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# Fighting for legitimacy: The Zonal Marking Controversy among Spanish Football Managers in the Nineties

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, there has been renewed interest for the sociological and historical framework of sports coaching. This paper aims to improve the knowledge about how tactical matters and training methods evolve over time and how national coaching cultures change because of foreign influence and social factors. In particular, we focus on how the introduction of Arrigo Sacchi's ideas about zonal marking and the training methods imported by Dutch managers changed working practice and the professional culture of managers in Spain in the late eighties and nineties. In order to do so, 23 semi-structured interviews were carried out, 10 with former managers and 11 with former footballers from the Spanish first and second division at the time. Spanish football managers in the eighties relied heavily on physical training methods imported from Sports Science and popularized by Eastern Europe managers in the late seventies, but proved their specific football expertise by choosing through intuition the right marks in a man-to-man defense, leaving any other tactical matters to the players. The adoption of Arrigo Sacchi's complex zonal marking forced them to develop a thorough tactical work which included automation of collective movements and behaviors through new tactical exercises, which in turn forced them to integrate physical, technical and tactical training in ball-centered exercises, inspired by the newly appointed Dutch managers.

This modernization process made them adopt a more abstract and rationalized approach to football and reduce the players' free will, but also made them dependent on players consent and comprehension, which again made them develop communication and pedagogical skills.

Tactical ideas evolve and disseminate over time, changing not only how teams perform on the pitch, but also their social relations and professional profiles.

**KEYWORDS:** Zonal Marking, Spanish Football, History, Sociology, Coaching.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research is the shifting in the late eighties and early nineties from man-to-man marking to zonal marking and the impact this had among the Spanish professional football managers' community, how they reacted to it, how they fought against its implications and how finally they came to terms with it, an evolution that somehow changed their coaching routines, their tasks and responsibilities and their identity. This research is based on two different

approaches. First, it studies the football professional culture, and second, it addresses the idea that tactics are part of this professional culture, that is to say, that they determine social relationships inside a team.

The professional culture of football has been described as dominated by a traditional masculinity and based on spirit, violence, pain acceptance, obedience, authoritarianism and patronage, what for British scholars is the shop floor culture, that is to say, that football teams reproduce the factory social relations between

the workers and the foreman (Bertrand, 2009; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Llopis, 2008; Parker, 1996; Roderick 2003). Moreover, there is also the craftsmanship side of coaching, the privileging of practical knowledge, and learning by doing, and the rejection of theoretical notions, studies and diplomas (Day, 2011; Kelly, 2008). The idea that football knowledge comes from the football playing experience, and therefore having been a footballer is mandatory to become a manager. Finally, the studies by Potrac and colleagues (Potrac, Jones and Cushion 2007; Potrac & Jones, 2009) try to show that coaching is not only about authoritarianism and verbal abuse, but also about negotiation and seducing the various forces inside a club, since the managerial position is always weak and unstable, having to satisfy the board members, the media, the public and also the players. There is then a traditional authority role, based on a patriarchal relationship and the admitted practical expertise of managers, an authority that must, however, deal with different pressures and actors in an unstable position.

As for the tactics, there is not much published work but we can highlight Parlebas' insights about how the same sports are played differently in each country, giving birth to the notion of *sociogénesis* to explain the different tactics and national ethos for a same sport (2003). Also, some authors have mentioned the relationship between tactics and work organization, such as the Marxist Brigauer (1981), the Spanish Verdú (1980) and, in more contemporary work, the chapter by Giulianotti (2000) dedicated to the matter in his work *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Both Verdú and Giulianotti have reflected on how the tactic evolution mirrors that of work organization, pointing out that the WM man-to-man tactics would be the implementation of Fordist ideas such as specialization, simplification of tasks and separation of manual from intellectual labour, and that the Dutch *Total Football* would be the equivalent of post-Fordist organization. Therefore,

the main hypothesis behind this work is that tactical organization is at least partially socially determined, and at the same time it determines the social relationships established inside a team.

## 2. METHODS

Using the research team's professional acquaintances, a convenience sample was developed through a snowball technique where the interviewees were asked to offer a new possible contact. Sampling maximum variability was sought, assuring a wide range of biographies, on-field and off-field status, age and positions on the field. Information was gathered through 23 semi-structured interviews with professional managers, a physical trainer and footballers. 13 were face-to-face interviews, while 9 took place through a phone call and another one by videoconference. Interviews had a minimum length of 21 minutes and a maximum of 110. There were 10 interviews with professional managers, their ages ranging from 66 to 76 years old, all of them having worked in the top level Spanish football league, *La Liga*, the Spanish Second Division or both, and 12 interviews to former professional footballers, their ages ranging from 40 to 56 at the time of the interview, all of them also having developed a top-level career in *La Liga*. Finally, a physical trainer aged 66 was also interviewed, who had also developed his career at *La Liga*. All of them were men and were working at the time of the study (1985-1995).

## 3. RESULTS

The advent of zonal marking engendered a cultural war between the established generation of managers and the new generation because it jeopardized some of the firmest beliefs in Spanish football. In order to understand this confrontation, is necessary to first describe how managing was understood in the Eighties before the zonal revolution. The way

coaching developed in the Eighties came first from the idea that football knowledge could only come from practice, and it was instinctive and individual. Therefore, professional players were already experts, and had nothing to learn from the manager or anyone. That's why managers could tell them what their duties were, but never how to carry them out. Thus, when a sweeper was asked what kind of tactical orders he received from his managers, he spontaneously answered 'when I came to the *Liga*, nobody had to tell me when to change marks or cover a teammate. I already had it, that was the reason why they hired me in the first place' (Sweeper, 54 years).

So, if managers didn't decide what their players had to do in the pitch, what was exactly their duty in those days? In man-to-man marking, they had to choose who shadowed each opponent, and that decision was a key one, a mixture of football experience and psychological insight. Managers felt that matches were therefore some kind of a chess game between them, each trying to guess what marking decisions was going to take the other. Apart from those decisive moments, the managers' role was not designing the tactical plan, but keeping the players fit, motivated and disciplined. In that sense, man-to-man marking allowed the manager to evaluate each player individually, and the defender whose attacker scored was 'if not scolded, at least pointed out' (Midfielder, 49 years) by the manager. As for physical training, the analytic training and periodization techniques, brought to football by newcomer physical trainers and Eastern Europeans managers, allowed them to keep players in shape.

It is into this mind-set that Arrigo Sacchi's Zonal Marking arrived. His impact in Spanish Football was enormous, not only because he won two consecutive European Cup Champions, but because he did so eliminating the best Spanish generation in decades, Real Madrid's *Quinta del Buitre*. The shared perception was that the source of this supremacy was some kind of tactical revolution, or as one forward reflected, Real

Madrid had been beaten by a 'more powerful idea' (Forward, 51 years). This tactical revolution was based on an unprecedented space reduction. His Milan had not only used an advanced flat four defence line, but also abandoned the most distant space from the ball to collapse the space around the ball, making it nearly impossible for the opponents to escape their pressing. But more importantly, from that moment, the defence reference was not their opponents, but the space, the control of the space. So players didn't mark other players, but tried collectively to block passing lanes, especially forward ones.

This, in turn, implied that players had to be coordinated, but at the same time they had to make constant decisions, where to be, to press or not, to help the teammate or to sit deep, constantly reacting to the game's evolution. The team would move around the pitch as one man, adapting their position to the ball's. In doing so, each player behaviour became defined by the others' positions. It was kind of a systemic or relational turn, in which the players lost reference to both their supposed field position and to any fixed space or to any specific opponent. This was some kind of Copernican change for football tactics, which since the WM had tried to compartmentalize football for decades, on positions, on functions, on spaces, and was now being understood as an open system trying to adapt to its environment.

However, probably the most troubling aspect of Milan tactical behaviour was that its author, Arrigo Sacchi, had no experience whatsoever as a professional footballer, and it seemed that his idea was exactly that, an idea born in his mind as a result of his abstract analysis of the game. This idea had produced, in addition, some kind of paradigm shift: it was a whole new way of approaching football, a new and superior way that invalidated all former tactics and forced everyone to adopt it, in order to keep in track.

Finally, to play this way you had to be somehow be re-educated, you had to go through a learning process which put you back as an

apprentice, and you had to forget your intuition and act according to a new logic and new patterns. Opponents were confounded by the fact that defenders would lose track of the ball and focus on their teammate Baressi to replicate his movements. To make this happen, Sacchi would practice day after day, relentlessly, 'like going to church' (Manager, 76 years) without the ball and without opposition, only automating collective movements, and his colleague Maturana, would tie the players with elastic bands during training to make them learn how to keep the distance between them. You had to re-educate your mind and your body.

But you also had to develop your tactical intelligence, knowing when and how to act. It was not just about repeating routines, but interpreting the game. Since tasks had become so complex and changing, you had to practice this ability, you couldn't just let the players act instinctively, and to fill that gap came integrated training, brought to Spain by Johan Cruyff in 1988. The Dutch understanding of football was born from a premise: that the most important quality of a player was his intelligence. This intelligence had to be trained, through specifically designed ball related exercises. Another heretical idea was that this technical-tactical training was also physical: players could be kept fit only through ball exercises. This in turn made training more fun and interesting for players, who didn't even feel they were working, they were 'exhausted but happy' (Goalkeeper, 46 years).

Both schools of thought, Sacchi's Zonal Marking and Cruyff's integrated training, were eagerly adopted by a young generations of managers, who 'firmly believed' in these tactical ideas and were literally 'in love' with zonal marking (Central defender, 48 years). One of these managers was so convinced of zonal marking superiority that he used to push it to its logical limits, placing the defensive line almost in midfield, and feeling he was 'the king of the hill' (Manager 59 years). They had another significant common trait: most of them had no top

level experience as footballers. Their way up 'wasn't easy' but 'they had to make it because they were good' (Central defender, 48 years). For this group, zonal marking and integrated training were not a tactical evolution, but a way of life, or as their more prominent theorist, manager Juanma Lillo put it, 'to play zonally you first have to live zonally'. In the Spanish traditional mind-set, it was at the same time a liberating force for players and a modernizing way out from its aggressive, anti-intellectualist tradition. For this reason, they were enthusiastically championed by the media, especially the new private broadcasters in search of more spectacular football in the middle of a profound modification process (Giulianotti 2000).

For the already established managers, this innovation threatened not only their jobs, but more critically, the community's control over football knowledge. If abstract thinking could defeat the players' innate technical abilities and the managers accumulated experience, then the footballers' and ex footballers' position as the legitimate experts on football was at risk. Their answer, led by the then National side manager, Javier Clemente, was to cast doubt on the superiority of this tactical evolution, saying that the real reason for success were his players – 'I used to say it wasn't Sacchi's Milan, but Baressi's' (Manager, 70 years old). If that was the case, zonal marking was just a theoretical idea, whose suitability depended on the players available, and its advocates just a bunch of poets or philosophers, 'trying to understand the game with concepts and words' (Manager 69 years). It was precisely their rejection of a rational knowledge of football that animated their critics, and the confrontation, amplified by the media, lasted for years.

The critic's other target was integrated training and the possibility of training without suffering. Both managers and physical trainers considered it 'impossible' to achieve the same results with ball-centred training (Manager 76 years) and when one physical trainer proposed a course about ball-centred exercises, his

peers simply called him 'nuts'. This resistance was clearly in place with the new managers. For example, when the Dutch manager Bert Jacobs was sacked from Sporting de Gijón, the physical trainer said that 'there would be no more nonsense' and that 'it was the end of the principle of minimum effort' (Allongo, 1993). Also, when after two years of success, the Dutch Guus Hiddink was sacked from Valencia after some bad results, a report by Valencia's technical staff was made public, stating that 'most of the players are overweight, a clear sign of a lack of physical training' (Blay, 1993).

However, conservative managers were facing a twofold pressure: there was a media frenzy about zonal marking, with journalists calling them 'old-fashioned and outdated' (Manager, 59 years), and at the same time their practical experience was showing them that teams using zonal marking were more effective than theirs. Some of them had 'real difficulties understanding the advantages' of zonal marking and 'died with their ideas' (Physical trainer, 66 years) but as time went by most of them had to accommodate to the new situation. That was not an easy task, since zonal marking was full of theoretical and practical complexities and nuances. So what did they do? First of all, simply copying Milan by going to Milanello, where Sacchi approved all requests to watch their training methods. Secondly, by allowing the new managers to take the burden of innovating: instead of re-educating players 'used to a certain work' (Manager 68 years) through a harsh training, it was better to wait until new players arrived already trained in zonal methods and play other tactical alternatives in the meantime. And third, using the trial and error method, which implied committing mistakes and 'taking some goals' (Manager 72 years) and some defeats.

As the years went by, however, they successfully retained control over the profession, keeping strangers outside, except for this first and exceptional generation of innovators. Up to today, most managers are still former footballers. Zonal marking knowledge was integrated

by new generations of former footballers who became managers, and once again playing experience and professional networks became mandatory to achieve a top level career. This way, football knowledge remained the monopoly of the professional footballers' community, although it had become a more abstract and rationalized one.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Football professional culture has been described as masculine, aggressive and authoritarian, similar to the shop floor culture at the factories. Our findings point out that teams' social relationships are more like those in an artisan workshop than those in a factory, since footballers have always been skilled artisans with a high control over their work. Therefore, managers' legitimacy has been based more on their football experience and shared knowledge than on an authoritarian drift, resembling more the master artisan than the factory foremen (Kelly, 2008). The man-to-man Fordist approach (Rigauer, 1981; Verdú, 1980; Giulianotti, 2000) increased the manager's surveillance power, but respected the practical origin of football knowledge.

At the same time, a zonal marking post-Fordist twist increased players' autonomy and enriched their work, but also increased their interdependence and their acceptance of theoretical and external principles and patterns. This rupture was understood as a menace to the shared understanding of football, since it opened the possibility for an abstract knowledge to take over football. From this point of view, the problem of legitimate knowledge assumes an enormous importance, since managers and footballers conform to an artisan closed community, and collectively try to keep control over their work through the exclusion of outsiders, whether they are newcomers, journalists, fans, board members or academics. Thus, the zonal marking controversy clearly shows that tactics are at the core of football

knowledge, and that football knowledge itself is at the centre of the professional football community's political fights, that is to say, over each actor's position in the field. This political acting is central to the manager's position (Potrac, Jones & Cushion, 2007; Potrac & Jones, 2009) and, therefore, to fully understand its tactical matters must be taken into account.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to make the case for tactics to be studied from a sociological point of view, that is to say, that tactics are simultaneously a matter of sport efficiency and a matter of social organization. We can say that tactics give shape to social relations inside and outside the pitch. Some questions remain however unanswered. First, maybe tactics shape social relations but, how are they shaped by their social environment? Or to put it differently, how did Sacchi devise a new theory that resembled so much the wider changes in sphere of work? And finally, there is the question of sport's commodification. Zonal marking was supported by the media, especially by the new pay per view television network in need of customers. It was somehow more modern, more rational and more beautiful, and therefore could attract new public. How did the coalition between new managers, journalists and the media develop in those years?

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