger left foot. Arjen Robben has resurrected Bayern Munich's season doing much the same. Cristiano Ronaldo is right-footed and plays on the right, but is so strong with his left that he too is constantly shifting inside, looking for shooting opportunities.

It's the same in England. Ashley Young is a right-footed left-winger. Adam Johnson is left-footed but has made an impact at Manchester City on the right, while Craig Bellamy, a right-footer on the left, has arguably been their best player this season. Niko Kranjcar plays on the left but drifts infield on to his right. Damien Duff spent most of his career on the left but has prospered on the right for Fulham. At Wigan, the left-footed Charles N'Zogbia is having a decent season on the right. Steed Malbranque has been a revelation in recent weeks on the left for Sunderland. At national level, Steven Gerrard has become the preferred choice on the left of the attacking midfield trident when Fabio Capello opts for 4-2-3-1. So why is the tactic so effective, and why has it suddenly become so widespread?

THE DEATH OF THE TRADITIONAL WINGER

Herbert Chapman, who foresaw most developments, was suspicious of the winger even before the 1925 change in the offside law prompted the shift away from 2-3-5 to W-M. His Huddersfield team that won the FA Cup in 1922 and went on to lift three successive league titles featured two wingers in George Richardson and Billy Smith who eschewed the touchline-hugging stereotype. Inside passing, Chapman argued, was "more deadly, if less spectacular" than the "senseless policy of running along the lines and centering just in front of the goalmouth, where the odds are nine to one on the defenders".

Chapman's Arsenal side that itself completed a hat-trick of championships was thoroughly modern in the sense of having wingers who regularly drifted infield, making the most of the long, accurate passing of the inside-forward Alex James. Yet for all their success, the image of the winger, isolated, bandy-legged, sashaying his way past the full-back and crossing, remained to English eyes the creative ideal. Perhaps the hurly-burly of English midfields, or the fact that from autumn onwards the only firm ground was to be found out wide, meant flair was necessarily pushed to the flanks. Perhaps it was simply nostalgia.

In the year immediately following the World War Two, there was a great flowering of the English winger with Matthews, Finney, Len Shackleton, Bobby Langton, Jimmy Mullen, George Robb, Johnny Hancocks and Charlie Mitten. The problem was that they emerged just as the collectivist football of the Communist bloc was demonstrating the outmodedness of the English focus on the individual.

Mikhail Yakushin, the manager of the 1945 Dinamo Moscow tourists, for instance, was scornful of Matthews. "The principle of collective play is the guiding one in Soviet football," he said. "A player must not only be good in general; he must be good for the particular team. His individual qualities are high, but we put collective football first and individual football second, so we do not favour his style as we think teamwork would suffer." It took the 6-3 mauling at home to Hungary in 1953 to bring that message home – six months after what many saw as the apogee of wing-play, Matthews's performance in the 1953 FA Cup final.

What really did for the old-school winger, though, was the shift from the three at the back of the W-M to a back four, a process which began in Hungary, the Soviet Union and Brazil in the 1950s and was

universalised after Brazil's successes in the 1958 and 1962 World Cups. The back three of the W-M operated on a pivot; the ideal for attacking teams was to switch play rapidly from one flank to the other, so "turning" the defence, and providing space for the winger so he could be travelling at speed by the time he reached the full-back. Add an extra defender, and that acceleration room simply isn't there anymore.

It was that realisation that led Alf Ramsey and Viktor Maslov to develop the 4-4-2 (or, more accurately in both cases, the 4-1-3-2) in the mid-1960s. As their ideas took hold, the winger became a wide midfielder, a shuttler, somebody who might be expected to cross a ball but was also meant to put in a defensive shift. The lop-sided 4-3-3s of the 1970s could still accommodate something approximating to a winger, but by the 1980s they had become increasingly rare, evolved out of existence by the dominance of 4-4-2 and 3-5-2 – which Johan Cruyff described as "the death of football" precisely because it militated against wing-play.

THE REINVENTION OF THE WINGER

As 4-2-3-1 and 4-1-2-3 came to vie with 4-4-2, so the winger could be introduced. Dribbling was a way of disrupting the predictability that 4-4-2 often seemed to engender, and the deployment of two holding midfielders provided the platform that enabled the incorporation of dribblers again. Why, though, do so many prefer to turn infield rather than doing what wingers used to do, trying to get to the goal-line and sweep in a cross?

With a lone centre-forward, of course, there is a need for the advanced midfielders to provide goals (and conversely, it may be that many of the players now operating as wide forwards would in a previous age have been second strikers), particularly if that forward operates as a false nine, so that perhaps, to an extent, explains the modern directness.

But it also seems hard to explain the idea that the most lethal cross was a ball dragged back from the goal-line. It can be dangerous of course, raising doubt in a goalkeeper's mind as to whether he should come to claim or not, but there seems no reason why it should be more threatening than an inswinger delivered at pace (I'm not sure any stats exist to prove or disprove this, but if they do, please post a link).

In fact, intuitively, it would seem a ball whipped towards the far post that requires just a touch to divert it in or that will sneak in if nobody touches it is more dangerous. It also feels as though that sort of goal has become more common over the past decade or so. That may itself be a result of an increasing number of inside-out wingers, or it may be a result of the increased spin that can be imparted on modern balls, or even perhaps of the liberalisation of the offside law which forces teams to defend deeper – an inswinger curving into the far post is obviously more dangerous if players are running into it six yards out than 15 yards out, both in terms of angle and the time a goalkeeper would have to react to a touch.

There are other advantages to a wide player coming inside. For one thing, given most full-backs still play on the traditional side, a winger taking him on the inside is attacking his weaker foot. For another, a wide player drifting infield is opening space for an overlapping full-back, of. The link-up of Pires and Ashley Cole at Arsenal was an early example of that; more recent examples include Ivan Rakitic and Danijel Pranjic for Croatia, Gerrard and Cole for England and, most obviously, Messi and Dani Alves for Barcelona.

And then there is the issue of acceleration room. A full-back pushed tight on a wide forward does not allow him to accelerate down the line, but by cutting inside on to his stronger foot, the forward opens up room on the diagonal. It is that, for instance, that allowed Messi to score his first against Stuttgart last week. It was rapidly obvious what he was going to do as he turned inside but the best efforts of four defenders couldn't stop him because of the pace he was going at by the time he got within shooting range.

THE TWO TYPES OF INSIDE-OUT WINGER

Not that the wide forward has to use the room to dribble into. Darren Bent's second goal for Sunderland against Birmingham on Saturday, for instance, came because Malbranque checked inside, and had space to measure an angled pass to the forward with his stronger foot. Earlier in the season, playing on the right, Malbranque looked past it, too slow to beat his full-back on the outside, so right-footed that when he came inside he resembled a canoe with only one paddle, turning always in a circle away from goal. Switching to the left means the lack of pace no longer matters, and he effectively becomes a playmaker who happens to operate wide.

That certainly has been the role occupied by Kranjcar and Luka Modric at Spurs; in their case, the flank becomes an area where a playmaker can still be accommodated in the English game. Others, though, such as Ronaldo and Bellamy, are more obviously forwards, who just happen to start wide. Wayne Rooney's aerial ability perhaps means that centre-forward is his best position, but previous seasons have suggested that he too could occupy that role.

And in between, both playmaker and forward, is Messi, a genius for all the ages. It is hard to believe any player starting wide has had such an impact on games so regularly since Matthews (and even then you wonder whether British pundits, conditioned to see greatness in wingers, weren't seeing what they wanted to see).

Wide forwards can be stopped, but it takes a major change for the defending team. Alvaro Arbeloa's marking job on Messi for Liverpool in 2007 shows how effective it can be switching a right-footed full-back to play on the left flank, and Young's slightly stuttering form for Aston Villa earlier this season shows what can happen when full-backs get used to showing a player outside rather than inside.

But then a player of the class of Ronaldo or Messi (as he is today) will simply go outside (could that, in fact, be why Barça bought Zlatan Ibrahimovic, to give them an aerial presence if Messi were forced into crossing more often?), and playing a right-footer at left-back or a left-footer at right-back immediately impairs their capacity to overlap.

So, the wide forward is hard to combat, scores goals, can operate as a playmaker and creates space for attacking full-backs. All he doesn't do is get to the by-line and curl in away swingers. He seems such a potent threat that the real puzzle is why he didn't emerge earlier.

THE QUESTION: HOW WILL FOOTBALL TACTICS DEVELOP OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

THE END OF THE GOAL POACHER AND THE REBIRTH OF THE LIBERO ARE TWO TRENDS WE ARE LIKELY TO SEE DURING THE NEXT 10 YEARS

Could we see the death of the classic goal poacher in the next 10 years? Photograph: Peter Robinson/Empics Sport

It is hugely difficult to imagine the future as a radically different place, which is probably why so many visions of the future in the past century have stuck to three basic templates: silver suits and hover-boots; totalitarian nightmare; apocalyptic wasteland. Still, given the way football has evolved in the 146 years since it was codified, it is probably safe to assume that the age of revolutions is over, and that developments in tactics over the coming decade will be incremental rather than radical.

The great revolutions – passing, the move from 2-3-5 to W-M; *catenaccio*; the development of the back four; total football – all sprang up either in response to rule changes, or from a culture with little previous experience of football, and thus a less rigid conception of how it should be played. In the modern world of blanket television coverage, it is almost impossible for football to grow up in the sort of isolation that could allow tactical quirks to develop. As in so much else, globalisation is leading to homogeneity.

Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of Vivek Ranadive, who coached his daughter's team of 12-year-olds into the US's national championships despite having no previous knowledge of basketball. Baffled by the way, as he saw it, basketball teams effectively took turns to attack, Ranadive applied the principles he'd picked up from football and encouraged his side to press the opponent in possession high up the court. I have no idea whether that would be effective at the top level of basketball, but my point is that if there is to be a revolution in football tactics, it will almost certainly come from another sport, or at least from a culture in which another sport predominates.

THE POSSIBILITY OF REVOLUTION

It always strikes me when reading US and Japanese accounts of football that there is a dislocation, not merely in vocabulary, but in the way of thinking about the game. This is a generalisation, of course, but broadly speaking Europeans view football more as a continuum, the US and Japanese as a series of discrete events. Japanese magazines are full of intricate diagrams that look good but I'm not sure reflect the game as a whole, while I often detect a frustration from US commentators that football doesn't lend itself more readily to the sort of statistical analysis that predominates in American football and basketball.

One of the oddest comments on Inverting the Pyramid came from a US reviewer who expressed surprise that 140 years of tactical history seemed to have produced nothing more sophisticated than moving a player a little bit forward or back, and speculated on the impact an American football offensive or defensive coach might have on football. I would suggest that the anarchic nature of football, the lack of set-plays to be replicated and practised, militates against the sort complex pre-rehearsed moves he was talking about.

But I don't know for sure. It may be that the approach does eventually yield something profound and new and – at the moment – unthinkable, just as Allen Wade, the former technical director of the FA, instituted a new way of thinking about the game when he broke it down into multiple phases for his influential coaching course which produced a generation of coaches that included Roy Hodgson and Don Howe. He faced early opposition for being overly functional but, as the Swedish academic Tomas Peterson puts it, he introduced to football a "second order of complexity", a knowledge of its own working such as Picasso brought to painting or Charlie Parker to music.

Or maybe North Korea, which is about as close as football gets to the Maliau Basin, will take advantage of its isolation to generate something new. The team did, after all, play a 3-3-3-1 at times in World Cup qualifying which, if not revolutionary, is at least unusual. Isolation in itself, though, is not necessarily a good thing, because it often leaves the isolated vulnerable to predators to which the rest of the world has built up immunity – Argentina's humbling at the 1958 World Cup after years of Peronist isolation being the prime example.

THE AEROPLANE MODEL

Whether there is a revolution or not, evolution will continue. Justifying Dynamo Kyiv's switch to 4-4-2 in the mid-60s (which seems to have happened fractionally before Alf Ramsey's similar but independent change in England), Viktor Maslov said: "Football is like an aeroplane. As velocities increase, so does air resistance, and so you have to make the head more stream-lined."

Although the progression has not been straightforward, Maslov has broadly been proved right. Over the past year in the Premier League there has been a turn back towards 4-4-2 (or 4-4-1-1), but single striker systems remain common and in Spain 4-2-3-1 has been the default for some time. At Barcelona – and Arsenal have followed their shape – that itself is being modified, with the two wide attacking players further advanced and the second striker pulled back into a deeper playmaking role to form a 4-3-3.

What is fascinating about Barcelona's 4-3-3 is that while it may look roughly similar to the 4-3-3 of, say, José Mourinho's Chelsea, it has been arrived at via a different evolutionary route (through 4-2-3-1 rather than through the diamond), and so functions in subtly different ways – a useful reminder that tactics are a combination of formation and style and that, as cannot be said often enough, formations themselves are neutral.

Malsov's analogy requires a slight gloss, for to say a team must be streamlined doesn't make a huge amount of sense. What he meant, presumably, was that as the velocity of players increases, it becomes harder for them to find space, and thus more necessary for attacking players to come from deeper positions, making them harder to pick up.

As a general principle that remains true, although we would perhaps say now, having seen the goal-scoring success of Cristiano Ronaldo and Barcelona's forwards cutting in from the wings, that it is advantageous to play with attacking players coming from deeper or wider positions, which rather ruins the image of streamlining. Corollary to that is the use of false nines, centre-forwards who drop deep into a playmaking role, disrupting the opponent's marking scheme, as Lionel Messi did to such startling effect in Barça's 6-2 win at Real Madrid last season.

THE TWO DIRECTIONS OF THE CENTRE-FORWARD

The false nine is one of two directions in which the centre-forward position seems to be heading (at the highest level – lower down, where control of possession and imagination of approach are necessarily less prioritised, the traditional virtues of being quick or big or predatory are still of value). If he is not refining himself out of existence, he is doing the exact opposite, and imposing himself as a powerful leader of the line and creator of space in the manner of Didier Drogba, Emile Heskey or even Bobby Zamora. Some, such as Dimitar Berbatov and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, combine both styles.

Either way, the situation has emerged whereby a striker's primary function is no longer to score goals, but to create the space for others to do so. Obviously it's advantageous if he can take chances, or even conjure up goals out of nothing, which is what makes Drogba and Fernando Torres so special, but increasingly goals alone are an inadequate measure by which to judge a forward. If the poacher isn't dead yet, he may well be in a decade's time.

UNIVERSALITY (IN PATCHES)

That diversification of the striker's role is part of the wider trend towards universality. It was an ideal first articulated by Maslov, before being more fully theorised by Valeriy Lobanovskyi and Arrigo Sacchi, and found its practical form not just at Dynamo and Milan, but also at Celtic in the late 1960s, and at Ajax and Bayern Munich in the 1970s.

The latter three had young teams who, maturing together, grew almost organically to play to each other's strengths and cover each other's flaws, developing a highly fluid style of play. At Dynamo and Milan, it was a conscious policy enforced by visionary coaches. I have my doubts as to whether their rigorously systematised approach is possible in an age of celebrity, but the more general logic of universality pertains.

An analogy can be drawn with table football. Get beyond a certain level, and the key attacking players become the back two because they have time and the space behind them to line up a shot; the three forwards thus take on a function as blockers. As full-backs in football proper have exploited the space they have been afforded and become more attacking, so wide forwards have become more defensive to close them down.

As that has happened, it has become apparent that the player with most space is no longer the full-back, but the second centre-back, which may lead to the return of the *libero*, something that can already be seen in the performances of Gerard Piqué. With the liberalisation in the offside law stretching the game so it tends to be played in four bands not three, it seems likely that the coming decade will see some elision of the roles of attacking centre-back and holding midfielder, and thus to teams effectively playing with three-and-a-half at the back.

THE HEGELIAN MODEL

Evolution, though, is not linear. It hops about, goes forward and back, and isn't necessarily for the better. Ten years ago, you'd have said football was becoming a game for physical monsters, but the success of the likes of Messi, Xavi, Andrés Iniesta and Andrey Arshavin suggest that while players with the physique of Cristiano Ronaldo clearly have certain advantages, there is still a place for the comparatively diminutive player with skill. And it's worth remembering that 30 years ago the decathlete-turned-full-back Hans-Pieter Briegel was hailed as the player of the future, only to be at least partly responsible for four of the six goals West Germany conceded in the World Cup finals of 1982 and 1986. Size remains something, but not everything.

To an extent, evolution is a game of cat and mouse: a space opens, it is closed, and so a space opens elsewhere. A rugby writer recently suggested to me that rugby World Cups tend not to produce attacking play because of a natural cycle. After each tournament, he said, law variations are brought in to open the

game up, which works for a year or two, but by the time the next tournament comes around, coaches have worked them out and so it becomes more defensive again.

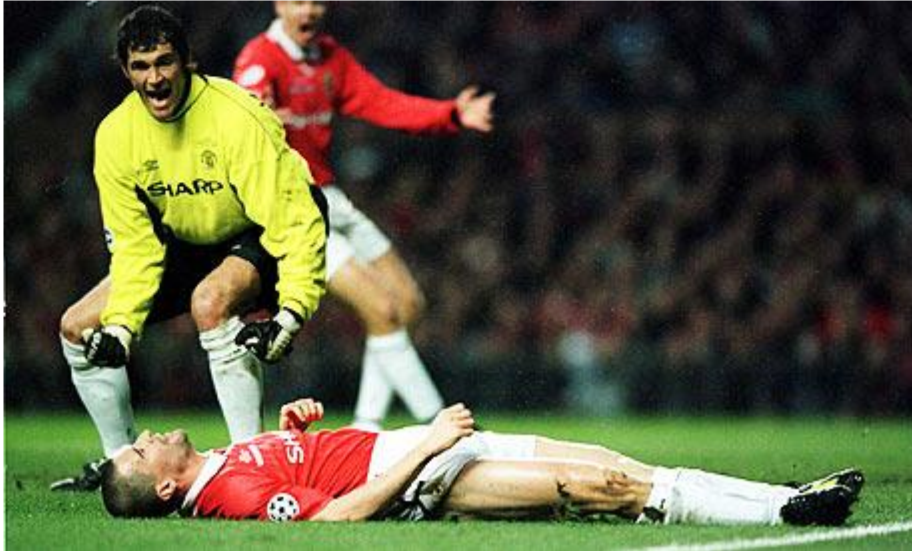
It seems to me that, with one or two exceptions – the 1925 change in the offside law, the 1992 outlawing of the backpass and the tackle from behind in response to the sterility of Italia 90 – football is strong enough to generate new ways of attacking on its own without recourse to tinkering with the game's mechanics, but the process of thesis, antithesis, synthesis is the same.

Lurking behind progress, though, are old ideas waiting to be reapplied. Most obviously in the past decade, Greece won Euro 2004 playing with man-markers, setting opponents a problem they had forgotten how to solve. The success Stoke had with Rory Delap's long throws last season fall into a similar category. Teams now have remembered how to counter them, and so they are no longer such a potent threat. It may even be that towards the end of the next decade, as centre-backs have got used to advancing, that the poacher is resurrected as a counter to attacking defenders.

But it seems fair to assume that the recognition of the holistic nature of football – of the team as energy-system, as Lobanovskyi put it – will become more widespread, particularly as statistical analysis becomes more sophisticated and the effects of events in one part of the pitch on events in another are more fully understood. To resurrect an old line, you don't win games by scoring goals, you score goals by winning games: by playing the game where you want it to be played, thus maximising your team's strengths and minimising those of your opponent.

THE QUESTION: HOW DID A NUTMEG CHANGE FOOTBALL TACTICS IN THE NOUGHTIES?

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER 30 YEARS, AN ENGLISH SIDE BECAME A WORLD LEADER IN TACTICAL INNOVATION THIS DECADE – THANKS TO HENNING BERG BEING NUTMEGGED



Raimond van der Gouw expresses his frustration at the prostrate Roy Keane after the Irishman's own goal set Real Madrid on the way to a 3-2 victory at Old Trafford that would lead to United transforming their tactics. Photograph: Shaun Botterill/Getty

A little over a hundred days into the new millennium United suffered a defeat so striking that it defined the tactical direction of English football for the decade to come. It is rare that you can pinpoint the precise moment at which the world changed, but for Sir Alex Ferguson it did on 19 April 2000 with a 3-2 defeat at home to Real Madrid in the Champions League quarter-final.

This was his equivalent of Liverpool's defeat to Red Star Belgrade in 1973, the game that persuaded him to tear up the old blueprints and start again. Then Bill Shankly, despite having won the Uefa Cup the season before, decided that if Liverpool were to dominate Europe, they had to alter their approach. "We realised it was no use winning the ball if you finished up on your backside," said Bob Paisley. "The top Europeans showed us how to break out of defence effectively. The pace of their movement was dictated by their first pass. We had to learn how to be patient like that and think about the next two or three moves when we had the ball." And so Liverpool changed and, under Paisley, came to dominate Europe in a way no other English side has managed, winning four European Cups between 1977 and 1984.

For Ferguson, too, the decision to change was a tremendous risk. That season his side won the second of three successive Premier League titles, finishing a record 18 points clear of Arsenal in second, while scoring 97 goals in 38 games. The year before they had won the Champions League. There would be many in the difficult seasons of transition who would tell him he should never have changed his approach. His willingness to do so, though, his ruthlessness and clear-sightedness (at least in seeing what was wrong, if not necessarily what the solution was), is precisely what makes him a genius. It is one thing to build a great side; quite another to be brave enough to dismantle it and start again, shaping football's evolution even as you adapt to its changing shape.

THE MISPERCEPTION OF INADEQUACY

Yet the strange thing now, looking back at the game, is that United were by no means outplayed. In the Guardian, Jim White spoke of "trademark United huff and puff" being overwhelmed by Real's class, and perhaps that is how it seemed eight minutes into the second half as Fernando Redondo backheeled the

ball through Henning Berg's legs, ran on, and crossed for Raúl to tap in his second of the night to make it 3-0.

When a British side loses to a continental team, especially when they are helped to their victory by such a memorable moment of skill, it is natural to reach for the old explanations about the greater subtlety of foreign technique. The fact that Chelsea had been demolished 5-1 in Barcelona the night before probably encouraged the sense of English inferiority in the face of Spanish football. The truth, though, is that United could easily have won the game, perhaps even should have won the game; that their passing and movement, the angles they worked around the box were at least the equal of Real. Besides, the stereotypical lament of English clumsiness hardly tallied with Steve McManaman being arguably the most influential player on the pitch.

This wasn't a case of, say, England against Brazil in 2002, exhaustedly chasing a ball they never quite won back; or of England against Croatia in 2007, doggedly following the Corporal Jones in their heads and launching yet another long ball in the belief that foreigners didn't like it up 'em. This was a very good team playing very good football, and being thwarted again and again by an inspired Iker Casillas and, in one case, by the hand of Aitor Karanka, who seven minutes before half-time, with the score at 1-0, got away with tipping an Andy Cole header over the bar from three yards.

That's not to say United were unlucky – or even that their defeat was predominantly down to ill luck – for Real had dominated the first leg in the Bernabéu, which had finished 0-0, and they benefited at Old Trafford from an unexpected tactical switch by Vicente del Bosque, who had replaced John Toshack earlier in the season. Pulling Iván Helguera deep, almost as a third centre-back, to guard against Dwight Yorke, he both liberated McManaman, who regularly initiated breaks, surging from deep, and the two full-backs, Míchel Salgado and Roberto Carlos, who both got behind United's full-backs again and again. Ferguson eventually matched Real's shape, but by then United were three down, and he admitted he wished he had made the move sooner. "They've never played that formation before," said Ferguson. "I suppose it was a compliment to us, but we were too slow to adjust."

WHY UNITED LOST

It was a cross from Salgado that led to Real's first, Sávio breaking, exchanging passes with Raúl and moving left, then laying the ball inside for McManaman, who was fouled by Berg. Pierluigi Collina allowed play to carry on as the ball broke for Fernando Morientes, who slipped it into the path of the overlapping Salgado. His cross was low, and Raimond van der Gouw would almost certainly have dealt with it, but either he failed to call or Roy Keane failed to react to the call, and United's captain, lunging to cut the ball out at the near post, diverted it into his own net.

A similar blend of United culpability and Real excellence led to the second and third goals. Perhaps United, aware that Real had the advantage of an away goal, were over-anxious, but they were guilty of overcommitting early in the second half. McManaman broke, and chipped the ball over Mikaël Silvestre, who had come on for Denis Irwin at half-time, for Raúl, who turned back inside the defender and curled the ball into the top corner. His second followed three minutes later with United's defence, seemingly mesmerised by Redondo's nutmeg, sucked to the near post.

David Beckham, negated until then by Roberto Carlos, scored an excellent goal, beating Sávio and Karanka before smacking his finish into the top corner and, even after Paul Scholes had converted an 88th-minute penalty, Yorke had a header saved on the line by Casillas, but three goals was too great a deficit to overhaul. It was those two strikes in three minutes that cost them.

THE FATAL FLAW

So Real were good and United were good, but Real went into a three-goal lead because United had, as the Guardian's subhead said, "lost their heads", perhaps made over-eager by the knowledge they had an away goal to overcome. From Ferguson's point of view, the game followed a worrying pattern. In 1998,

after drawing the away leg of their quarter-final against Monaco 0-0, they were eliminated by an away goal. The year before that, a 1-0 deficit from the away leg of their semi-final was rendered insurmountable by Lars Ricken's goal at Old Trafford.

Early goals conceded in the home leg, when played second, had become United's bane, and it's easy to understand why Ferguson should move to guard against the deficiency. It was, in a sense, specifically a European problem: in the Premier League, United could concede early (although obviously the higher quality in confederational competition made it more likely to happen then than in domestic games), and hit back in the reasonable assumption of overwhelming their opponents.

In that 1999-2000 season, for instance, United conceded the first goal and came back to win or draw against Arsenal (twice), Wimbledon (twice), Southampton, Marseille, Everton, Sunderland, Liverpool, West Ham, Fiorentina, Bordeaux, Middlesbrough and Watford. Ferguson would seemingly revel in the fact that "United always do it the hard way", and they were routinely praised for their resilience; perhaps the question, though, should have been why such a dominant team was so leaky.

In the later stages in Europe, not only were sides less easily submerged (yet Real could have been; in the 10 minutes following Real's opener, United had five very good chances), but the consequences were more severe. Over a league season United could afford the odd home draw; in Europe that same draw could mean defeat. And so began the slow, painful, transition towards a lone striker.

THE AGONY OF CHANGE

The next season the changes were limited to pulling Yorke or Sheringham deeper in Europe and restricting Ryan Giggs's forays. There was a greater sense of caution, which grew after the arrival of Juan Sebastián Verón, and the very obvious switch to 4-5-1, with Scholes or Giggs used as the advanced central midfielder off Ruud van Nistelrooy. The pairing of Scholes and Van Nistelrooy brought the title in 2002-03, but it was only after the arrival of Carlos Queiroz as assistant coach in 2004 that United began to explore more radical alternatives.

As coach of Portugal's youth side, Queiroz was a pioneer of strikerlessness, winning the World Youth Cup in 1989 and 1991 with João Pinto operating as a mobile lone forward, dropping off to create space for Toni, Gil and Rui Costa. For a time he bore the brunt of the anger of fans who had seen a team that had won seven titles in nine seasons with 4-4-2 transformed into a team that won one in five with 4-5-1. But revolution isn't supposed to be easy.

With Wayne Rooney and Carlos Tevez as a front pairing of constant movement, one or both dropping off to create space for Cristiano Ronaldo cutting in, United became part of the tactical avant garde (perhaps almost despite themselves, because had Louis Saha been fit, the swirling trident of unorthodoxy might never have been given its head. The shape could change by the week, with Park Ji-sung and Giggs adding their qualities to a protean mix – sometimes 4-3-3, sometimes 4-2-3-1, often 4-2-4-0 or 4-3-3-0.

It brought a hat-trick of league titles, and two European finals – one won – and Ferguson by the decade's end had his vindication. The idea of 4-4-2 as an absolute default to which English teams had to stick was over, and for the first time since Alf Ramsey's national team lifted the World Cup 1966, an English side was a world leader in tactical innovation.

And if United hadn't let in two goals just after half-time against Real Madrid, it might never have happened. The tactical course of the decade was set when Henning Berg was nutmegged on 19 April 2000.

THE QUESTION: DO FORMATIONS HAVE TO BE SYMMETRICAL?

ENGLAND'S LACK OF A NATURAL LEFT-WINGER IS OFTEN SEEN TO BE THEIR WEAKNESS, BUT FABIO CAPELLO HAS TURNED IT INTO AN ADVANTAGE

The England coach, Fabio Capello, has found a way to combine Steven Gerrard and Wayne Rooney to potentially useful effect. Photograph: Carl Recine/Action Images

England, we keep being told – and the criticism was particularly in vogue after the defeat to Brazil in Qatar, as though a defeat for a side missing 16 potential members of next summer's World Cup squad invalidated two years of progress under Fabio Capello – do not have width on their left side.

They don't, and it doesn't matter. When Capello protests against such designations as 4-4-2 or 4-2-3-1, it is presumably these tiresome arguments he is looking to avoid. Formations are useful, but crude, tools to give a general idea of shape, more relevant to those of us describing the game than those playing it. They are not Platonic ideals to which sides should attempt to live up. To insist that a side playing what we, for instance, call 4-2-3-1, must have a winger on each side is to allow the cart to drive the horse.

England in the World Cup qualifiers found a highly effective way of playing, so effective that they scored six more goals in European qualifying than any other nation (and before anybody argues they had an easy group, remember that no other European group featured three teams who had played at the 2006 World Cup; and that no side had ever beaten Croatia in a competitive fixture in Zagreb until Capello's England went there and shattered their self-belief with a 4-1 win). Just because that way of playing doesn't conveniently fit any default template does not diminish it; in fact, if anything, it may give it greater validity by making it harder to combat.

THE SCOTTISH WAY

Asymmetry has always been part of the game. The earliest extant description of a formation describes how England lined up against Scotland in the first international in 1872. According to notes made by Charles Alcock, the secretary of the FA, England's team was made up of a "goal", a "three-quarter back", a "half-back", a "fly-kick", four players listed simply as "middle", two as "left side" and one as "right side", which sounds like a lop-sided 1-2-7.

The 1-2-7 seems to have been standard, but we have no way of knowing whether it was usual to overload the left. It may be simply that those were the players available to make the long journey from London to Glasgow. Or the shape may reflect the early style of play. Football at the time – at least until Scotland showcased passing in that match – was based on head-down dribbling, with the occasional long

ball to clear the lines (hence the "fly-kick"). Assuming a preponderance of right-footers, it may be that they were more effective cutting in from the left towards goal, and it similarly is logical to assume that the natural trajectory for a right-footed fly-kick would be to send the ball on a diagonal towards the left side.

Either way, Scotland held England 0-0, their concern over England's weight advantage leading them to adopt a 2-2-6 and pass the ball to keep it away from their larger opponents. That style slowly spread, and as 2-2-6 became 2-3-5, symmetry ruled, at least in terms of how newspapers presented formations. That changed with the alteration of the offside law in 1925 so that only two defensive players rather than three were needed to play a forward onside, as teams began to withdraw their centre-half into the back-line to give added defensive solidity.

It soon became apparent that that left a side short in midfield, and so, at Arsenal, Charlie Buchan, an inside-right, dropped deep to provide cover; that unbalanced the team, though, and in time the inside-left also dropped, creating the symmetrical 3-2-2-3 or W-M.

THE BRAZILIAN RE-EMERGENCE

The W-M gradually spread through Europe, but it was after it had been exported to Brazil that asymmetry became formalised in a formation for the first time. It was taken across the Atlantic in 1937 by Dori Kurschner, a Jewish former Hungary international fleeing anti-Semitism in his homeland. He became coach of Flamengo, but lasted only a year as players, fans and journalists derided his supposedly defensive approach. Kurschner had replaced Flávio Costa, who stayed on as his assistant, and undermined his boss at every turn, taking advantage of his lack of Portuguese and mocking the new system.

When Kurschner was sacked, Costa was reappointed. By then, he had become a convert to the W-M, but having spent 12 months sneering at it, he couldn't admit as much. Instead he came up with what he insisted was a new formation, the diagonal, in which the central square of the W-M was tipped to become a rhombus, with one of the wing-halves slightly deeper than the other, and one of the inside-forwards slightly advanced.

There were those, such as the Portugal coach Cândido de Oliveria, who dismissed the diagonal as nothing more than a repackaging of the W-M, but perhaps it is fairer to say that Costa formalised an unspoken process that was inherent in the W-M. One inside-forward would always be more creative than the other; one half-back more defensive.

At Arsenal in the 1930s, as their former centre-half Bernard Joy explains in Soccer Tactics, the left-half Wilf Copping played deep, with the right-half Jack Crayston given more freedom. When the Wolves and England captain of the late 40s and early 50s, Billy Wright, who could also operate as a centre-half, played as a half-back, did he not play deeper than Billy Crook or Jimmy Dickinson?

Similarly, it was usual – perhaps giving credence to theories linking left-sidedness with creativity – for the inside-left to be more attacking than the inside-right, which is why the No10 rather than the No8 became lionised as the playmaker.

Costa also, whether consciously or not, began the evolution to 4-2-4, his defensive half-back eventually became a second centre-back, and the advanced inside-forward a second striker. Symmetry, briefly, returned, as Brazil won the World Cup in 1958, but by 1962, as others aped their 4-2-4 system, Brazil had moved on, using Mario Zagallo as a shuttling winger-cum-wide-midfielder on the left while Garrincha played as a more orthodox winger on the right: 4-2-4 had become an asymmetric 4-3-3.

Only when Alf Ramsey and Viktor Maslov did away with wingers altogether in the mid-60s did symmetry return, but for another two decades it was still common in those nations where a back-four was usual for one of the wide midfielders to be more attacking than the other. An extreme example came at Newcastle in the early 1980s as they played a 4-3-2 plus Chris Waddle operating on whichever flank he felt featured the weaker full-back.

Intriguingly, away at Chelsea this season, Manchester United played with what was essentially a midfield diamond, with Wayne Rooney as a lone central forward and Antonio Valencia wide on the right, a conscious asymmetry presumably designed to pen Ashley Cole back, a system more defensive in nature but essentially similar to that used by Brazil(and strangely similar to the way Argentina played in the 1966 World Cup, where Luis Artime was the lone centre-forward, and Oscar Más an isolated left-winger). The possibilities of asymmetry are still being explored in the modern game.

THE ITALIAN EMBRACE

As the W-M was superseded, football tended to follow one of two paths: there was the Russo-Brazilian, flat back-four model; or there was the Swiss-Italian *libero* model. *Catenaccio* abandoned symmetry early.

Helenio Herrera's Internazionale featured, in Giacinto Facchetti, a marauding left-back, who was accommodated by having the nominal right-back, Tarcisio Burgnich, tuck in to become a de facto right-sided centre-back. The space he left at right-back was then covered by Jair, the right-winger, chugging back when necessary to cover as a *tornante* – a returner. The tornante itself can be seen as a development of something that had been characteristic of football in Argentina since the late 1940s and River Plate's *La Máquina* side.

River's left-winger, Félix Loustau, became known as *ventilador-wing* (fan-wing) because his back-tracking gave air to the midfield. The centre-half and left-half could then shuffle right, which in turn allowed the nominal right-half Norberto Yácono to take on a man-marking role, tailing the opponent's most creative player (typically the inside-left), secure in the knowledge he would not be leaving a hole on the right side of midfield. The issue was less symmetry than balance.

Gradually Inter's system became formalised and developed into *il gioco all'Italiano*. "It was effective for a while," said Ludovico Maradei, a former chief football writer of La Gazzetta dello Sport, "and, by the late 1970s and early 1980s everybody in Italy was playing it. But that became its undoing. Everybody had the same system and it was rigidly reflected in the numbers players wore. The No9 was the centre-forward, 11 was the second striker who always attacked from the left, 7 the tornante on the right, 4 the deep-lying central midfielder, 10 the more attacking central midfielder and 8 the link-man, usually on the centre left, leaving space for 3, the left-back, to push on. Everyone marked man-to-man so it was all very predictable. 2 on 11, 3 on 7, 4 on 10, 5 on 9, 6 was the sweeper, 7 on 3, 8 on 8, 10 on 4, 9 on 5 and 11 on 2."

In other words, asymmetries matched, every system mapping neatly on to the one it was pitted against. The problem came when it met an incongruent asymmetry, as was exposed in Juventus's defeat to Hamburg in the 1983 European Cup final. Hamburg played with two forwards: a figurehead in Horst Hrubesch, with the Dane Lars Bastrup usually playing off him to the left. That suited Giovanni Trapattoni's Juventus, because it meant Bastrup could be marked by the right-back Claudio Gentile, while the left-back Antonio Cabrini would be free to attack.

Realising that, the Hamburg coach Ernst Happel switched Bastrup to the right, putting him up against Cabrini. Trapattoni, sticking with the man-to-man system, moved Gentile across to the left to mark Bastrup.

That, of course, left a hole on the right, which Marco Tardelli was supposed to drop back from midfield and fill. In practice, though, Tardelli was both neutered as an attacking force and failed adequately to cover the gap, through which Felix Magath ran to score the only goal of the game.

SYMMETRY DOES NOT EQUAL BALANCE

And that, really, is the advantage of asymmetry; it presents sides with unfamiliar and unpredictable problems. It also takes account of players' individual characteristics. There is something very reductive about the English convention of simply referring to players by position, so that players as dissimilar as Ronaldinho and Steve Stone can both be described as wingers. Other cultures – or certainly those of Italy

and Argentina – seem to have a far richer vocabulary with which to describe players, which in turn perhaps leads to greater tactical sophistication as it becomes immediately obvious that setting up a team is not about drilling 10 round holes and hammering pegs into them whatever their shape.

Perhaps that is why it took an Italian to set England up in a coherent way. Capello is not hindered by the dogma that players must play in their best positions, because he does not see players simply as positions (at times it almost feels as though England is stuck in the early 1950s and the days of a selection committee who couldn't conceive of anything beyond a W-M and mechanically voted on who the best left-winger was, who the best left-half was, and gave next to no thought to how they might actually work together).

The thought that Steven Gerrard must play in his natural position through the middle (as though you could somehow pack him and Wayne Rooney into the same space and somehow make twice the impact) isn't a distraction because Gerrard to him is less a central midfielder than a bundle of attributes. Playing him to the left of Rooney allows him into cut in on to his stronger right foot, often arriving late into the penalty area and making him difficult to pick up. Given Rooney has a natural leftward drift, that creates an intriguing interplay that is difficult for defenders to counter.

Attacking width on that flank is provided by Ashley Cole who, as he proved against Arsenal on Sunday, is once again one of the most potent attacking full-backs in the world now that he has been let off the leash by Carlo Ancelotti. Add in Frank Lampard coming from a deeper left-centre position, and England have a diverse range of options from the left, with the more orthodox width of a Theo Walcott or Aaron Lennon on the right.

Perhaps you could quibble that it would be better if, rather than Glen Johnson, England had a more defensively minded right-back, given the lack of cover Walcott or Lennon will provide (although Johnson overlapping as Walcott cuts infield is an attractive prospect), and that in an ideal world Gareth Barry would be right-footed to complement Lampard and cover Johnson's surges. And it would be nice if Emile Heskey, as well as creating space, which he does superbly, could hit a barn door – but those are the sort of flaws that are inevitable in international football, where squads are given not constructed.

England at last have a coherent model of play. That it is not symmetrical is irrelevant; far more important is that it is balanced.

THE QUESTION: WHY ARE TEAMS SO TENTATIVE ABOUT FALSE NINES?

IF PLAYERS WHO APPEAR TO BE PLAYING CENTRE-FORWARD, BUT DROP DEEP, ARE SO DANGEROUS, WHY DON'T MORE TEAMS TRUST THE SYSTEM?

Last season, Lionel Messi dropped deep and disrupted the opposition marking, having started in a central position. Photograph: Adam Davy/Empics Sport

When one team does it, it's happenstance. When Barcelona follow Manchester United in doing it, it's coincidence. Add in Roma as well, and it starts to become a pattern. Teams who use a "false nine" – that is, a player who appears to be playing centre-forward, but drops deep – seem, however successful they have been, not to trust the system.

The season before last, United won the Premier League and the Champions League using Carlos Tevez as a centre-forward who regularly dropped off or pulled wide, creating space for Wayne Rooney coming from deep, or for Cristiano Ronaldo cutting in from the right. The following season, they brought in Dimitar Berbatov, a more orthodox centre-forward, and reverted to a more traditional way of playing.

Last season as Barcelona won the treble of La Liga, Copa del Rey and Champions League, they often switched Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi so that, instead of playing in what might be considered their natural positions, Messi played centrally and Eto'o on the right. Messi naturally dropped deep, disrupting the opposition's marking. In the summer, Barcelona replaced Eto'o with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, a player who, for all his quality, is not going to be able to operate on the right wing and so liberate Messi.

Roma at least had a 7-1 defeat at Old Trafford to point to as an explanation for abandoning the false nine after they had – broadly successfully – experimented with Francesco Totti as a centre-forward who dropped deep, but for United and Barcelona the reasons for abandoning a successful shape are less obvious.

WHERE DID THE FALSE NINE COME FROM?

In England, the centre-forward tended traditionally to be a big target-man figure – what Brian Glanville characterised as "the brainless bull at the gate". His job was, essentially, to meet crosses. Elsewhere, though, where skill was prioritised over physicality, he soon became something rather more subtle, and there is evidence to suggest that by the 1920s it was not uncommon for centre-forwards in central Europe and around the River Plate to drop deep.

The first England came across was Matthias Sindelar in a friendly against Austria at Stamford Bridge in 1932. England ended up winning 4-3, but there was a widespread recognition that Sindelar, a slight but imaginative forward, had unnerved England by moving into midfield, looking to make the play as much as to finish chances.

In Argentina and Uruguay at the time, it was common for the two inside-forwards to play very deep, and it would be strange if there hadn't been some kind of experimentation with a centre-forward dropping off as well. Certainly by the time of River Plate's fabled La Maquina side of the late 40s, the nominal centre-forward, Adolfo Pedernera, often dropped off, with Angel Labruna, the inside-left, becoming the main goal threat.

English teams continued to be perplexed by forwards who refused to stand still and let themselves be marked. Vsevolod Bobrov unsettled everybody he played against on Dinamo Moscow's 1945 tour; Alfred Bickel's performance was the main reason for England's defeat to Switzerland in 1947; and in 1951, in what was technically only a representative game, an England XI lost 3-1 to an Argentina XI, their centre-half, Malcolm Barrass, having been dragged out of position by the Argentinian centre-forward José Lacasia.

England's manager Walter Winterbottom, acknowledging the problem, held a team meeting to try to come up with a counter-measure for the full international that was scheduled for a few days later. "Some people wanted to have a man following him," he said, "dogging his footsteps, but Billy [Wright] quite vehemently wanted the centre-half to stay back, in position, and let someone else pick off Lacasia.

"We decided that [Harry] Johnston, the centre-half, would go with him in the early part of the match, with Billy and Jimmy Dickinson [the two wing-halves] covering the gap in the middle, then Johnston would fall back in favour of someone else so that the Argentina team would not quite know if we were going to persist in man-to-man marking. But the match was washed out by rain after 20 minutes play so that the issue was not really joined."

Two years later, Johnston found himself similarly bemused by Nandor Hidegkuti, as England were beaten 6-3 by Hungary at Wembley. "To me," he wrote in his autobiography, "the tragedy was the utter helplessness … being unable to do anything to alter the grim outlook." Fabio Cannavaro admitted something similar after Real Madrid had been beaten 6-2 by Barcelona at the Bernabéu last season.

WHY IS THE FALSE NINE SO HARD TO COMBAT?

Man-marking barely exists at the top level of the game anymore, at least not in open play, but even with zonal marking the game falls into certain patterns. When 4-4-2 meets 4-4-2, for instance, essentially the two centre-backs pick up the two centre-forwards, the two central midfielders deal with the two central midfielders, and the wide-midfielders pick each other up, with the full-backs behind should one wide midfielder get beyond the other one.

One of the keys to tactical success is to break those patterns in a way that is advantageous; at its most basic level to overman in key zones. If a centre-forward drops deep, he is moving away from the centre-backs who would naturally mark him. If the centre-back follows, he risks leaving space that can be exploited by wide players cutting in, or by midfielders coming from deep. But if he sits off, the deep-lying centre-forward has freedom, time and space either to pick his pass or to turn and run at a defence so he is arriving at the centre-back at pace, which makes him far harder to stop.

The holding midfielder could pick up the deep-lying centre-forward, but that has knock-on effects elsewhere on the pitch. When 4-4-2 meets 4-4-2, if a centre-forward drops back into midfield, he effectively gives his team three men in there against two; there is overmanning. Equally, a midfielder restricting his attacking role to pick up an opposing centre-forward risks surrendering territory, so his team end up playing too deep, inviting pressure.

WHY HAS THE ISSUE ARISEN AGAIN?

English football, with its simplistic tactical shapes, has traditionally struggled with players who don't stand where they're supposed to, which in part explains the success of the likes of Eric Cantona, Gianfranco Zola and Dennis Bergkamp in the 90s. Just by operating in the grey area between the opponent's defensive and midfield lines, they caused confusion, and created new, unfamiliar angles of attack.

Back then, though, teams tended to play with a more orthodox central striker ahead of the deep-lying player and so, while they proved difficult to combat, they were easy to conceptualise as a strike partnership (they were not false nines so much as orthodox 10s). One centre-back picked up the orthodox forward, and the other had a certain license to follow the deeper-lying one, secure in the knowledge he had a central defender behind him, and that, if the wide midfielders were doing their job, at least one of the full-backs was likely to be free to tuck in. The trend towards a single central striker, though, has taken us back to a situation similar to that of the early 50s.

When a back four meets a 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1, the full-backs, even ignoring the increased attacking role they have in today's game, have a clearly defined role in negating the opposition wingers. They are less likely, in other words, to be able to provide cover. But worse, if the false nine drops deep, there are two centre-backs left redundant. One can follow the false nine, but the other is left isolated, with space all around and the full-backs too busy with their own concerns to help him. He can be attacked from wide or from deep, and he has no support.

That is the position in which Harry Johnston found himself in 1953, with the cherry-red blur of Laszlo Budai, Sandor Kocsis, Ferenc Puskas and Zoltan Czibor swarming all around him, and the player he thought he was supposed to be marking off directing things in the far distance, wandering forward at will to score three times. And it was the position in which Cannavaro found himself in May.

SO WHY DO TEAMS TURN AGAINST IT?

Why, if false nines are so dangerous, do teams who have used them successfully then turn away from them. It is, frankly, rather puzzling, and there is no easy answer. Neither Roma nor Manchester United seem to have intended to use what remains the most radical of tactical innovations; both were forced into it by injury. Similarly, Barcelona had intended to replace Eto'o before the start of last season – who knows what Pep Guardiola's plan may have been had he been able to.

The move towards the evolutionary avant-garde at United, perhaps, was inspired by Carlos Quieroz – who had dabbled with a form of strikerlessness with the Portugal youth sides who won the World Youth Cup in 1989 and 1991. With his departure went the impulse to innovation. Had Tevez's contract situation been less fraught, the urge to bring in Berbatov may not have been so strong.

In all three cases there are specific circumstances that make the move away from the false nine understandable if not entirely explicable. But there is also the simple fact that playing a false nine is a risk. When it works, it can be devastating, but it doesn't need much to go wrong to become stodgy or toothless.

Hungary, for instance, looked almost unstoppable for much of the early 50s, but there were occasions when it didn't quite click. Sweden held them to a 2-2 draw in Budapest shortly before the Wembley game by sitting deep, disrupting their passing by weight of numbers. The following year heavy pitches not conducive to passing football contributed to Hungary's defeat to West Germany in the World Cup final and the defeat of Honved, who provided the bulk of the national team, to Wolves in a floodlit friendly at Molineux.

A tall centre-forward who can hold the ball up – as both Berbatov and Ibrahimovic can – gives another option. He can be an outlet ball from defence and, by offering an aerial threat, also prevents opponents from simply sitting deep. Kocsis, of course, was such a noted header of the ball that he was nicknamed

Golden Head, but he was more a finisher of chances than somebody who could take the ball on his chest and hold off a defender while waiting for support.

United may have been less aesthetically pleasing last season, but they were defensively sounder, something at least in part down to the greater ease with which they held possession. This is largely a matter of degree: Berbatov and Ibrahimovic are not the brainless bull at the gate type of forward; both can drop off and create play as well as leading the line. They offer flexibility of style, but not quite the fluency of movement of the players who went before.

Both sides are still capable of overwhelming weaker teams (or even respectable mid-table teams) – as Barcelona did to Zaragoza on Sunday and United, eventually, to Wigan earlier in the season, but the emphasis has been shifted towards solidity. Which leaves Arsenal, as ever, to carry the standard for risky, free-flowing football. Robin van Persie may be a more natural leader of a line than either Messi or Tevez, but he is the falsest nine European football has at the moment.

THE QUESTION: IS THE MIDFIELD DIAMOND HERE TO STAY AND HOW DO YOU COUNTER IT?

IT'S BEEN ADOPTED BY CHELSEA AND INTER, BUT WILL THIS CURIOUS TACTIC STAND THE TEST OF TIME IN ITS LATEST INCEPTION?

Didier Drogba and Deco during a training session at Stamford Bridge today. Photograph: Steven Paston/Action Images

After years of being out of fashion in western Europe, the midfield diamond is back. Chelsea have rumbled to three straight league victories at the start of the season, despite pundits pointing out their lack of width, and wondering just how effective they can continue to be. Internazionale manager Jose Mourinho, who is regarded in the UK as a high priest of 4-3-3, reverted to 4-4-2 with a diamond midfield during his side's 1-1 draw against Bari at the weekend. Previously its popularity has proved fleeting - will this time be any different?

A HISTORY LESSON

The diamond is curious in that it emerged piecemeal over time; it is not part of the grand sweep of tactical history. It never seems to have been anybody's big idea, but was rather a bi-product of other forces and, generally speaking, it has never hung around for long, which suggests it may have limited applicability. The first team self-consciously to arrange their midfield four with one deep, one creating and two shuttling seems to have been Flamengo, where it began as an expedient compromise in a process that began shortly before the second world war.

As part of his plans to develop the club, Flamengo's president José Bastos Padilha sought a European coach. He found one in the Hungarian Dori Kurschner, who was only too glad to escape anti-Semitism in his homeland. He arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1937, but his attempts to introduce the W-M (3-2-2-3) were scuppered by a football culture suspicious of anything that might stifle natural creativity and improvisation.

Players, fans and journalists were openly mocking, their doubts fanned into rebellion by the assistant coach, Flavio Costa, who had been moved aside to make way for Kurschner. Having finished second in the Carioca championship in 1937, Flamengo lost 2-0 to Vasco da Gama in the opening game of the following season, the inaugural match at Padilha's new Estadio da Gavea, and Kurschner was sacked. After a brief time at Botafogo, he contracted a virus and died in 1941.

Costa, meanwhile, resumed his role as Flamengo coach. He had slowly become convinced of the merits of the W-M, but having been so scornful, could not admit as much, so claimed to have come up with a whole new system – the diagonal. Essentially, he took the central square of the W-M and tipped it so it became a rhombus, with the inside-left advanced just behind the centre-forward in the *ponta da lanca* (point of the lance) position Pele would make so famous, the inside-right a little deeper, the left-half a little deeper again, and the right-half sitting just in front of the back three (or of course, the formation could be flipped on its y-axis to make the right side more attacking).

Of course, even within the W-M, it had been common for one of the inside-forwards to be more attacking, or one of the wing-halves to be more defensive – at Arsenal in the 1930s for instance, the left-half Wilf Copping played deep, allowing Jack Crayston, the right-half, more license. But Costa formalised it, and as Flamengo were successful, his rhombus midfield spread. Gradually, though, the rhombus was tipped a little more, until 3-1-2-1-3 became 4-2-4, the system with which Brazil won the World Cup in 1958.

The diamond then disappeared from view, only springing up again in the sixties. It became common within the 4-2-4 for one of the midfielders to sit, as cover in front of the back four – Antonio Rattin of Argentina being a fine early example. Gradually, forwards began to drop deeper. Argentina, reacting to the shock of being beaten 6-1 by Czechoslovakia at the 1958 World Cup by experimenting with defensive tactics, were among the pioneers. Their obsession with the No10 remained, though, and so by the 1966 World Cup, with Rattin holding, and Ermindo Onega operating as a playmaker, the diamond was beginning to re-emerge.

England lost 1-0 to a defensive Argentina in the Maracana in 1964 in the Mundialito, a four-team tournament also including Brazil and Portugal. Alf Ramsey would never have admitted it, but that defeat seems to have persuaded him down the route of pragmatism. He abandoned 4-2-4 for 4-3-3, before ultimately adopting what Nobby Stiles termed a 4-1-3-2. The Manchester United midfielder anchored in front of the back four, with Alan Ball, Bobby Charlton and Martin Peters all given license to push on and join the front two.

That formation, a close cousin of the diamond, had already been common for a couple of years in the USSR, where Viktor Maslov, developing the notion of pressing at Dynamo Kyiv, deployed the veteran defender Vasyl Turyanchyk to 'break the waves' in front of the back four. In a team in which every player had defensive duties, only Andriy Biba, Maslov said, "retained the full rights of democracy". He was, in other words, the equivalent of the Argentinian playmaker, given a free role in what was effectively a 4-3-1-2.

It is that shape, with a holder and a playmaker flanked by two shuttling players – *carilleros*, as they are known in Argentina, the only country, seemingly, to give the role a specific name – that really forms the basis of the modern conception of the diamond. Strangely, though, only Argentina adopted it on a wide scale. Elsewhere a club side may play a diamond for a year or two, but it is a fad that soon fades; in the Argentinian league, although there are experiments with double-playmakers (such as Huracan played last season: a 4-3-2-1) or two holders (which I've seen described, rather neatly, as a double-Pacman), 4-3-1-2 remains the default formation.

PROBLEMS WITH THE DIAMOND

To European eyes, unused to seeing an artist provided with a three-man midfield stage on which to perform, that is, at least initially, refreshing. Argentina's historical notion of the default way of playing, equally, with its ready division into playmakers and holders has equipped them well for the modern trend towards four-band formations (which makes it all the more frustrating that Diego Maradona seems so reluctant to use one with the national team).

But there are difficulties. The first game I saw in Argentina was River Plate against Independiente in November 2007. Both teams played 4-3-1-2, and both teams cancelled; each seemingly waiting for their respective playmakers, Ariel Ortega and Daniel Montenegro, to do something. Neither did, and the game ended in a tame 1-1 draw that probably would have slipped from the memory had it not been my first visit to the Monumental. It was admittedly, a mid-table fixture, but the wider point was clear: the danger of playing through one creative source (in River's case in that game, bafflingly, for Diego Buonanotte was playing as a support striker and surely could have dropped deeper), is that a single stream is easily dammed. The diamond's lack of width only exacerbates the problem.

You wonder as well whether Argentina remains so caught up in the debate over the viability of the playmaker, and with producing creators (and thus Pacmen to stop them) that other areas get rather overlooked. Playing a 4-2-3-1 – and ignoring the spats that have ruled certain players out - Argentina would have, by some distance, the best middle five in the world (two of Javier Mascherano, Esteban Cambiasso, Sebastian Battaglia and Fernando Gago; three of Leo Messi, Sergio Aguero, Carlos Tevez, Juan Román Riquelme, or even Javier Pastore), but are deficient in every other area.

My own doubts about the diamond crystallised one night in Belgrade in October 2002. Yugoslavia had played a diamond against Italy the previous Saturday, and had succeeded in frustrating them, drawing 1-1. They set out with the same shape that Wednesday against Finland, and found themselves outplayed in the first half as Finland's two wide midfielders in an orthodox 4-4-2, Mika Nurmela and Joonas Kolkka, revelled in the open spaces on the flanks. Yugoslavia may have enjoyed the bulk of possession, but they became so paranoid about their vulnerability to wide counters that they were able to do little with it, and were fortunate still to be level at half-time. A quick switch to 3-5-2 soon solved that (and freed Sinisa Mihajlovic - playing by that stage of his career as a centre-back - from actually having to do any defending), and they won 2-0.

CAN CHELSEA MAKE IT WORK IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE?

Given the tendency within the diamond to predictability, it seemed to me fine as a defensive formation, but of less use to a team who needed to take the initiative. Gradually, though, particularly from watching Argentinian football, I've become less sceptical. The issue really is the *carilleros*. If they get too narrow, as Yugoslavia did that night, then a team is vulnerable wide, and its numerical advantage in the centre is outweighed by the fact that everybody is packed into so tight a space that passing options become limited.

If they can retain some width – and it is notable that Chelsea this season have twice in the league, and in the Community Shield, used Florent Malouda, a winger, as the left *carillero* – and so ensure the system is a 4-3-1-2, then that is less of a problem. If those *carilleros* and/or the full-backs (and Chelsea have two – three if you include Yuri Zhirkov – attacking full-backs) can also get forward, given confidence to do so by

the central midfield holder, that relieves some of the creative burden from the player at the tip of the diamond.

Chelsea also have the variation offered by the asymmetry introduced by Guus Hiddink. The second striker plays slightly to the right of Drogba – that was clear when Kalou partnered him at Sunderland, and still evident in Anelka's role at Fulham – which encourages the left *carrillero* to advance, something that is difficult for orthodox symmetrical formations to pick up, and which stimulates a very necessary flexibility.

HOW TO SMASH THE DIAMOND

So, how can the diamond be countered? The lack of width remains the flaw, and the key is to try to shift the battle from the centre to the flanks. Hull rode their luck to an extent on the opening day, but it is no coincidence that it was their 4-5-1 rather than the 4-4-2 of Sunderland and Fulham that came closest to stopping Chelsea.

Midfielders played wide and high stop the advances of the full-backs, while a hard-tackling trio in the centre will at least make Chelsea fight for possession, while shielding the back four when Chelsea have possession. In addition, a team's wide midfielders block Chelsea's full-backs, their own full-backs should be free to either become an extra man in midfield or provide additional defensive cover.

The narrowness of the diamond is a flaw, but no system is without them. The issue really is how many sides are able to engage them those wide areas. So far the inherent weakness in the system has been over-ridden by Chelsea's dominance in the centre. It's all very well pointing at where the space may be, but largely irrelevant – from an attacking point of view – if you can't get the ball, and by playing with, effectively, four central midfielders, Chelsea are ensuring they enjoy the bulk of possession.

Their football may never produce the geometric rhapsodies of, say, Arsenal at their best, but certainly while Didier Drogba remains in form (and in the country: he, Michael Essien, Salomon Kalou and Mikel Jon Obi will all be in Angola in January for the African Cup of Nations), Chelsea look capable of overwhelming opponents, that frontline of attack backed up by a prodigious second wave from midfield.

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That is the position in which Harry Johnston found himself in 1953, with the cherry-red blur of Laszlo Budai, Sandor Kocsis, Ferenc Puskas and Zoltan Czibor swarming all around him, and the player he thought he was supposed to be marking off directing things in the far distance, wandering forward at will to score three times. And it was the position in which Cannavaro found himself in May.

SO WHY DO TEAMS TURN AGAINST IT?

Why, if false nines are so dangerous, do teams who have used them successfully then turn away from them. It is, frankly, rather puzzling, and there is no easy answer. Neither Roma nor Manchester United seem to have intended to use what remains the most radical of tactical innovations; both were forced into it by injury. Similarly, Barcelona had intended to replace Eto'o before the start of last season – who knows what Pep Guardiola's plan may have been had he been able to.

The move towards the evolutionary avant-garde at United, perhaps, was inspired by Carlos Quieroz – who had dabbled with a form of strikerlessness with the Portugal youth sides who won the World Youth Cup in 1989 and 1991. With his departure went the impulse to innovation. Had Tevez's contract situation been less fraught, the urge to bring in Berbatov may not have been so strong.

In all three cases there are specific circumstances that make the move away from the false nine understandable if not entirely explicable. But there is also the simple fact that playing a false nine is a risk. When it works, it can be devastating, but it doesn't need much to go wrong to become stodgy or toothless.

Hungary, for instance, looked almost unstoppable for much of the early 50s, but there were occasions when it didn't quite click. Sweden held them to a 2-2 draw in Budapest shortly before the Wembley game by sitting deep, disrupting their passing by weight of numbers. The following year heavy pitches not conducive to passing football contributed to Hungary's defeat to West Germany in the World Cup final and the defeat of Honved, who provided the bulk of the national team, to Wolves in a floodlit friendly at Molineux.

A tall centre-forward who can hold the ball up – as both Berbatov and Ibrahimovic can – gives another option. He can be an outlet ball from defence and, by offering an aerial threat, also prevents opponents from simply sitting deep. Kocsis, of course, was such a noted header of the ball that he was nicknamed

Golden Head, but he was more a finisher of chances than somebody who could take the ball on his chest and hold off a defender while waiting for support.

United may have been less aesthetically pleasing last season, but they were defensively sounder, something at least in part down to the greater ease with which they held possession. This is largely a matter of degree: Berbatov and Ibrahimovic are not the brainless bull at the gate type of forward; both can drop off and create play as well as leading the line. They offer flexibility of style, but not quite the fluency of movement of the players who went before.

Both sides are still capable of overwhelming weaker teams (or even respectable mid-table teams) – as Barcelona did to Zaragoza on Sunday and United, eventually, to Wigan earlier in the season, but the emphasis has been shifted towards solidity. Which leaves Arsenal, as ever, to carry the standard for risky, free-flowing football. Robin van Persie may be a more natural leader of a line than either Messi or Tevez, but he is the falsest nine European football has at the moment.

THE QUESTION: IS 4-4-2 MAKING A COMEBACK?

CHELSEA AND MANCHESTER UNITED BOTH EMPLOYED VARIATIONS ON 4-4-2 IN THE COMMUNITY SHIELD — ARE WE SET FOR A RESURGENCE OF THE TRADITIONALISTS' FAVOURITE FORMATION?

Chelsea captain John Terry goes close with a header against Manchester United. Photograph: Gerry Penny/EPA

So much for the inevitable march of progress. As we come to the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the two sides rated by the bookmakers as the best in England raised the curtain on the new season by lining up against each other in variations of 4-4-2.

Chelsea, admittedly, tried to make it look as though they were still playing with a lone striker by fielding an anonymous Nicolas Anelka alongside Didier Drogba, but still, this was discernibly a diamond midfield. United's system was rather more fluid, with Wayne Rooney dropping off Dimitar Berbatov and Nani, on the left, given a more attacking brief than Park Ji-sung, who tucked in on the right, while keeping half an eye on Ashley Cole's forward darts.

The pundits who have told us incessantly that they like to see a team paying "two up top" must be delighted, as must those who have hailed Carlo Ancelotti's switch away from the 4-1-2-3 that they have

used almost since Jose Mourinho's arrival (although he too started off with the diamond he had used in winning the Champions League with Porto) as a turn towards attacking football.

But let's get this clear, for this is one of the prime fallacies in discussions of tactics: 4-4-2 is neither more nor less attacking than 4-1-2-3, 4-2-3-1, 4-3-2-1 or any of the other variants of 4-5-1. Formations are neutral; it is their application that gives them positive or negative qualities.

THE MOVE TO THE SINGLE FORWARD

United's abandonment of what others called 4-4-2 (Sir Alex Ferguson claims never to have used it, and the deployment of Eric Cantona, Dwight Yorke and Teddy Sheringham as deep-lying second strikers certainly meant that they were never as constrained by the three rigid bands as most other English sides) was prompted by Manchester United's 3-2 defeat to Real Madrid in 2000. Although United were not as outplayed as many would later claim – and were undone as much by bad defending as anything else – the defeat was seemingly enough to convince Ferguson of the need to dismantle the old formation, to find a way of introducing less predictable talents, dribblers who could beat their man without the need for acceleration room, rather than chargers and crossers.

To do that, though, necessitated a defensive platform, and so began the shift towards 4-2-3-1, which went through its uneasy teething with Juan Sebastián Verón, and reached its glorious culmination two seasons ago with a shape that, with Rooney and Carlos Tevez drifting, and Cristiano Ronaldo swooping in from the right, threatened at times to do away with a conventional centre-forward altogether. The move to a single forward, in other words, was attacking in origin.

What makes the misconception all the more frustrating is that English football seemed to have learned the lesson that football is a holistic game and that fewer attackers does not necessarily mean less attacking or more defenders more defending during the 1990 World Cup. John Barnes and Chris Waddle, asked why they struggled to reproduce their domestic form at international level, invariably replied by pointing out that England's 4-4-2 demanded they hold the shape; they could never exercise their attacking talents with quite the freedom they had with Liverpool or Marseille.

Given Bobby Robson constructed fluid sides at club level, the rigidity of his England was probably, at least in part, the result of the lack of time available to players at international level to develop a mutual understanding. Then Robson, ahead of the second group game, terrified that England would be torn apart by Holland as they had been at Euro 88, introduced Mark Wright as a third centre-back. With a sound defensive platform, the midfield and full-backs were suddenly liberated: the shift to an ostensibly more defensive shape actually made England a more fluent attacking side.

"I can play for Liverpool," Barnes told Pete Davies in All Played Out, "and it's like the continentals – they'll have someone in that zone, but not necessarily the same person. So Alan Hansen can go past me, and I'll take his position. But here [in a 4-4-2], if Chris comes off the line, or I come off the line, and no one goes into that position, if the full-back doesn't come, then the marker's free. With the sweeper [system], the full-back can go, and the sweeper can cover; or the marker can cover and the sweeper can mark – you're not caught short anywhere."

THE LOGIC, OR LACK OF IT, BEHIND REVERTING TO 4-4-2

So what will the switch back to 4-4-2 mean in practice? The art of tactics – and this again is a point that is often misconstrued – is the art of shifting the battle to where you want it to be fought. It is not that one formation is necessarily better than another. That said, over the 140 years or so of football history there has been a general trend of moving to fewer and fewer forwards, because more men in defence and midfield means it is easier to regain the ball, and tends to provide for more options once a team has it.

Other than accommodating Anelka (and as Guus Hiddink showed, he could be used to the right of an asymmetric 4-3-3 if he really had to be included), it is, frankly, hard to see the logic behind Chelsea's

switch. At United, having lost Ronaldo and Tevez, two fluid, multi-functional players, a return to something more traditional makes sense as a retrenchment, a short-term protection against change. You do wonder, though, whether Ferguson would have gone back to a nominal 4-4-2 had he still had as his assistant Carlos Queiroz, who arguably pioneered playing no strikers with his Portugal youth sides in the early 90s and then was key in United's move to 4-2-3-1 earlier in this decade.

There are two areas where the classic 4-4-2 logically struggles against 4-3-3. Firstly, in the middle of midfield, where the 4-3-3 has three players against two and so, given equality of ability of player, should be able to dominate possession. The way Park played narrow for United on Sunday suggested he may be used as a counter against that. Chelsea, meanwhile, with a diamond, effectively have four central midfielders anyway; or, given how far forward Frank Lampard played and that Florent Malouda was tugging left, at least two and two halves. The two are Mikel Jon Obi and Michael Essien, so that shouldn't be too much of an issue.

The other problem, though, may be rather more serious. Wingers, recently, have had to take on increased defensive responsibility to check the forward sallies of full-backs (who became increasingly attacking as they got used to having space when 4-4-2 met 4-4-2). Park excelled in that role last season, as, at times, did Rooney, most notably away to Porto in the Champions league quarter-final when he stifled Aly Cissokho.

With two central strikers, rather than two wide men pushed high on the full-backs, that becomes far harder to do. In the first half on Sunday, Nani had the beating of Branko Ivanovic, partly because he was coming at him from deep, and so was already moving at pace when he met a putative challenge – which is an advantage 4-4-2 has over 4-3-3 – and partly because he was supported by the surges of Patrice Evra, who was unchecked by Chelsea's narrow midfield.

However good a full-back may be defensively, there is little he can do once such a situation has developed; Ancelotti's solution was to bring on José Bosingwa in the second half, and his capacity to take the attack to United, forcing Nani to defend, had stifled some of his attacking threat even before he suffered the dislocated shoulder.

Their battle was similar to the confrontation between Ronaldo, playing on the left, and Essien, playing at right-back, in the 2008 Champions League final. Then, Ronaldo had the better of the first half-hour, until Essien began to drive at and beyond him, setting up Lampard's equaliser as his drive was half-blocked, and going on to have the better of the contest for the rest of the game.

On the other side, Malouda did little to trouble John O'Shea, but Cole twice burst past Park towards the end of the first half – understandably given he was also bolstering the right side of midfield and thus dealing in part with Malouda – to set up chances for Drogba, who headed over, and Anelka, who shot wide.

THE MICHAEL OWEN FACTOR

With the same starting XI, United could switch easily to a 4-3-3. In fact, given the asymmetry of their midfield, their formation on Sunday, at least in the first half, was almost halfway between 4-4-2 and 4-3-3, and was thus not dissimilar to how England played at Euro 96, with Steve McManaman pushing forward on the left, while Teddy Sheringham dropped off Alan Shearer.

However the signing of Michael Owen, who cannot play as a lone striker, suggests Ferguson is considering 4-4-2, at least for certain games. Provided United are confident of dominating possession, there is no reason why that won't work, at least against lesser teams.

Owen and Berbatov are a logical partnership, while Owen and Rooney, although they never had a great relationship with England – only once has one ever scored from an assist by the other – do have a compatibility: teams defend high against Rooney to restrict his space, and preferred to defend deep against Owen so he couldn't use his pace to exploit the space behind them. If that pace really is as

diminished as it seemed in his later days at Newcastle, it may not be so relevant, but teams anyway defend deeper now than they did in his heyday thanks to the liberalisation of the offside law.

Chelsea's diamond, meanwhile, seems far less flexible – although of course they do have the players to revert to the 4-1-2-3 of old if required – and it is hard to see how they would deal with a side featuring two attacking full-backs. Given how well Malouda ended last season, it's easy to see why Ferguson opted for the more defensive O'Shea, but it would have been fascinating to have seen Fabio unleashed earlier than the 76th minute. Equally the fact that both Drogba and Anelka play high, while Berbatov and Rooney like to drop deep, suggests United will have the greater fluidity.

Given Arsenal will pick a front three from Andrei Arshavin, Theo Walcott, Robin van Persie and Eduardo, with Cesc Fábregas pulling the strings, they should be significantly the most fluid side in the Premier League; which, if – and it is a big if – they can sort out their problems at the back of the midfield and in central defence, could make them surprising challengers. Liverpool fans, similarly, can look at their 4-2-3-1 and draw encouragement from its modernity, even if it is hard to see how the passing of Xabi Alonso can be compensated for.

What that means for the rest of the season depends really on how flexible each proves to be; although given the dominance that the Big Four (or Five) still exerts over not merely the Premier League but also the majority of Europe – diminishing as it may be as the effects of Real Madrid's spending, the falling pound and the 50% tax band kick in – it could be some time before the effects of the tactical reversion are felt.

"Football," said Viktor Maslov, the Dynamo Kyiv coach who pioneered pressing and so can be hailed as the father of the modern game, "is like an aeroplane. As velocities increase, so does air resistance, and so you have to make the head more stream-lined." For 40 years he has been right: a return to 4-4-2 feels rather like evolution has paused for breath.

THE QUESTION: HOW IS BRAZIL'S 4-2-3-1 DIFFERENT FROM A EUROPEAN 4-2-3-1?

NOW WORLD CUP QUALIFICATION IS ALL BUT ASSURED, THE BIG DEBATE IS LESS OVER DUNGA'S FUTURE, THAN OVER WHAT SYSTEM HIS SIDE PLAYS

Ramires breaks away again for Brazil against the United States. Photograph: Halden Krog/EPA

Brazil's first-half performance in their 3-0 victory over Italy in the Confederations Cup on Sunday confirmed what the results of the last couple of months had been hinting at: for all the doubts about Dunga's supposed pragmatism, all the quibbles over personnel, they will be serious contenders next summer.

The 1-1 draw in Ecuador in March may have been fortuitous, and the defending shambolic, but Argentina's 6-1 defeat to Bolivia a few days later showing the effect altitude can make. Since then, they have put three past Peru and four past Uruguay, before winning 2-1 against Paraguay, their closest challengers in Conmebol qualifying. So now that qualification is all but assured, the big debate is less over Dunga's future, than over what system his side plays: when is a 4-2-3-1 not a 4-2-3-1?

DIAMOND GEEZERS

At this Confederations Cup, most European observers have happily jotted down their formation as 4-2-3-1, with Luís Fabiano as the centre-forward, Robinho to the left, Kaká as the central creator and Ramires on the right of the attacking three. Gilberto Silva sits in front of the back four, with Fiorentina's Felipe Melo in the slightly more advanced holding role. Yet the Brazilians persist in describing the system as a diamond.

As they see it, Gilberto is the base, with Ramires right and Melo left as *carrileros* (the shuttlers on the sides of the diamond), Kaká as the playmaking tip, and Robinho as a second striker. At first, that sounds nonsensical, because that isn't how it looks on the pitch, but there is greater subtlety to the Brazilian notation. Gilberto, as the most defensive, they describe as a "first function" midfielder, Melo is "second function" and Ramires, as the most attacking of those three, is "third function".

There is an acceptance too that Robinho pulls left. He does not operate centrally, for were he to do so, he would be competing for space with Kaká and Luís Fabiano. Strangely, he has seemingly reinvented the left-sided attacking position as practised by, for instance, Gianni Riva, in *il giocco all'Italiana*, the slightly more attacking version of *catenaccio* practised by Italy in the 1970s. he was, in effect, a converted,

tucked-in winger from a 4-3-3, encouraged to move inside by the surges forward of the left-back, who had, since the days of Giacinto Facchetti, been the more attacking of the full-backs in the Italian system.

And once you start to see that, you realise that Ramires, who has had an excellent tournament pounding up and down the right flank, offering deftness as well as energy, could be seen as a modern version of a*tornante* (literally, a "returner") who, like Jair in Helenio Herrera's Internazionale, is a winger who tracks back. Apart from the fact that the back four is flat rather than employing a sweeper, a middle-aged Italian could easily see this Brazil as an incarnation of *il giocco all'Italiana*. In that regard, Brazil have become a sort of tactical Rorschach test, with everybody seeing in it what they are culturally disposed to see.

Which begs the question that, if such things are so open to interpretation, whether there is any point putting a name to a formation. There is, because it gives us a basic shape, but we must always be conscious of differences within systems that ostensibly appear to be the same. In fact, one of the great criticisms that can be levelled at the English game historically is that the formation has led the game: players, rather than being treated as individuals whose tactical responsibilities were to be negotiated within a basic framework, were rammed into pre-designated holes.

So while describing the current Brazilian system as a diamond feels almost as antiquated as those British newspapers in the 50s who still listed teams in the 2-3-5 that had died out three decades earlier, so we should be aware that 4-2-3-1 doesn't tell the full story either. And, most intriguingly, the Brazilian 4-2-3-1 differs from the European version precisely because it has evolved via a different route.

DEVELOPMENT OF BRAZIL'S SYSTEM

The European 4-2-3-1 derives from 4-4-2. A centre-forward is withdrawn, and the roles of the midfield become more precisely defined, the wide players advancing and the central players retreating, although the wide players still have responsibility for dealing with the attacking intentions of the opposition full-backs.

In Brazil, though, the default for several years has been the 4-2-2-2. It was first showcased to the world in 1982, when Falcao and Cerezo operated as deep-lying playmakers behind Zico and Socrates (the magic square, as it was known). After a flirtation with 3-5-2 under Sebastiao Lazaroni in 1990, the 4-2-2-2 returned in far more defensive form at the 1994 World Cup, at which Dunga, the present coach, operated alongside Marcio Santos at the back of the midfield, with Zinho and Mazinho in front of them as *trequartistas*, and Bebeto and Romario as the centre-forwards.

The evolution of that system to 4-2-3-1 has come about by pulling one of the centre-forwards back and wider, while one of the *trequartistas* shuffles a little wider – and in Ramires's case deeper – on the other side to accommodate him. Robinho is thus a forward playing to the left (as Riva did), whereas a European version of the system would have a winger or a midfielder (or a defensive forward) there. So far in this tournament, there has been no sign of him feeling any sense of defensive responsibility.

That may be a problem if he comes up against a right-back of great attacking intent – such as Maicon (who has looked a far more complete player than Dani Alves in the Confederations Cup), but generally the balance looks promising. Ramires, who will join Benfica from Cruzeiro before the start of next season, chugs up and down the right, allowing Melo, the more advanced of the two holders, to focus his attentions more to the left while Gilberto remains central.

It is an adventurous system – counter-intuitively, given Dunga's reputation – but its great advantage is the position of Robinho. As a withdrawn, left-sided central forward, he naturally falls under the marking remit of any member of the opposition. Given one holding midfielder is trying to deal with Kaká, if the other shifts across to stop Robinho, he risks leaving the right-side exposed for Maicon and Ramires. But neither is Robinho playing tight against the opposing full-back or centre-back; in a game that seems increasingly crowded, his has discovered (or rediscovered) a new niche of opportunity.

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION FOR EUROPEAN TEAMS

Attacking from wide, of course, is very much in vogue. "When forwards attack from wide to inside, they are far more dangerous," Sir Alex Ferguson explained. "It's funny when I see centre-forwards starting off in the middle against their markers and then going away from goal. Strikers going inside are far more dangerous, I think. When [Thierry] Henry played as a striker, and sometimes when Wayne [Rooney] does, they try to escape and create space by drifting from the centre to wide positions, when that actually makes them less dangerous."

It is all the more dangerous if the wide attacker in operating in conjunction with an attacking full-back: Lionel Messi cutting infield as Alves surges by him is perhaps the most obvious example, but Andrei Arshavin, backed up by either Aleksandr Anyukov or Yuri Zhirkov, has benefited similarly for Russia, while one of Croatia's great strengths – at least until Fabio Capello exposed it by deploying the pace of Theo Walcott high on the right in Zagreb – was Danijel Pranjic's link-up with Ivan Rakitic on the left flank.

It would be a brave manager who called Robinho's bluff and encouraged his right-back to ignore him and surge forward, but that might be the best way to deal with his role. Or a team could play as Chelsea did in Barcelona, with three very deep central midfielders. Or play with a tucked in and purely defensive right-back. And that perhaps is the greatest strength of Dunga's side – that their interpretation of 4-2-3-1 raises questions European sides are not used to answering.

THE QUESTION: ARE DEFENSIVE FORWARDS THE FUTURE?

BARCELONA, MANCHESTER UNITED AND LIVERPOOL ARE AMONG THE TEAMS TO HAVE REALISED THAT ATTACKING PLAYERS MUST BE PREPARED TO FUNCTION IN LESS GLAMOROUS WAYS

Leo Messi and Thierry Henry celebrate Barcelona's second goal against Manchester United. Photograph: Jasper Juinen/Getty Images

Amid all the praise for the way Barcelona maintained possession against Manchester in the Champions League final, one comment from their manager, Pep Guardiola, tended to be overlooked. "Without the

ball," he said, "we are a horrible team. We need the ball, so we pressed high up the pitch to win the ball back early."

From a Barcelona manager, perhaps that isn't so surprising. After all, since Rinus Michels took charge there in 1971, they have favoured the classical Dutch model, which demanded pressing and an aggressive offside trap. "When I went to Barcelona," remembers Marinho Peres, the Brazilian defender who joined the club in 1974, "Michels wanted the centre-backs to push out to make the offside line. In Brazil this was known as the donkey line: people thought it was stupid. The theory was that if you passed one defender, you passed all the others.

"But what Cruyff said to me was that Holland could not play Brazilians or Argentinians, who were very skilful, on a huge pitch. The Dutch players wanted to reduce the space and put everybody in a thin band. The whole logic of the offside trap comes from squeezing the game. This was a brand new thing for me. In Brazil, people thought you could chip the ball over and somebody could run through and beat the offside trap, but it's not like that because you don't have time."

Arrigo Sacchi, whose philosophy was developed from Total Football, believed that a side pressing would ideally allow only 25 metres between centre-forward and centre-back, but such a thin band seems impossible under the liberal modern interpretation of the offside law, which is one of the reasons that it has become increasingly common for sides to play in four bands instead of three. (In fact, it could be argued that one of the reasons that United were so outplayed was that Barcelona's system was discernibly a 4-1-2-3, while United, perhaps because of the absence of Darren Fletcher, perhaps because of Anderson's indiscipline, were stuck in a far more rigid 4-3-3. Given rough equality of talent in that midfield area, a triangle will always beat a line.)

What Barcelona achieved, in other words, was to find a way of pursuing the classic tenets of Total Football – short passing, intermovement of players, winning the ball high up the field – under the modern interpretation of the laws. Their solution, in truth, is not especially complex. Certainly it does not require the intellectual leap of faith Marinho found he needed to accept the efficacy of aggressive offside.

If defenders cannot move forward to defend high up the field because the weakened offside law makes them reluctant to leave space behind them, then logically forwards, when they do not have the ball, act as defenders. This is nothing particularly new – Andriy Shevchenko's ability to defend, for instance, was one of the things that made Valeriy Lobanovskyi hail him as the first "universal player" – but what is surprising is the extent to which Barcelona's forwards are deployed as ball-winners.

To traditionalists who prefer to think of forwards as fragile artists who should not be troubled by such negative thoughts that may be unpalatable – Jimmy Greaves always thought a forward should run as little as possible to ensure he was fresh to pounce when chances arose - but the statistics are telling.

For Barcelona Dani Alves stands alone, having committed twice as many fouls as anybody else in the back four last season, but Opta stats show that Thierry Henry committed more fouls than any other member of the back four, with Gerard Piqué only one ahead of Samuel Eto'o, and Leo Messi and the other regular defenders within one foul of each other. Given none are the sort of players usually thought of as dirty, and they are not the Kevin Davies or Niall Quinn sort of target-man forward who concedes a lot of free-kicks simply because they challenge for a lot of headers, that surely is significant.

Barcelona, because of their reputation for beautiful football, are perhaps the most striking example, but they are certainly not alone. It is not stretching things by much to draw a parallel with table football where, beyond a certain level, most of the play is made by the back two, because they have secure space behind them and so can tee up shots, while the front bands of five and three are left to block or to pounce on loose balls.

pitch because full-backs, as Jack Charlton noted in 1994, tended to be the only players on the field who regularly had space in from of them. Logically, the next step was to close that down, which means forwards, and particularly wide forwards, taking defensive responsibility.

Manchester United tend to use Park Ji-sung as a defensive winger, as he did most notably against Internazionale when he almost entirely negated the attacking threat of Maicon from full-back. Indeed given his lack of obvious creative abilities, his deployment against Sylvinho, who had barely played for two years and who looked nervous early on, was one of the more mystifying elements of the Champions League final.

But Wayne Rooney too has been used defensively. Even within the scope of that final, it was evident in Carles Puyol's surges from full-back in the second half – one of which led to the second goal - just how Rooney had restricted him before switching flanks at half-time. There are those who would argue that Rooney would be better served operating centrally, as a purely creative presence, but that is to ignore both how many goals are scored from wide these days, and also how good Rooney is as a defensive player. Defenders are often spoken of as being frustrated forwards, but Rooney at times gives the impression of being a frustrated left-back, forever chafing at the restrictions of creativity, desperate to go and get involved in a bit of jockeying.

The surges of Aly Cissokho from left-back had troubled United in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final against Porto, so in the second leg, Sir Alex Ferguson played Cristiano Ronaldo as a centre-forward, with Rooney on the right. Cissokho and Porto were negated, and United completed a relatively comfortable 1-0 victory. Similarly last season, in the semi-final away to Barcelona, Rooney became almost a second full-back, neutralising Messi.

Ronaldo's 42 goals last season meant he was almost universally hailed as United's outstanding player, but consider this curiosity: in Premier League games Ronaldo started last season, Manchester United picked up 2.38 points per game; when Tevez started they picked up 2.44; when Rooney started they picked up 2.52. That's only one measure, and it's fairly crude, but it does hint at how much important work goes unseen. It may be more thrilling to see Rooney employed in a central role, but it is not necessarily more effective. Indeed, it is tribute to his selflessness that he is prepared to function in less glamorous ways.

At Liverpool, similarly, Dirk Kuyt has become adept in the role, harrying and pestering his full-back. Given Steven Gerrard seems certain to continue at the centre of their 4-2-3-1, it is easy to understand why Rafa Benítez might be tempted to bring in Carlos Tevez. Not only would he offer a second central striking option, but playing on the left he would give Liverpool a formidable line of three creative players, all of whom work exceptionally hard, and all of whom are prepared to do their share of defending.

Of course the corollary to defensive forwards is that more defensive players must learn to create. The deep-lying play-making of Falcao and Cerezo for Brazil in the 1982 World Cup, it could be argued, was facilitated. More recently, Shevchenko helped drive back the opposition defence to create room for Andrea Pirlo's successful reinvention as a deep *regista* (central midfield playmaker, literally 'director'). In the Premier League we have seen Michael Carrick and Xabi Alonso offer interpretations of the same role. Would Xavi or Andrés Iniesta be quite so effective without three forwards who tackle in front of them?

Lobanovskyi evangelised universality, foreseeing an age when players could interchange at will, and it is perhaps towards that that we are heading. Yet that process seems, paradoxically, to be leading to greater specialisms, perhaps even inversions – in Park's case in particular. Some defenders have always been selected with their creative qualities in mind; now we are seeing the rise of the defensive forward.

THE QUESTION: IS THE BOX-TO-BOX MIDFIELDER DEAD?

IN THE LATEST IN OUR SERIES ANALYSING FOOTBALL TACTICS, WE LOOK AT WHERE THE ROBSONS, KEANES AND MATTHAUS'S HAVE GONE IN THE MODERN GAME

Bryan Robson Photograph: Peter Robinson/EMPICS Sports Photo Agency

Doing some research into the 1990 World Cup recently, I was struck by a comment made by the England manager Bobby Robson after his captain, Bryan Robson, had picked up his customary World Cup injury, rupturing an Achilles during the 0-0 draw against the Netherlands. Bryan is, Bobby said, "as good a player as we've ever produced".

As good a player as we've ever produced. Even allowing for the magnifying lens of context, for the sense of despair Bobby Robson must have felt to lose his captain at such a crucial stage – and just when England had produced a performance, if not a result, to rebuff their most poisonous critics – that is an extraordinary statement. Not "he'll be a big loss", not "he's been a key player for us over the years", but "as good a player as we've ever produced".

The stats show the importance of Robson the player to Robson the manager. Bobby was in charge for 88 games. Bryan played in 62 of those, of which England lost only 10; of the 26 he missed, England lost seven. So that got me thinking: if Robson really is one of the best ever, where would he fit in the present England set-up?

And the answer is that he wouldn't, not comfortably, not if England continue to play a loose 4-2-3-1. It seems churlish to define such a great player by what he was not, but did he really have the technical ability to operate in one of the three attacking midfield slots? But equally, given his goal-scoring ability, would it not be a waste to play him as a holding player? And, anyway, until his pace had gone late in his career, did he really have the discipline to operate as one of the holding players?

He would probably have to play in the awkward compromise position Frank Lampard occupied against Slovakia and Ukraine, as the freer of the two holders, alongside a Gareth Barry figure. Which would just about work, I think, and yet it seems terrible to circumscribe the role of a player whose greatest assets were his stamina, his courage and his completeness. And anyway, that role seems best occupied not by a shuttler chafing constantly at the reins, but by an intelligent passer such as Xabi Alonso or Michael Carrick.

And then it occurred to me that complete midfielders, those great drivers of teams who could both score goals and make tackles, are generally a declining breed. After Robson there came Löthar Matthaus, David Platt, then Roy Keane and thereafter, well, nobody. The question is why.

REASON ONE: THE DECLINE OF THE TRADITIONAL 4-4-2 FORMATION AND THE RISE OF THE HOLDING MIDFIELDER

Perhaps the point is not that complete midfielders don't exist so much as that they are no longer able to play as complete midfielders. Michael Ballack, Cesc Fàbregas and Michael Essien, for instance, have all played this season both as holding midfielders and as attacking midfielders, but rarely, if at all, just as midfielders.

This, surely, is the key issue in the debate over whether Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard, both of whom would seem to have the full range of attributes that in a previous age would have made them Robson-style box-to-box players, can play together in the same midfield.

In a sense, the problem is less the answer than the question. For what the question omits is the assumption that we're taking about them playing together in the centre of a 4-4-2 (for how, until Fabio Capello opened our eyes, could our players possibly have veered from the one true path of 4-4-2?).

This, arguably, was the main reason for the farrago of the golden generation: England were blessed with a remarkably talented generation of players; the problem was that Michael Owen and David Beckham needed a 4-4-2, while Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard needed an additional holding player. Neither Sven-Göran Eriksson nor Steve McClaren ever had the clarity of thought to opt for one system over the other and cull players accordingly. It was almost as though football itself were taunting England for its lack of tactical sophistication and its concomitant obeisance to the cult of the celebrity player.

Perhaps in a club situation, working together every day, Lampard and Gerrard could have come to an understanding, but at international level they palpably couldn't. The World Cup qualifier away to Austria in September 2004 showcased the problem. Both Lampard and Gerrard scored, and with 20 minutes to go England seemed comfortable, only for Roland Kollmann to knock in a free-kick conceded by Lampard, and Andreas Ivanschitz to equalise with a drive that deflected off Gerrard and squirmed under David James.

Both goals, ultimately, resulted from the vast space that opened up between back four and midfield as Gerrard and Lampard advanced. That area has always been English football's great weakness. It was from that position that Matthias Sindelar almost exposed England when Austria lost 4-3 at Stamford Bridge in 1932, from that position that Vsevolod Bobrov so tormented Chelsea in their 4-4 draw against Dinamo Moscow in 1945, and, most notoriously, from that position that Nandor Hidegkuti crafted Hungary's 6-3 demolition of England in 1953. Even in the 1990s, Eric Cantona and Gianfranco Zola were able to exploit the stratified nature of the average English set-up, prospering in the space between the lines.

As lone forwards became increasingly common, so it became increasingly necessary for sides to deploy a midfield holder to combat the withdrawn forward, precipitating the gradual shift – at the highest level at least - to 4-2-3-1. Once that formation has been adopted, midfielders are necessarily categorised as either defensive or attacking, and completeness, although it allows a player to play in either role, becomes within the immediate context of the game far less of an asset.

REASON TWO: MODERN FOOTBALL IS ABOUT SPECIALISTS

The game nowadays increasingly demands universality. It is no longer enough simply to be a winger or a playmaker or a poacher. Full-backs have to be able to attack. Which makes the decline of the most universal player on the pitch paradoxical.

It also explains the distaste of Arrigo Sacchi – along with Valeriy Lobanovskyi one of the two high priests of universality – for 4-2-3-1. "Today's football is about managing the characteristics of individuals," he

said. "And that's why you see the proliferation of specialists. The individual has trumped the collective. But it's a sign of weakness. It's reactive, not pro-active."

Sacchi saw that most clearly during his time as sporting director of Real Madrid in 2004. "There was no project; it was about exploiting qualities," he said. "So, for example, we knew that Zidane, Raúl and Figo didn't track back, so we had to put a guy in front of the back four who would defend. But that's reactionary football. It doesn't multiply the players' qualities exponentially. Which actually is the point of tactics: to achieve this multiplier effect on the players' abilities. In my football, the *regista* – the playmaker – is whoever had the ball. But if you have [Claude] Makélélé, he can't do that. He doesn't have the ideas to do it, though of course, he's great at winning the ball. It's all about specialists."

Sacchi remains as committed to 4-4-2 now as he was when his AC Milan side won successive European Cups in 1989 and 1990. Neither of his central midfield pairing of Carlo Ancelotti and Frank Rijkaard were as prolific as Robson or Matthaus, but both were certainly capable of both destroying and creating. Given players with the physical and technical attributes of Lampard and Gerrard, he would, presumably, play both in a 4-4-2 – if, that is, they had the mental attributes he demanded. He is not sure that Gerrard, in particular, does.

"When I was director of football at Real Madrid I had to evaluate the players coming through the youth ranks," he said in response to a question about Gerrard. "We had some who were very good footballers. They had technique, they had athleticism, they had drive, they were hungry. But they lacked what I call knowing-how-to-play-football. They lacked decision-making. They lacked positioning. They didn't have that subtle sensitivity of football: how a player should move within the collective.

"You see, strength, passion, technique, athleticism, all of these are very important. But they are a means to an end, not an end in itself. They help you reach your goal, which is putting your talent at the service of the team, and, by doing this, making both you and the team greater. So, situations like that, I just have to say, he's a great footballer, but perhaps not a great player."

Rafa Benítez, who is probably the most Sacchian manager English football has known, seems to have harboured similar doubts. Twice, he was willing to sell his captain (to Chelsea, who would presumably have used Lampard and Gerrard to flank Makelele in a 4-3-3), and his regular deployment of Gerrard on the right or the left of a midfield four was surely evidence of his uneasiness at giving him responsibility in the centre.

It was, of course, the use of Didi Hamann as a holding player that released Gerrard in the 2005 Champions League final, while Benítez's conversion to 4-2-3-1 more recently has given Gerrard licence, because he has two holders behind him. Gerrard started as a complete midfielder, might have become a holding midfielder who get forward, and has become instead an attacking midfielder who can put in the odd tackle.

Lampard's role at Chelsea is slightly deeper-lying, but he is, none the less, more comfortable with a holding player behind him. It will be fascinating to see whether he has the acuity to adapt to the slightly more defensive brief Capello seems to envisage for him with England.

The question then is the extent to which the need to use Gerrard and Lampard in conjunction with more defensive players is a facet of them lacking "knowing-how-to-play-football", and how much it is inherent in the way the tactical evolution of the game has affected the position they grew up playing.

To an extent, the comparison of England's 2004 performance against Austria and a Sacchi side is absurd, for no Sacchi side would ever allow the sort of gap between defensive and midfield lines to open up as emerged in Vienna (something that may, in part, have been caused by the defence's desire to prevent David James, who was having one of his more erratic days, from being tempted into leaving his box).

REASON THREE: THE LIBERALISATION IN THE OFFSIDE LAW

That said, Sacchi's ideal was for attack and defence to be separated by no more than 25m, providing a compact structure that facilitated his hard-pressing game, and it may be that such a high defensive line is no longer practicable given the liberalisation of the offside law.

It is impossible to prove, but it seems reasonable to suggest that Sacchi's approach would be undermined today as much by the modern interpretation of offside as by the egos of millionaire modern players. The change in the offside law has stretched the game, so we now tend to see it in four bands, and it is that that has effectively decommissioned the complete midfielder.

Historically, that is entirely consistent. The notion of a complete midfielder itself is far from constant across football's history. It first emerged as the centre-half in the 2-3-5, which came to prominence in the 1880s was a multi-skilled all-rounder, defender and attacker, leader and instigator, goal-scorer and defender, but by the early thirties he had all but disappeared as W-M took hold (the last of the old-style centre-halves was probably Ernst Ocwirk, who continued to mastermind the Austria midfield until the early 1950s, but he was very much an anachronism by then).

The old-style centre-half was replaced by the stopper and, as the inside-forwards dropped off to become advanced midfielders, the resulting 3-2-2-3 neatly split midfielders into those whose responsibilities were defensive and those whose were attacking.

Only in the mid-sixties as the four bands of the W-M were replaced by the three bands of 4-2-4, and then old-style 4-3-3 and 4-4-2 – a development that was soon followed by pressing and the squeezing of the game – did the complete midfielder re-emerge.

Now, as three bands once again become four, midfielders are specialising once again.

THE QUESTION: WHY IS FULL-BACK THE MOST IMPORTANT POSITION ON THE PITCH?

ALL THE HYPE IN FOOTBALL IS ABOUT FORWARDS AND FANTASISTAS, BUT INCREASINGLY THE BATTLE IS WON AND LOST AMONG THE FULL-BACKS

Cafu and Roberto Carlos excelled in tandem at the 2002 World Cup. Photograph: Reuters

It was, strangely, Jack Charlton who first gave voice to the thought, claiming after the 1994 World Cup that the most important attacking player on the team was the full-back. At first, it sounds preposterous, until you consider that every World Cup since has been won by the team with the best pair of attacking full-backs: Jorginho and Branco for Brazil in 1994; Lilian Thuram and Bixente Lizarazu for France in 1998; Cafu and Roberto Carlos for Brazil in 2002; and Gianluca Zambrotta and Fabio Grosso for Italy three years ago.

Now of course, to an extent, that is coincidence. Nobody wins anything simply by having a pair of good full-backs, but what the trend highlights is the importance of full-backs to the tactical side of the game. Take, for example, Spain's victory over Russia in the Euro 2008 semi-final. The game tends to be remembered for its 3-0 scoreline and used in evidence against Andrei Arshavin, but it started very evenly.

Arshavin, it's true, struggled to escape the marking of Marcos Senna, but the decisive moment of the game came after 34 minutes, when David Villa was injured. Off he went, on came Cesc Fábregas, and Spain switched from 4-1-3-2 to 4-1-4-1. That brought Andres Iniesta and David Silva into more direct confrontation with Alexander Anyukov and Yuri Zhirkov, the Russia full-backs whose marauding had been such a feature of the tournament. With their forward surges inhibited, Russia lost fluency, Spain took control of midfield and went on to score three times in the second half. Counter-intuitively, without the tournament's top scorer, they played more effective football – a useful reminder that goals are a measure of success, not a means to it.

Or consider the first leg of Manchester United's League meeting with Internazionale. In the first half, Park Ji-Sung, presumably selected ahead of Wayne Rooney for the purpose, restricted Maicon's attacking surges from right-back, which, given how narrow Inter's midfield was, allowed Patrice Evra to advance. If it looked at times as though United had an extra man it's because, effectively, they did.

After the break, though, as Ivan Cordoba replaced the hapless Nelson Rivas at centre-back, Estaban Cambiasso was able to play higher – in the first half, he had almost become an auxiliary centre-back, so deep had he dropped to bail out Rivas – allowing Zanetti to push further to his right and so restrict Evra. Accordingly, the second half was far more even than the first had been.

BRAZILIAN BEGINNINGS

The full-back, in the modern sense, developed in Brazil in the fifties. The genesis of the 4-2-4 is complex and disputed, but what is significant here is that at the 1958 World Cup, Brazil were using it and nobody else was. It may seem counter-intuitive that it should have been Brazil, with their reputation for attacking flair, who pioneered the use of four defenders as opposed to the three of the W-M, but formations are neutral; it is their application that gives them an defensive or aggressive aspect (which is another way of saying, yet again, that 4-5-1 is not inherently negative).

Terminology here is surely significant. In English the term "full-back" is used as a hangover from the days of 2-3-5. Those two defenders were pushed wider by the backward movement of the centre-half (another confusingly antiquated term) in the W-M, and then wider still when another midfielder (usually the left-half) was pushed deeper to form a back four (this is why the classic numbering of an English back four, reading from right-to-left, goes 2-5-6-3).

In Brazil, though, (and, for that matter, in Spanish-speaking countries as well) a "full-back" is a 'lateral'. The term gives a notion of width, but not of depth: he was, in other words, a wide player, but not necessarily a defensive one, a mindset that was inherent in Brazilian football almost from the start. Arsenal toured in 1949 and, although broadly successful, were bewildered by what they found. "Suddenly, a bloke comes dashing through and he's had a shot at goal and the ball went wide," said the full-back Laurie Scott, describing Arsenal's 5-1 win over Fluminense in Aidan Hamilton's An Entirely Different Game. "And we started looking around to see who we'd got to blame for this. We couldn't find it. We found out it was their full-back. See, they didn't care. I never went up there like that."

That exuberance had been a problem for Brazilian football – they won only two Copa Americas before the second world war, and it's significant that both of Uruguay's goals in the final game of the Cup resulted from the left-back, Bigode, being caught out of position. The 4-2-4, though, gave just enough structure for those attacking tendencies to flourish.

Given the space in front of them, the full-backs were encouraged to advance, while at the same time providing immediate cover. Once marking had ceased to be man-to-man, it became a simple process for the fourth defender to react to the forward movement of the full-back by not pushing out himself, leaving his side still with the three-man defensive cover they would have had in the W-M. The pairing of Nilton Santos and Djalma Santos is often overlooked, but they were key to Brazil's World Cup victories of 1958 and 1962.

NATURAL EVOLUTION

Even by 1962, though, the shape had changed, with Mario Zagallo shuttling up and down the left rather than acting as a traditional winger – as Garrincha most certainly was on the other side. England, in 1966, operated without wingers, using something that would today probably be described as a 4-1-3-2. Their full-backs, George Cohen and Ray Wilson, while nowhere near as flamboyant as their Brazilian forebears, had vital roles, and were noted for their overlapping runs. This, of course, is a natural evolution: if there are no wingers to defend against, the full-back can be more adventurous; and at the same time, if there is no winger, there is a need for the full-backs to advance to provide width.

In 1970, Brazil operated with just one attacking full-back, Carlos Alberto, with Everaldo tucking in on the left to provide balance. That was a function of the highly idiosyncratic development of that side, but it was symptomatic of a more general trend. Most European sides who used a *libero* tended to deploy one attacking full-back, balanced by a more defensive player on the other flank, who tucked in and operated as a marker: Giacinto Facchetti and Tarcisio Burgnich in Helenio Herrera's Inter, for instance; Paul Breitner and Berti Vogts in West Germany's World Cup-winning side of 1974; or Antonio Cabrini and Claudio Gentile in Italy's World Cup winners of 1982.

In those last three combinations, the left-back was the attacking one of the pair, which was the orthodoxy. Gianluca Vialli has a theory that the right-back was always the worst player on the team. If he showed defensive ability, and was of average height or above, he would be moved into the centre; if he was good on the ball he would be pushed into midfield. The only players left to play at right-back, then, were those who were outstanding neither defensively nor technically. Left-backs were different, partly because left-footers are rarer and tend to be nurtured, and partly because of the example of Facchetti. That thinking has changed over the past 20 years.

The advent of wing-backs can be seen as attempt to liberate both full-backs again – particularly in a world without wingers, but as the gradual move to a single striker has led to a return to a back four, the full-back has again taken on attacking importance. That Dani Alves can be hailed as one of the greatest players in the world is an indication of how crucial the role has become.

Few sides today play with wingers who stay wide. Part of the point of a 4-2-3-1, in fact, is to restore dribblers to the game without risking becoming over-manned in the centre. Even in a 4-4-2, the wide midfielders rarely play high up the field, which means that, as Charlton said, the full-backs are the only players on the field who regularly have space in front of them, and where there is space there is opportunity: if there is no direct opponent, there is the chance to overman, as United showed in the San Siro.

TRYING TO COUNTER THE FULL-BACK

The danger, of course, is that sides become over-reliant on the full-backs to provide attacking width, as happened to Russia in that Euro 2008 semi-final. Equally, Chelsea under Luiz Felipe Scolari, after early success with Jose Bosingwa and Ashley Cole pushing forwards (a Brazilian coach employing a typically Brazilian tactic), found themselves restricted as teams began to deploy midfielders to pen them back.

The rise of players like Park and Dirk Kuyt, wide men who play high up the field but are capable of taking on a defensive brief, is one of the most striking features of the past couple of seasons (or look at the job Wayne Rooney did in Barcelona last season). In a sense they are modern incarnations of players such as Jair, who operated on the right for Herrera's Inter. He was a tornante (literally "returner"), a wide midfielder characteristic of classic *catenaccio*, whose role was to occupy the opposing left-back and track his forward surges.

Most fascinating is what happens when genuine winger and attacking full-back clash, as happened in last season's Champions League final. Cole has probably played Cristiano Ronaldo as well as anybody, and so Sir Alex Ferguson switched Ronaldo across to the left, putting him up against Michael Essien.

For half an hour, Ronaldo destroyed him, not merely twice beating him on the ground, but even leaping above him to head United into the lead. The temptation must have been to try to double up on Ronaldo, but Chelsea ended up doing the opposite. Essien drove by him again and again. That effectively gave Chelsea an extra man in midfield and as they came to dominate, Ronaldo became increasingly marginalised. Frank Lampard's equaliser, of course, came from a half-blocked Essien drive. The course of the game mirrored exactly the ebb and flow of that battle between Essien and Ronaldo.

England's 4-1 victory in Croatia, similarly, can be seen as a tale of winger and full-back. Danijel Pranjic had looked excellent in the Euros, his overlapping runs allowing Ivan Rakitic to drift infield off the left flank on to his favoured right foot. Faced with the pace of Theo Walcott, though, he never had the confidence to abandon his man and surge forward, which had the effect both of stymieing Croatia as an attacking force, and of exposing his own defensive shortcomings. That Walcott scored a hat-trick underlined the point, but came almost a bonus alongside his primary role of disrupting Croatia's left flank.

Come next summer's World Cup, of course, all the build-up will be about the forwards and fantasistas – Lionel Messi and Franck Ribéry, Wayne Rooney and Fernando Torres, Samuel Eto'o and Robinho. Perhaps though, what we should be concentrating on is the full-backs: Sergio Ramos and Philipp Lahm,

Alexander Anyukov and Patrice Evra, Dani Alves and Ashley Cole. For it is there, increasingly, where the battle is lost and won.

THE QUESTION: WHY ARE MANCHESTER UNITED CONCEDING SO FEW GOALS – AND HOW DO YOU SCORE AGAINST THEM?

IN THE LATEST IN OUR SERIES ANALYSING TACTICS, WE LOOK AT UNITED'S DEFENCE AND HOW TEAMS CAN BREAK IT DOWN

Rio Ferdinand has been central to Manchester United's defensive feats this season. Photograph: Rebecca Naden/PA

Remember 8 November last year? Labour Party rule came to an end in New Zealand, Ban-Ki Moon met African leaders to discuss the future of Congo, hurricane Paloma edged nearer the Cayman Islands, and Manchester let in a league goal. Two, actually, and both to Samir Nasri. In a British record 1,212 minutes (plus injury-time) of league football since Nasri's second, Edwin van der Sar has not conceded, placing

That run of 13 clean sheets includes eight 1–0 wins and two goalless draws, which is uncharacteristic for a club that prides itself on its cavalier tradition, but it would be misleading to suggest that United are suddenly flying the flag for negativity. United remain the Premier League's third-top scorers, with an average of 1.71 goals per game this season. They are behind Chelsea on 1.76 and Manchester City on 1.75, but ahead of Liverpool on 1.68 and Aston Villa on 1.60. So, if United's goals return is slightly on the low side, how does their defence measure up? They have conceded 0.42 goals per game this season, which sets them far ahead of the Premier League rivals. Chelsea are next with 0.6, then Liverpool 0.68 and Fulham 0.83.

Last season, United let in 0.58 goals per game, the same figure Chelsea achieved in winning the title in 2005-06, while the season before last United conceded 0.71. Their present record, in other words, would be remarkable were they to sustain it until the end of the season, although Chelsea only conceded 0.39 in 2004-05. The question, then, is why have they been so good defensively this season?

THE OBVIOUS FACTORS: THE FIXTURE LIST AND THE PLAYERS AT THEIR DISPOSAL

A number of external causes suggest themselves. United's fixture list this season is odd in that their first nine away games were against the nine other sides who had finished in the top 10 last season. It would be only natural if that programme led to a focus on defence that has carried over into what should, logically, be the easier part of the season.

The structure of the season, with the trips to Monaco for the European Super Cup and Yokohama for the Club World Cup, has also led to a stop-startness that a number of players have mentioned. Factor in the injuries to Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo, and the arrival of a new forward in Dimitar Berbatov, and a certain attacking disjointedness is only to be expected.

Ronaldo has, admittedly started 20 of 23 league games this season, and Rooney 16, but it is worth remembering that United scored only 10 goals in their first 12 games last season. Their highly mobile attacking approach takes time to hone; players have to come to understand each other's movements, and any disruption to that can retard the process. As a result it's perhaps only natural that United have concentrated more on their defence.

But the minor shortfall in United's attacking quality should not disguise just how good they have been at the back. Tactics have played their part, of course, but even Valeriy Lobanovskyi, for all his focus on the "coalitions" between units in his system, accepted that it helped if the units were outstanding. In Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic, United have two of the best centre-backs in the world, and quite possibly the best pairing.

Sir Alex Ferguson gleefully hailed Vidic as "a defender who can defend" when he signed him from Spartak Moscow in 2006, and his arrival has coincided with the maturing of Ferdinand, and the elimination of the majority of the lapses of concentration that occasionally undermined his game. They are a classic stopper-passer combination, although Vidic is also comfortable with the ball, and Ferdinand can also dominate in the air. But it is their understanding that is key. "With Vidic," Ferdinand said, "I know exactly where he's going to be, without speaking." As a deputy, meanwhile, Jonny Evans is showing every sign of living up to the potential he demonstrated in two loan spells at Sunderland.

As Arrigo Sacchi has always insisted, though, it is possible for somebody to be a good footballer without being a good player, and all the technical qualities in the world mean little if you cannot form part of a cohesive team unit. And it is in that area, the statistics suggest, that United have really improved this season.

UNITED ARE PASSING MORE AND KEEPING THE BALL BETTER

Opta stats show that last season United averaged 458.5 passes per game, with a completion rate of 80.50%. This season, they're up to 518.5 passes per game and a completion rate of 83.54%, and in the last 13 games, they've made an average of 540.5 passes per game with a completion rate of 84.33%. Possession has risen from 58% last season to 62% in the last 13 games.

Correspondingly, as they hold the ball better, the number of tackles they have had to make has fallen from 25.7 per game last season to 19.7 this. The opposition has managed only 22 shots against over the 13-game run of clean sheets; in the same period, Everton are next most stifling, allowing their opponents 40.

Possession, though, is not everything – it is not an end in itself but one of a number of tools that can be used to control space (in Sam Allardyce's last season at Bolton, to take perhaps the most extreme example of this, they only won away games when the opposition had made more passes than them).

A high percentage of possession can be a sign that a team is being penned back in its own half, knocking the ball fruitlessly sideways. United have, indeed, ceded territorial advantage in certain games – most notably at home to Chelsea in the first hour and away against West Ham – but in both games they

seemed to be rooted in a desire to draw opponents forward and hit space behind them. That they have had more touches in their opponents' half over the last 13 games (5,626) than any other side demonstrates that their preference most of the time is to take the initiative.

BERBATOV'S ROLE IN HELPING UNITED RETAIN POSSESSION

The most obvious difference between United this season and last, of course, is Dimitar Berbatov who, despite his versatility and willingness to drop deep, remains far more of a central totem than Carlos Tevez was. That means United are (relatively) less fluid than last season, and their shape is more obviously a 4-2-3-1. Last season, with Rooney, Tevez and Ronaldo interchanging, there was no fixed attacking focus, which is why, although there almost always was a central attacking presence, the formation was often described as either a 4-3-3-0 or a 4-2-4-0.

Berbatov is far more flexible than most – and speaks of enjoying playing both as creator and striker – but he also provides an outlet on the odd occasions when United are under pressure, his stature and chest-control making him far better with his back to goal than either Rooney or Tevez. That, of course, is one of the reasons United have held possession better this season. What is lost in attacking fluidity is gained in enhanced defensive capacity. There are two other major areas of difference in terms of personnel: at the back of the midfield, and at right-back. Ferguson rarely fields the same two holders in successive games, but the pair used most frequently are Darren Fletcher and Michael Carrick. The tackler-passer combination is familiar, but Fletcher is a more obviously defensive option than either Anderson or Owen Hargreaves, who tended to fulfill the role last season.

One of the most remarkable factors in United's solidity this season has been that it has been achieved with three different right-backs: Wes Brown, Gary Neville, and Rafael. Although highly promising, Rafael is inexperienced and occasionally suspect positionally, while the games away to Arsenal and at home to Everton suggested age may be telling on Neville.

That has led to Ji-Sung Park frequently being used on the right (he has started 12 league games this season, as opposed to eight in the whole of last), to provide additional cover. In turn, that pushes Ronaldo across to the left, and has stymied some of their fluidity.

SO HOW DO YOU SCORE AGAINST THEM?

If there is a weakness – and it is slight – it is probably wide. Ferdinand and Vidic, bolstered by the two-man curtain in front of them, are almost impossibly imposing. Right-back, as has been noted, is a comparative problem area, but there may also be opportunities to expose the left-back, given Ronaldo's reluctance to track back – although it would take a brave full-back to charge forward and leave Ronaldo in space behind him.

Chelsea exploited that in the Champions League final: although Ronaldo scored and twice skinned Michael Essien in the opening half-hour, the Ghanaian gradually began to surge past him, and over the course of the two hours was probably the more effective, his most obvious impact being the half-blocked shot that led to Frank Lampard's equaliser. And if crosses can be kept away from Vidic and Ferdinand, there is a theory than Van der Sar has been slightly suspect in aerial battles since breaking his nose in a collision with Robbie Keane in February 2007.

Jose Mourinho spoke of the benefits of counter-attack against United after the 2007 FA Cup final, suggesting Ferdinand can be dragged out of position, and his Internazionale will probably set up defensively against United in both legs of their Champions League tie, but it seems this season that attacking United can unsettle them, if only because they are so unused to it. Forced to attack having fallen behind early, Liverpool beat them at Anfield; Arsenal attacked from the start and had their reward at the Emirates, and Everton threatened at times to outmuscle them.

This United team is not impregnable, but it does appear more defensively minded than other successful United teams. It's also worth noting, though, that while 15% of their shots brought goals last season, only 12% have this. That is probably partly because the chances they have created this time are harder to take than last season's, but a 25% decline in shooting accuracy almost exactly correlates with the drop from 2.11 goals per game to 1.71. Improve that ratio, and the goals will flow again; until then, perhaps we should just admire good defending. Football, after all, is about far more than just goals.

THE QUESTION: WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE CLASSIC GOALPOACHER?

MICHAEL OWEN IS ONE OF THE LAST OF A DYING BREED AS MORE HAS BECOME REQUIRED OF STRIKERS AS FOOTBALL HAS DEVELOPED TACTICALLY

Michael Owen lacks the all-round game possessed by most of the world's top strikers. Photograph: John Walton/EMPICS Sport/PA

Michael Owen may be the arch-poacher, but even he seems to have accepted that the art in which he excelled is of declining relevance. In his 2004 autobiography, Off the Record, Owen was still fighting against the tide, condemning Kevin Keegan for his attempts while England manager to add variety to his game.

Yet by the end of last season, under Keegan at Newcastle, he was willingly operating in a deep role behind Mark Viduka and Obafemi Martins. Owen is perhaps the last English example of his kind – at least at the highest level. There are two things at which he excels (or at least excelled): sitting on the shoulder of defenders and timing runs on to through balls, and getting across his marker at the near post to meet crosses. His diminishing pace has affected his ability to do the former, but he remains excellent at the latter (it is three years ago now, but his two late goals in the 3-2 win over Argentina in Geneva were typical).

NO MORE MÜLLERS

Over the last 40 years, numerous players have succeeded with similarly limited skill-sets. It would be hard to argue that the likes of Gerd Müller, Gary Lineker, Hossam Hassan or Filippo Inzaghi contributed much to the team beyond putting the ball in the back of the net, and yet all had distinguished international careers.

But football has changed. As a snap-shot of top-level modern football, let's take last season's Champions League quarter-finals. The main striker for each of the eight teams in the first legs were: Mirko Vucinic, Wayne Rooney, Kevin Kuranyi, Samuel Eto'o, Emmanuel Adebayor, Fernando Torres, Mateja Kezman and Didier Drogba. Of those, only Kezman even comes close to being an old-style poacher, and even he was operating as a lone forward, there as much to create space with his movement as to score (and, it may be noted, he was playing for Fenerbahce, probably the weakest of the quarter-finalists).

IMPROVED DEFENCES

So why should goalscorers have gone out of fashion? There is a practical explanation. Put simply, defences are better now than they were before: it takes more to break them down. "A lot of the goals a poacher scored came from mistakes," said the Montenegro manager Zoran Filipovic, an outstanding centre-forward for Red Star Belgrade in the early seventies. "Maybe not an obvious mistake, but a loss of concentration, giving the forward a metre of space. With defences now that doesn't happen. And fitness is better. Players used to make mistakes because they were tired. Now they can concentrate better."

In addition, the liberalisation of the offside law over the past decade means that teams tend not to operate such a high defensive line. They don't leave so much space behind them, and so the ability to burst onto through-balls at pace and beat the goalkeeper in a one-on-one is less valuable than it once was.

That, in part, explains Chelsea's troubles at home this season: Nicolas Anelka is one of the best in the world when put through against the goalkeeper, but is only given the opportunity to demonstrate that when the opposition attempts to take the initiative and is unable to defend as deep as they may like. Of his 14 Premier League goals this season, only two have been the first of a game (and one of those deflected in fortuitously off his knee at Blackburn); of Chelsea's 12 Premier League victories, only two have been by a single goal: in other words, when Chelsea score early and the opposition chases the game, Anelka takes advantage.

SET POSITIONS OR FLUIDITY

But there are also more theoretical reasons for the poacher's decline. There are two basic ways of conceptualising a team: it is either a series of predetermined slots (the target-man, the holding midfielder, the right-back ...) into which players are dropped, or it is a holistic entity, in which the relationships between component parts are as significant as the parts themselves.

In reality, of course, most managers end up somewhere between the two extremes, their more idealistic impulses often tempered by the resources available. Football in Britain, though, far more than anywhere else in the world has tended towards the former. Players preferred the security of a "position" in whatever the default formation of the day was: 2-3-5 until the thirties, the W-M from then until the sixties, and 4-4-2 ever since.

Pundits are still bewilderingly suspicious of sides who refuse to play "two up", while there seems to be a general consensus that 4-4-2 is the only logical way for England to play. There is a certain logic to that, for while at club level there is time to work on other systems, at international level it is probably safest to stick to the tried and tested, the formation that is hard-wired into English players from birth.

That said, at Euro 96, Terry Venables's side played a highly fluid system that, although taking 4-4-2 as its base, could become 3-5-2, with Gareth Southgate stepping into midfield, or 4-3-3, with Steve McManaman advanced. In the 1990 World Cup, under Bobby Robson, England switched mid-tournament to a 3-5-2. (Such flexibility, of course, is indicative of the basic truth – which is surely what Fabio Capello was alluding to when he dismissed the Whole notion of formations – that designations such as 4-4-2 and 4-2-3-1 are nothing more than crude signifiers useful for providing observers with a general idea of patterns; there are always far more subtleties beneath, and it is with those that a coach deals on a day-to-day basis).

And in 1966, Alf Ramsey devised what would become known as the 4-4-2, despite the prevalence of W-M and 4-2-4 at club level. In other words, in the three tournaments in which England reached the semi-finals or better, they were using a formation that struck against the default. Which is perhaps to say no more than how we used to do things is not necessarily a blueprint for how we should do them now.

LOBANOVSKYI'S SCIENCE

Valeriy Lobanovskyi was not the first to take a holistic approach, but he was the first to use computers to aid his conceptualisation, and the first to explain his thinking in clear scientific terms. Influenced by the cybernetic techniques being pioneered at the Polytechnic Institute while he was a student in Kyiv, he saw football as a system of twenty-two elements – two sub-systems of eleven elements – moving within a defined area (the pitch) and subject to a series of restrictions (the laws of the game). If the two sub-systems were equal, the outcome would be a draw. If one were stronger, it would win.

What really fascinated Lobanovskyi is the peculiarity that in football the efficiency of the sub-system is greater than the sum of the efficiencies of the elements that comprise it. Football, he concluded, was less about individuals than about coalitions and the connections between them.

UNIVERSALITY OR POACHERS AND THEIR PARTNERS

Lobanovskyi became convinced of the importance of "universality": if players could adapt, could play in two or three positions, could interchange on the field, those coalitions were less predictable and therefore harder to disrupt. In such a philosophy, there is no place for a player who is only a sniffer, whose only contribution is – to use Arrigo Sacchi's term – "reactionary", finishing chances created for him by his team-mates or presented him by the errors of the opposition.

Lobanovskyi hailed Andriy Shevchenko as the player who had come closest to his ideal of universality. Perhaps significantly, in his early days at Dynamo Kyiv, he was regularly outscored by Serhiy Rebrov – only later did his focus shift more to goalscoring; and even at Milan he regularly acted as a creator for Inzaghi. As such, he is the prototype for the modern forward.

Poachers operate best in partnerships. They need either a target-man to knock balls down to them (Niall Quinn and Kevin Phillips, Mark Hateley and Ally McCoist) or a deep-lying creator to feed balls through for them (Kenny Dalglish and Ian Rush, Dennis Bergkamp and Nicolas Anelka). That, though, draws a player from midfield, which decreases flexibility and thus a side's capacity to control space.

MOURINHO'S MODERN FORWARDS

The best modern forwards are universal players; effectively hybrids of the old partnerships. The likes of Didier Drogba and Emmanuel Adebayor are both target-man and quick-man, battering-rams and goalscorers, imposing physically and yet also capable of finesse. A Thierry Henry or a David Villa mixes the best qualities of the creator and goalscorer, capable of dropping deep or pulling wide, as adept at playing the final ball as taking chances himself. Somewhere in between the two extremes are ranged Samuel Eto'o, Fernando Torres, Dimitar Berbatov and Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

English football, though, seems reluctant to adapt, as Jose Mourinho pointed out. "I can't believe that in England they don't teach young players to be multi-functional," he said. "To them it's just about knowing one position and playing that position. To them a striker is a striker and that's it. For me, a striker is not just a striker. He's somebody who has to move, who has to cross, and who has to do this in a 4-4-2 or in a 4-3-3 or in a 3-5-2."

GLUT OF CREATORS

By playing one of the hybrid strikers as a lone forward, a coach can accommodate three – perhaps four – creators, allowing greater fluidity and flexibility, which in turn enables the control of space Lobanovskyi demanded. Football's development off-field, possibly not by design, has gone hand-in-hand with that thinking, as academies have produced a glut of attacking midfielders.

It may even be that in the absence of the hybrid striker it is better to play with none at all (the 4-6-0 foretold by Carlos Alberto Parreira, and practised by Roma and Manchester United last season and, more recently, Everton), or with an otherwise undistinguished target-man who can hold the ball up – hence the return to favour of Emile Heskey (it is worth noting in this context that Aime Jacquet has always insisted Stephane Guivarc'h's contribution to France's World Cup triumph in 1998 was undervalued and, as Rob Smyth argued on these pages, that Serginho's contribution to Brazil in the 1982 World Cup may have been misunderstood.

IS THIS IT FOR OWEN?

So is there any place for poachers in modern football? The bad news for Owen is that if there is, it is probably at somewhere like Newcastle. After watching Lobanovskyi's USSR beat Italy 2-0 in the semi-final of Euro 88 with a breath-taking demonstration of their pressing principles, Marcello Lippi hailed the victory of systematised pressing – of the necessity of controlling space (as Lobanovskyi, Rinus Michels and Sacchi had been arguing).

That means universality, and that means no poachers. But that sort of football is hugely difficult to play, and there is an argument that sides who are not capable of it may as well ensure they make the most of whatever chances come their way. Equally, it may be that good sides having an off day and in desperate search of a goal should abandon a stuttering quest for control and trust to chance by knocking balls forward, looking for dead-balls and lucky breaks, trying to stimulate panic in opponents who are holding the lead. Again, in those circumstances, it may be useful to bring a poacher off the bench so that if a chance does materialise, it is as likely as possible to be taken.

Far better, though, for good sides is to reduce as far as possible the workings of chance, and to trust reason and ability and do everything possible to control the flow of chances by controlling space. You don't win games by scoring goals; you score goals by winning games.

THE QUESTION: WHY HAS 4-4-2 BEEN SUPERSEDED BY 4-2-3-1?

THE COMING OF 4-2-3-1 WAS A NATURAL PROGRESSION FROM 4-4-2, AND IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS NEARLY ALL TACTICAL INNOVATIONS ARE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE FORMATION

Spain switched their 4-2-3-1 system in the Euro 2008 semis before landing the trophy. Photograph: Alex Livesey/Getty Images

At what turned out to be Roy Keane's final press-conference as Sunderland manager, after the 4-1 defeat to Bolton, he admitted his side's 4-4-2 formation had been part of the problem. Kenwyne Jones and Djibril Cissé may be a forward pairing that, given their power and pace, will terrify defences, but it doesn't really matter if, as happened in that Bolton game, the midfield four are outnumbered and - outplayed - by an opposition using five midfielders, rendering them unable to work the ball into dangerous areas.

Fielding five midfielders was for a long time considered a negative tactic, but that is dependent entirely on the make-up of the five. It is still a commonplace of English punditry to speak of teams not playing "two up" as being negative, but even a glance at a team-sheet should show what nonsense that it. Take, for example, France in the Euro 2000 final with Youri Djorkaeff, Zinedine Zidane and Christoph Dugarry playing off Thierry Henry, or Portugal in the same tournament with Luis Figo, Rui Costa and Sergio Conceicao playing off Nuno Gomes. Take Spain in the final of Euro 2008, with Andres Iniesta, Cesc Fabregás, Xavi and David Silva arrayed behind Fernando Torres.

As ever in tactical matters, the sense is that British football lags behind. In Spain, for instance, 4-2-3-1 was common by 2000, and within a couple of years had become almost a default. Perhaps that is not surprising, for it was in Spain that the formation first developed as something distinct from 4-4-2.

Once sides had started using their playmaker as a second striker – a trend that emerged at the 1986 World Cup – the coming of 4-2-3-1 was inevitable. Initially a holding midfielder would be deployed to pick him up – hence the late-nineties boom in players capable of playing the Makelele role – at which point the deep-lying forward would start drifting wide to find space. If the holding player followed him, that created space in the middle, so an additional player would be dropped deeper as cover, with knock-on effects for the more attacking midfielders.

Or the evolution could come from the other direction: a side playing 4-4-2, with the wingers pushed high and one of the centre-forward dropping deep, is effectively playing a 4-2-3-1. When Manchester United beat Barcelona in the 1991 Cup-Winners' Cup final, for instance, they had Bryan Robson and Paul Ince holding, with Lee Sharpe and Mike Phelan wide, and Brian McClair dropping off Mark Hughes. Everybody still referred to it as 4-4-2, but it was in effect a 4-2-3-1.

SELF-CONSCIOUS SYMMETRY IN SPAIN

The first to deploy the new formation self-consciously, at least according to the Spanish coaching magazine Training Football, was the Real Sociedad coach Juanma Lillo while he was in charge of the Segunda Division side Cultural Leonesa in 1991-92. "My intention was to pressure and to try to steal the ball high up the pitch," he explained.

"It was the most symmetrical way I could find of playing with four forwards. One of the great advantages is that having the forwards high allows you to play the midfield high and the defence high, so everybody benefits. But you have to have the right players. They have to be very, very mobile and they have to be able to play when they get the ball. You have to remember that they're pressuring to play, not playing to pressure."

At Leonesa, Lillo had Sami and Teofilo Abajo as his two pivots (the system in Spain is known as the "doble pivot"), with Carlos Nunez, Ortiz and Moreno in front of them and Latapia as the lone forward. Seeing the success of the system Lillo took it to Salamanca. There, according to an editorial in Training Futbol, the players reacted with "faces of incredulity because they thought it was a strange way to play; they responded to the positions they were told to adopt and the distribution of each line of the team with the same sense of strangeness and surprise as someone who had just come face to face with a dinosaur." Nonetheless, it took them to promotion.

The formation rapidly spread. Javier Irureta had been using it with Deportivo la Coruna for a couple of seasons before they won the league title in 2000, and when John Toshack returned to Real Madrid in 1999, he deployed Geremi and Fernando Redondo as his holding midfielders, with Steve McManaman, Raul and Elvir Baljic in front of them and either Anelka or Fernando Morientes as the lone striker.

4-2-3-1's transfer to England – at least in terms of a recognition of it as something distinct from 4-4-2 – came with Manchester United as an emphatic 3-2 home defeat by Real Madrid in the Champions League in 1999-2000 convinced Sir Alex Ferguson that the more orthodox 4-4-2 he had employed to win the treble the previous season had had its day in European competition (although he maintains, with some justification, that he has never played 4-4-2, but has always used split forwards).

PRO-ACTIVE OR REACTIVE?

The great advantage of using the two holders is that it provides a platform on which more creative players can express themselves, effectively allowing dribblers back into the game, but for a purist like Arrigo Sacchi, it is a retrograde step. His AC Milan side won the European Cup in 1989 and 1990 playing a highly fluid and compact 4-4-2. "Today's football is about managing the characteristics of individuals," he said. "And that's why you see the proliferation of specialists. The individual has trumped the collective. But it's a sign of weakness. It's reactive, not pro-active."

Like Valeriy Lobanovskyi, Sacchi was a devotee of universality, believing that if players were capable of operating in multiple positions, they could create an interactive "energy-system" whose effectiveness was greater than the sum of the effectiveness of the individuals within in. It was during his brief spell as sporting director of Real Madrid in 2004, that Sacchi realised just how far football had drifted from his ideals.

"There was no project; it was about exploiting qualities," he said. "So, for example, we knew that Zidane, Raul and Figo didn't track back, so we had to put a guy in front of the back four who would defend. But that's reactionary football. It doesn't multiply the players' qualities exponentially. Which actually is the point of tactics: to achieve this multiplier effect on the players' abilities. In my football, the regista - the playmaker - is whoever had the ball. But if you have [Claude] Makelele, he can't do that. He doesn't have the ideas to do it, though of course, he's great at winning the ball. It's all about specialists."

In that he has a point, and it may be that today's celebrity players, who enjoy such freedom of movement under modern transfer regulations, would never sublimate themselves to a system as Sacchi demanded his players should. Even at Milan, for all his success, Sacchi ended up falling out with Marco van Basten and Ruud Gullit.

OFFSIDE CONSIDERATIONS

There is a question, anyway, as to whether Sacchi's style could operate in the same way today. His ideal was a maximum of 25m at any moment between centre-back and centre-forward, but that level of pressing demands a high offside line. It may be that the liberalisation of the offside law in recent years has rendered that impossible; certainly few teams operate an offside trap any more.

Lillo, intriguingly, acknowledges that his high-pressing game was conceived to take advantage of the old offside law; his thinking may have diverged from Sacchi's, but he is just as much a part of the tradition of Lobanovskyi and the Total Football of the Dutch. The difference perhaps is that while 4-2-3-1 allows a high defensive line, Sacchi's style of 4-4-2 demands it. The changes to the interpretation of the offside law mean that defences tend to play deeper these days, and the game is therefore more stretched than it was even a decade ago; given that, it is perhaps logical to split the midfield into holders and creators and so play in four bands rather than three. This is not new: the W-M, a 3-2-2-3, was also a system of four bands.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

All of which begs the question of whether, given many 4-4-2s were effectively 4-2-3-1s, it matters what we call it. Should we really hail Lillo as a pioneer, when his breakthrough was to do self-consciously and give a name to something that was already happening? Isolating and naming something, though, as Wittgenstein argues, is a highly significant step. Once an idea is understood fully enough that it can be described by a simple term – 4-2-3-1 – then work can begin on developing it. What happened in Spain in the early part of this decade, as the basic template moved from 4-4-2 to 4-2-3-1, was nothing less than a paradigm shift.

Almost every tactical innovation of the past five years can be seen as developments from a 4-2-3-1. That is true of Roma and Manchester United's experiments with strikerless formations, but also of the fluid 4-3-3 of this season's Barcelona.

One of the great advantages of the 3-5-2 was the flexibility offered by the use of three central midfielders. Slaven Bilic still speaks disbelievingly of the flair of Croatia's trio of Robert Prosinecki, Zvonimir Boban and Aljosa Asanovic in the 1998 World Cup, but against Germany in the quarter-final, Prosinecki was replaced by the much more defensive Zvonimir Soldo. Two years later, Italy's interpretation was a stage more defensive: a 3-4-1-2, with Demetrio Albertini and Luigi Di Biagio holding and Stefano Fiore operating as a playmaker.

MIDFIELD FLEXIBILITY

The triangle of two holders and the central creator in the 4-2-3-1 is similar in that it allows the tone of a side to be changed without a major tactical overhaul. Advance one of the holders and a 4-1-4-1 is created. It was that system to which Spain switched in the Euro 2008 semi-final after Fabregás had come on for the injured David Villa. They retained the shape for the final and, counter-intuitively, probably produced their best football after their top scorer had been ruled out.

More subtly, if United play Anderson or Paul Scholes alongside Michael Carrick, their emphasis is more positive than if Darren Fletcher and Owen Hargreaves occupy the roles. Away against Roma in the Champions League last year, the central creator was withdrawn, forming a 4-3-3 with Carrick, Scholes and Anderson as the midfield, and Park Ji-Sung, Cristiano Ronaldo and Rooney as the forwards.

It is essentially a more attacking version of that shape that Barcelona tend to operate – the two wingers slightly withdrawn off a central striker, with, usually, Xavi Hernandez advanced of two more defensive midfielders. And there is, frankly, no better football in Europe at the moment, in terms of both aesthetics and results.

All tactical systems are relative and, as Lillo stresses, all are reliant on the players available and circumstance. It may be that the overwhelming dominance of 4-4-2 in English thinking means it retains a valuable function, but the closest any of the Big Four come to using it is Arsenal's fluid 4-4-1-1. At the highest level, the paradigm has already shifted: 4-2-3-1 is king.

THE QUESTION: WHY ARE BARCELONA SCORING SO MANY GOALS?

BARÇA HAVE SCORED 43 IN A RUN OF 12 UNBEATEN LEAGUE GAMES - HERE'S HOW PEP GUARDIOLA HAS TURNED AROUND THE CLUB'S FORTUNES

Lionel Messi celebrates another goal with his Barcelona team-mates. Photograph: Manu Fernandez/AP

Blunt doesn't do it justice. The cover of El Mundo Deportivo showed a gigantic red arrow pointed to the Camp Nou goal below the headline "lads, it's over here!" The second week had gone and Barcelona had a solitary point. Worse, they'd scored just once – from the penalty spot. Most sides would put racking up almost 60 shots and failing to score down to plain bad luck but Barcelona aren't most sides and there was a worrying familiarity to their profligacy.

Yet still it felt like before long someone, somewhere was going to be on the wrong end of a huge hammering. That someone was Sporting Gijón in week three, against whom Barcelona scored six. It was, they said, a one-off: Sporting were desperate defensively. Proof came three days later when Real Madrid went one better and put seven past them.

But Barcelona had only just started: they scored three against Betis, five against Almería and six against Valladolid. They beat their first big opponents, Atlético Madrid, 6-1; they scored four against Málaga on what was more public pool than perfect pitch; they travelled to Sevilla, the team with the best defensive record in the league, and beat them 3-0. Valencia arrived unbeaten away; Barcelona dispatched them 4-0. Since that arrow pointed the way, Barcelona have won 11 league games, drawn one and lost none, scoring 43. They're on course for a new La Liga record.

Add the five goals against Basle and five against Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League, plus 17 shots against the post, and Barça are Europe's most impressive attacking side. The question is, how did it happen? How has a team that last season finished third, 18 points behind Madrid, recovered so spectacularly? Why are Barcelona scoring so many goals?

KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE PLAYING AT

"You can lose a match but never your identity." So said Deco during his spell at the Camp Nou and no side in Europe has a clearer footballing identity. Since the arrival of Johan Cruyff – first as a player, then coach, now unofficial presidential advisor, a kind of eminence gris - Barcelona have shown an almost obsessive desire to maintain possession, best expressed in the Dream Team that won four successive titles between 1991 and 1994.

"Everything revolves around the ball," says one of Pep Guardiola's closest collaborators. It's all about quick and constant movement, short, one-touch passing, intelligent positioning. About running, sure, but running the right way. "Blindly sprinting everywhere is worthless," says Barcelona's No2 Tito Vilanova; Guardiola had to tell Seydou Keita to stop running so much.

Barcelona have had more seven, eight, nine and 10-man moves than any other side - and by over 50% in every case. The key is just how entrenched the Cruyff method is: while Cruyffism can be fundamentalist, it works because it is so much a part of Barcelona's DNA, running right through the club. As Michael Robinson, Spain's most famous football commentator, puts it: "put 20 kids in a park and I can tell you which two are at Barça."

There is a Barcelona model, common to Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta and Cesc Fábregas - traceable to Cruyff's ideology and the classic Barcelona central midfielder: current coach Guardiola. It is the commitment to an identity that led Barcelona to opt for continuity with him rather than employing the iconoclast Jose Mourinho. "Pep suckled from the teat of Cruyff," as one of his staff puts it. The inclusion of La Masia graduates like Xavi, Carles Puyol, Leo Messi, Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets, Gerard Piqué, Bojan Krkic and Pedro makes that innate feel for the system even more self-perpetuating.

RE-ESTABLISH SERIOUSNESS AND HUNGER; BRING BACK THE MOTIVATION

As Barcelona collapsed last season, Guardiola privately commented that with the talented players they had, all it would take would be to add a bit of effort, discipline, togetherness and hard work to make them half decent again. Although there's more to Guardiola's method, that's exactly what he has done. Out went Ronaldinho and Deco, in came a new code of conduct. A €500 fine for missing breakfast with the squad, €1000 for not being home by midnight, and €6,000 for every minute late to training.

The players too are hungry again, while Dani Alves in particular has injected new desire. "Motivation became a problem after winning the Champions League," Rijkaard's No2 Eusebio admits. Now, stung by failure, particularly the humiliation of handing champions Madrid a guard of honour, Barcelona have renewed determination. And if that is not enough, Guardiola has taken control of the CD player on the team bus. Not that his choice of tracks entirely convinces: it's Coldplay all the way.

GIVE WIDTH AND DEPTH TO YOUR ATTACKS

Barcelona's 4-3-3 is not the 4-5-1 in disguise adopted by many sides. All three of the front three play as real forwards, opening up the pitch and create space for the midfield to exploit, constantly interchanging but within a clear framework. "Barcelona make the pitch look bigger than it really is," says the former Barcelona midfielder and current Getafe coach Víctor Muñoz.

On the left, Thierry Henry plays right on the touchline, getting through more running than he ever has before. Behind him, Eric Abidal rarely ventures forward. On the right, it is a different story: Leo Messi dashes inside, leaving the wing free for right-back turned hyperactive child Alves to zoom past from deep.

Alves is not alone rolling forward in that second wave. When Barcelona signed Keita, most assumed that he was coming as a defensive midfielder. They were wrong. What Guardiola likes about him is "llegada" — the ability to get beyond the forwards, creating the element of surprise. Xavi too is entering the area more. When the attack appears static, watch for him suddenly setting off on a sprint.

PUSH THE SIDE RIGHT UP THE PITCH, SUFFOCATING THE OPPOSITION

"It's simple," says Guardiola, "I'm happy when we're in the opposition's half and not happy when we're in our own." The defending starts from the front. Messi, Henry and Samuel Eto'o have committed more fouls this season than centre-backs Puyol, Rafael Márquez and Piqué. "I prefer pressuring the opposition to scoring goals," says Eto'o.

But it's not just defending – it's attacking too. Pressuring high, swarming over their victim en masse doesn't just mean winning the ball; it means winning chances. "Barcelona play very high up the pitch and if they get the ball off you there, they're lethal," says Muñoz.

BE ALERT AND GET THE SMALL DETAILS RIGHT; WORK ON SET PLAYS AND QUICK THINKING

Graeme Sounness recently said: "When play stops, bad players rest. Good players ask 'where's the dope?'" Barcelona have good players, properly tuned in after two years of cruising. At the Camp Nou Valencia stopped to appeal for an offside; Alves didn't, steaming 30 yards in the blink of an eye to score. Against Atlético, goalkeeper Gregory Coupet was leaning against the post as if waiting for a bus when Messi clipped the free kick into his empty net.

Meanwhile, a clever free-kick to Messi, pretending not to be interested, broke Recreativo's resistance. Barcelona have already scored more from set-plays this season than in the last two under Rijkaard. "We're working on strategy now," says Xavi. The "unlike before" goes without saying.

SCORE EARLY

Virtually every team that plays Barcelona does it the same way: 10 behind the ball and on the break. The longer it takes to score, the more entrenched the opposition get, the more edgy Barça become, and the harder it gets. If the opposition score first, the anxiety really kicks in for the Catalans. The solution: score first. Resistance broken, that massed-ranks tactic no longer works. Forced out, Barcelona can pick them off.

Barça scored after just 20 minutes against Sevilla, twice in the first 43 minutes against Sporting, twice in the first 23 against Betis, twice in the first 19 against Málaga and twice in the first 28 against Valencia. After 44 minutes against Valladolid it was 4-0 and after 36 against Almería it was five. When Barcelona faced Atlético they were one up after three minutes, two up after five, three up after eight, four up after 18 and five up after 28.

HAVE GREAT PLAYERS

Finally, there's another, very simple reason why Barcelona are so good: Xavi, Eto'o, Iniesta, Alves, Henry and the rest are very, very good football players. Messi meanwhile is the best in the world. And, this year he's fit.

THE QUESTION: IS 3-5-2 DEAD?

IN THE LATEST INSTALMENT OF OUR IN-DEPTH SERIES, JONATHAN WILSON TRACKS THE RISE AND FALL OF A TACTICAL SURVIVOR

Carlos Bilardo and Diego Maradona at the 1986 World Cup, where their victorious Argentina side used a 3-5-2 formation. Photograph: David Cannon/Allsport

Some formations come and go, waxing and waning in and out of fashion. When others fade, though, they disappear. Nobody would dream these days of playing a 2-3-5 or a W-M, and it seemed as though 3-5-2 was headed the same way. There are good reasons for that and yet, defying the prevailing wisdom, Napoli have climbed to second in Serie A using the formation. Perhaps, as Carlos Bilardo returns to the spotlight as part of Diego Maradona's coaching staff with the Argentina national team, it is appropriate that the tactics he devised should fall once again under consideration.

THE BIRTH OF 3-5-2

Bilardo, having been part of Osvaldo Zubeldía's brutal and pragmatic Estudiantes side, was as system-driven as any coach; putting him in charge of an Argentina side featuring one of the greatest individual talents there has ever been seemed like football's great joke. His solution was to make Maradona his captain and to develop a new formation to accommodate him.

Wingers were in decline, becoming auxiliary midfielders, he reasoned, so what was the point of full-backs? They had been becoming increasingly attacking since the early 50s and the days of the great Brazilian Nilton Santos, so why not simply redesignate them as midfielders?

It was desperation that drove Bilardo to experiment on a tour of Europe in 1984. He had won only three of his first 15 games in charge, and his position was under threat. So low had his reputation sunk that when he read out the team to face Switzerland, journalists assumed he had made a mistake. "They told me I was wrong, that I'd named three central defenders," he said. "But I told them I was not confused. We were going to use three defenders, five midfielders and two forwards. We had practised it for two years, and now I was going to put it into practice in tough games."

Switzerland were beaten 2-0, as were Belgium, and then Argentina won 3-1 against West Germany. Bilardo then retreated from the 3-5-2 – perhaps to shield his new formation from spying eyes, or perhaps because he had no grand plan but was constantly tinkering – until it came to the World Cup quarter-final against England two years later. He dropped the centre-forward Pedro Pasculli, who had scored in the previous round against Uruguay, instead deploying the midfielder Héctor Enrique as part of a central trio

with Jorge Burruchaga and Sergio Batista. "You can't play against the English with a pure centre-forward," he explained. "They'd devour him, and the extra man in midfield will give Maradona more room." His playmaker, in other words, became a second striker as the shape shifted from 4-3-1-2 to 3-5-2 (or perhaps, more precisely, 3-5-1-1).

HOW THE IDEA SPREAD

European football had been heading to a similar point. *Catenaccio* – and the slightly more liberal *gioco all'Italiana* that followed it – had usually featured a libero, a marking centre-back, a marking right-back who tucked in, and an attacking left-back, with the right-midfielder dropping back where necessary – as a 'tornante', or 'returner'. It didn't take much to play the tornante deeper as what would become known as a right wing-back.

German football had been wedded to a 1-3-3-1-2 since the 1974 World Cup, often with an attacking libero and/or full-backs. In 1986, West Germany's coach Franz Beckenbauer, depending on the opponents, began pushing one of his central midfielders into a deeper role, so that by the time of the World Cup final, they too were effectively using a libero, two markers, two flank defenders who were expected to provide attacking width, two holders in midfield, a playmaker and two centre-forwards – what would become known as a 3-4-1-2, a close cousin of the 3-5-2.

And so the system spread. Variants of 3-5-2 won the World Cup in 1990 (West Germany) and 1994 (Brazil) and the European Championship in 1996 (Germany). Even England, the great stronghold of 4-4-2, experimented with the formation through the 90s. And yet now – outside of Brazil and the Balkans – it is barely seen. Not a single side at Euro 2008 used it; not a single side who reached the last 16 of the Champions League last season used it; not a single side in the Premier League uses it (although Portsmouth did dabble).

WHY HAVE TEAMS TURNED THEIR BACK ON 3-5-2?

José Alberto Cortes, head of the coaching course at the University of São Paulo, believes the issue is physical. "With the pace of the modern game," he said, "it is impossible for wing-backs to function in the same way because they have to be quicker and fitter than the rest of the players on the pitch."

Others, though, see the turn against three at the back as the result of incorporating skilful players by bolstering the midfield. Bilardo's formation, curiously, contained the seeds of its own undoing. If the playmaker is deployed not as a midfielder but as a second forward, he drops deep, leaving only one central striker. Modern attempts to use creative players wide in a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-3-3 equally feature a single central striker. (Here it should be made clear that the modern 4-3-3 – perhaps more accurately a 4-1-2-3 – is significantly different from the 4-3-3 Brazil introduced in 1962, and which was relatively common in Britain in the 70s and early 80s. That system commonly featured two centre-forwards and one winger: it was, in effect, a lopsided 4-4-2, with one wide midfielder more advanced than the other).

Bilardo's scheme had two markers picking up the opposing centre-forwards, with a spare man sweeping behind. If there is only one centre-forward to mark, though, that leaves two spare men – one provides cover; a second is redundant - which in turn means a shortfall elsewhere on the pitch. "There's no point having three defenders covering one centre-forward," explained Miroslav Djukic, the former Valencia defender who became Partizan Belgrade manager in 2007.

AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Nelsinho Baptista, the experienced Brazilian coach who took charge of Corinthians in 2007, has developed software to explore the weaknesses of one system when matched against another. "Imagine Team A is playing 3-5-2 against Team B with a 4-5-1 that becomes 4-3-3," he said. "So Team A has to commit the wing-backs to deal with Team B's wingers. That means Team A is using five men to deal with three forwards. In midfield Team A has three central midfielders against three, so the usual advantage of

3-5-2 against 4-4-2 is lost. Then at the front it is two forwards against four defenders, but the spare defenders are full-backs. One can push into midfield to create an extra man there, while still leaving three v two at the back. So Team B can dominate possession, and also has greater width."

One of Team A's central defenders could, of course, himself step up into midfield, but if you're going to do that, it is surely better to use a defensive midfielder in the role (full-backs are rather more used to advancing than central defenders, so it is more natural for them to function as an auxiliary midfielder). Which is precisely what Chelsea do with Mikel Jon Obi, and Shakhtar Donetsk with Mariusz Lewandowski, a holding midfielder allowing the full-backs greater rein.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

The 2008 African Cup of Nations provides a practical example. Egypt won it with a 3-4-1-2, but that can be explained by the fact that 4-4-2 still tends to dominate tactical thinking in Africa. In fact, in 2008, aside from Egypt – and at times Cameroon - only Guinea and Morocco, both of whom used a 4-2-3-1, did not set up in some form of 4-4-2.

In their opening match, Egypt hammered Cameroon 4-2, a scoreline that flattered their opponents. They went on to add a further 10 goals in disposing of Sudan, Zambia, Angola and Côte d'Ivoire before meeting Cameroon again in the final. In that first game, Cameroon's coach Otto Pfister had his players in a 4-4-2; in the final, he opted for a 4-2-3-1 and, for the first time in the tournament, Egypt struggled for fluency. The central defender Wael Gomaa looked like a spare part, anxiously and uncertainly wandering into midfield, and, although Egypt bossed possession, they ended up beating a limited side only because of a terrible individual error from Rigobert Song.

SIGNS OF RECOVERY

So what, then, of Napoli? If 3-5-2 is ailing, how can their success be accounted for? The answer is that they are quite happy to have, in effect, two liberi. Napoli are not a team who need to take the initiative to the opposition; rather – as happened in the early days of *catenaccio* – they often sit deep, invite the opposition onto them, and break quickly, using the pace of Ezequiel Lavezzi. Having an extra spare man at the back makes it easier for them to pick up runners, and Edy Reja, their coach, is prepared to sacrifice possession for the extra defensive security.

It would not work for everybody – probably not for a top, top club, who feel the onus to take the game on themselves – but it works for Napoli. And that illuminates a universal truth about tactics: there is no right or wrong, just fads and fashions and systems that are right for particular teams at particular times.

Is 3-5-2 dying? No, but the trend towards one central striker has exposed a serious shortcoming.