Football is a team game, but we pay to watch stars. As Alison Ratcliffe discovers, this paradox presents all coaches with the same conundrum...

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Which comes first: the system or the player?

Chicken or egg? The question has preoccupied thinkers from Aristotle to Stephen Hawking, from Arsène Wenger to Louis van Gaal. Should tactics be born of the players available, or do players exist to be moulded to a coach's chosen strategy?

Chicken first

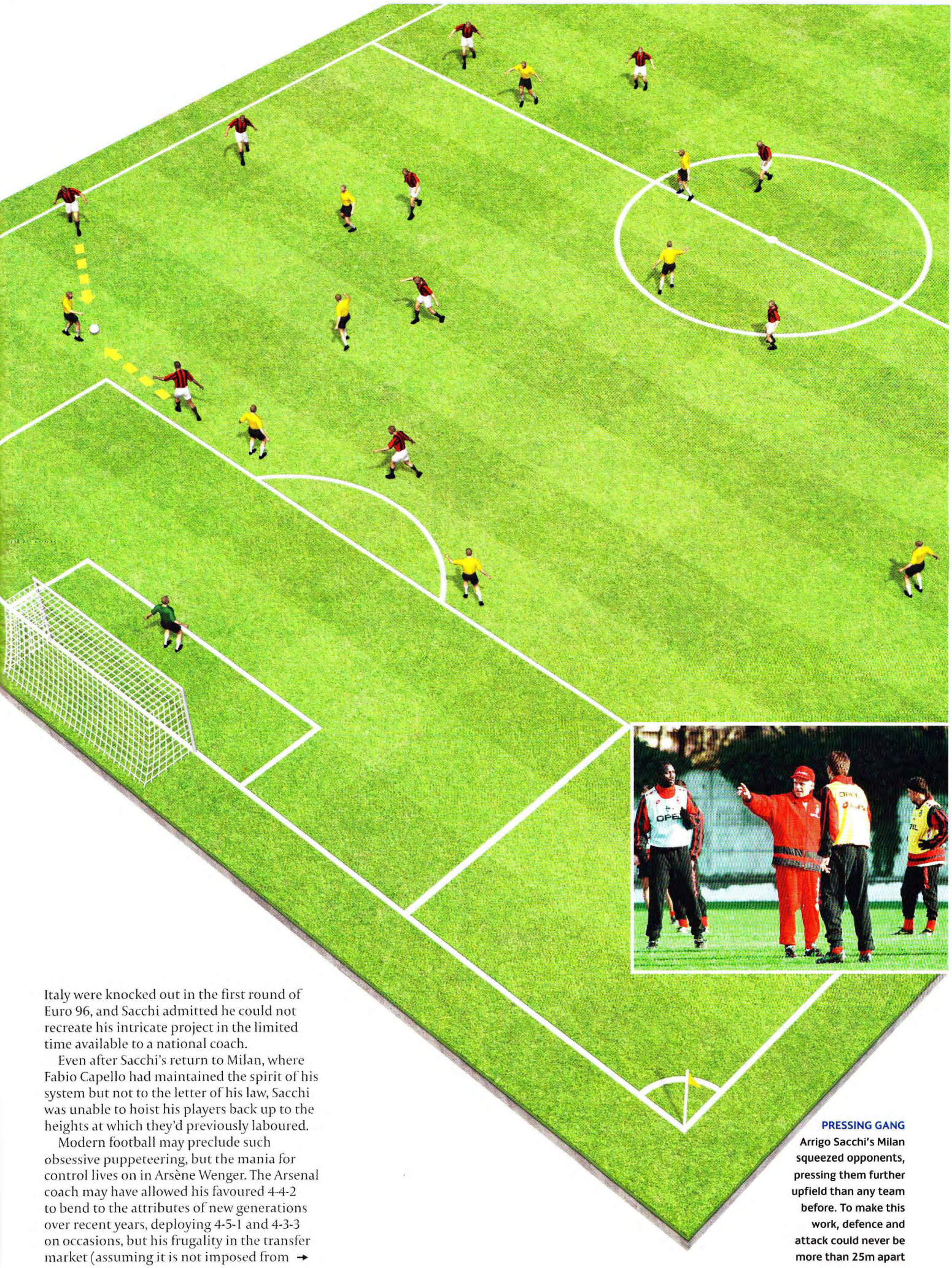
As sporting director of Real Madrid, Arrigo Sacchi claimed to have cast aside brilliant technical players because they couldn't learn and submit to systems. He was appalled by the galáctico policy: "There was no project. It was about exploiting qualities. We knew Zidane, Raúl and Figo didn't track back, so we had to put a guy in front of the back four who would defend. But that's reactionary football.

"Many believe football is about players expressing themselves. But that's not the case. Or rather, not in itself. The player needs to express himself within the parameters laid down by the coach. That's why the coach has to fill his head with as many scenarios, tools and movements as possible. Then the player makes decisions based on that."

Sacchi's parameters were around 25m – the distance his great Milan side of the 1990s maintained between the forward and defensive lines of their 4-4-2. They moved forward and back, left and right as a compact unit. In possession, five men were required to be ahead of the ball, with a player on each flank. Player roles were interchangeable, and the whole XI adjusted to every movement of the ball, the opposition or any one of their number. Their famous pressing game even included four different versions to be deployed according to circumstance.

Enabling players to deal with different scenarios required intense repetitive training. When Carlo Ancelotti signed in 1987, Sacchi had him turn up an hour before training every day to do drills with the youth team until he had learned the system.

Sacchi then took on the challenge of grafting his carefully calibrated system onto the national side. Italy reached the final of USA 94, but after the tournament Sacchi dropped Roberto Baggio, Gianluca Vialli, Beppe Signori, Roberto Mancini and Gianluca Pagliuca to build a new team to fit his vision.



Italy were knocked out in the first round of Euro 96, and Sacchi admitted he could not recreate his intricate project in the limited time available to a national coach.

Even after Sacchi's return to Milan, where Fabio Capello had maintained the spirit of his system but not to the letter of his law, Sacchi was unable to hoist his players back up to the heights at which they'd previously laboured.

Modern football may preclude such obsessive puppeteering, but the mania for control lives on in Arsène Wenger. The Arsenal coach may have allowed his favoured 4-4-2 to bend to the attributes of new generations over recent years, deploying 4-5-1 and 4-3-3 on occasions, but his frugality in the transfer market (assuming it is not imposed from →

PRESSING GANG
Arrigo Sacchi's Milan squeezed opponents, pressing them further upfield than any team before. To make this work, defence and attack could never be more than 25m apart

"Sometimes we did it automatically. Football is best when it's instinctive"

above) seems like an aversion to bringing in players he has not brought through himself.

Not only are green players schooled in the Arsenal way, but pegs are repeatedly whittled and slotted into new holes: Emmanuel Petit from left/centre-back to central midfield, Thierry Henry from winger to striker, Theo Walcott from striker to winger. The latter pair of adaptations were to facilitate the incisive threat from wide so beloved of Wenger. "I want to have success by building a team with a style, a know-how, with a culture of play specific to the club," he says. If this means waiting for that success rather than buying it and bending, Wenger is prepared to do so.

Barcelona are less the fruit of a manager's imposed ideas than of institutional intransigence – or tradition, depending on your point of view. As Fabio Capello recently observed: "Pep Guardiola is not a huge innovator, but he's shown a great talent for leading a dressing room."

The club have more or less demanded possession-based 4-3-3 since Johan Cruyff, the man Guardiola played under for six years. Xavi, Puyol, Messi, Iniesta, Busquets, Piqué, Bojan and Pedro are all products of La Masia academy, all inculcated in the Barcelona way. As commentator on Spanish TV Michael Robinson says: "Put 20 kids in a park and I can tell you which two are at Barça." Fans await with interest the outcome of Guardiola's recent dalliances with 4-2-3-1.

Egg first

Though the fluency of total football suggests much technical forethought and schooling, Rinus Michels is open about the organic nature of its development: "In starting, you have no exact idea about the aims after which you are going to strive... The team's tactical development – that just went on."

Ajax had won four Dutch titles and reached the 1969 European Cup final playing the 4-2-4 of the era, until a draw against the 4-3-3 of Ernst Happel's Feyenoord convinced Michels to switch. The system was better suited to the interchanging of positions, but as Barry Hulshoff remarked: "People couldn't see that sometimes we just did things automatically. It comes from playing a long time together. Football is best when it's instinctive. This way of playing, we grew into it."

Brazil won the World Cup in 1970 with a 'system' that writer Jonathan Wilson describes as "just players on a pitch expressing themselves". As coach Mario Zagallo said: "What this team need is great players. Let's go with that and see where it takes us." Brazil also dazzled at Spain 82 with a mutant formation of 4-2-2-2, as coach Telê Santana rejected width and simply piled his four fabulous playmakers – Cerezo, Falcão, Zico and Sócrates – onto the same pitch.

Such laissez-faire now seems as dusty as Sacchi's string-pulling. But there are modern coaches who take their players as the starting point. Guus Hiddink's PSV famously lifted the 1988 European Cup without winning a match from the quarter-final stage on, lumbering to the final with a stodgy 5-3-2. It may not have been attractive but it certainly maximised the capabilities of its components.

If the chicken-first doctrine is incompatible with international football, the pragmatic Hiddink's success with eggs at that level is based on logic. The Holland side he took to the semis of France 98 lined up in a 4-4-2 or 4-4-1-1. Two years later, when he took charge of South Korea, things were different. Dutch coach Piet de Visser, a Hiddink mentor, recalls his reasoning: "He had observed the players were strong physically, so he decided on a 3-4-3 in which the front three would always press the defenders. The midfield was [conventional] so one defended, one attacked and there were two on the wings."

Hiddink then took PSV to the 2005 Champions League semi-finals playing 4-3-3,

Method or madness? Bayern coach Louis van Gaal's system failed to beat Juventus at home but won 4-1 in Turin

Shocks to the system

Football teams have a complex dynamic. Rinus Michels' gifted Ajax side of the late 1960s had a wealth of talent in a system the players grasped perfectly. But by 1973, after their third European Cup in a row, winger Piet Keizer admitted: "The personal interests of the players had taken over." Within a year, five of the eleven who had started that final (including Johan Cruyff, below) had left.

Jose Mourinho proved in 2004 with Porto that any coach trying to challenge the giants of the game can use a system to level the playing field. His side had lots of talent, but industry was prized above flair. Their 4-3-3, industry and ability to control the tempo of a game outfoxed opponents.

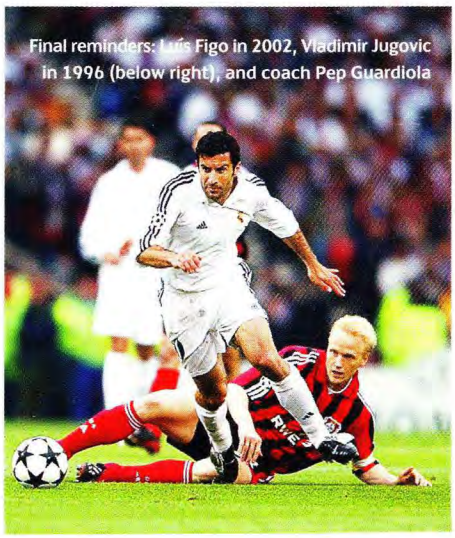
Systems don't have to be dull. Barcelona and Milan have systematically developed a style that is part of the club's personality and is understood by every player on the books, whether they're in the first team or the youth team.

Implementing systems on the way to the summit is easier than doing it after it has been reached. The first signs of decline are often subtle – a midfielder not stepping up half a yard to facilitate a pass, a full-back not tracking back as quickly – and only the coach may spot them. But players, egged on by hangers-on, may chafe against their roles, and younger rivals may feel those who have been there and won that are living off their reputations.

Such tensions can unravel a team from the inside. Sir Alex Ferguson, asked to define the essential skills a manager needs, says: "You have to know when a player has passed their peak. It can be hard, because they may have grown up with you, but you have to know and you have to act."

a system he continued with Australia, where their facility for morphing to 4-5-1 allowed him to shore up the Socceroos defence. Next came Russia. "Russia had always played 3-5-2," says De Visser, "but Guus changed it to a 4-3-3. He had strong full-backs – Yuri Zhirkov would attack from the left and Aleksandr Anyukov did the same on the right." Things shifted again to 4-1-3-2 during Euro 2006 as Hiddink saw the need to apply the brakes a little.

Hiddink seldom stays in one place for long these days, but Marcello Lippi is proof that sustained success can be achieved through reactive coaching. During his eight years at Juventus the mountain regularly went to Muhammad. After using Giovanni Trapattoni's 1-3-3-3 in 1994, Lippi switched to 4-3-3 after the arrival of midfield dynamo Vladimir



Final reminders: Luís Figo in 2002, Vladimir Jugovic in 1996 (below right), and coach Pep Guardiola

Jugovic. This system won the 1996 Champions League but gave way to 4-4-2 to accommodate Paolo Montero, Zinedine Zidane, Christian Vieri and Alen Boksic. After Vieri and Boksic departed, Juve reached the 1998 Champions League final as a 4-3-1-2, and the 2003 final as a 4-2-3-1 with the fearsome midfield screen of Edgar Davids and Alessio Tacchinardi.

Bayern Munich's maverick boss Louis van Gaal also sees himself as a reactive coach. "A system depends on the players you have," he says. "I played 4-3-3 with Ajax, 2-3-2-3 with Barcelona and 4-4-2 with AZ." He now plays 4-4-2 or 4-3-3 with Bayern, a vacillation highlighted by Philipp Lahm, who criticised Bayern for buying the best players rather than the right players. Lahm saw the purchase of Mario Gómez as confirmation that Bayern would line up as a 4-4-2, only for the arrival of Arjen Robben to send them back to 4-3-3.

Van Gaal's current line-up is really more like 4-2-3-1, with two holding midfielders in front of the back four (one a ball-winner, the other more creative) and one striker. That leaves three players from four – Franck Ribéry, Arjen Robben, Thomas Müller and Ivica Olic – who are used neither as midfielders nor as strikers but something in between. Not only have systems become very flexible, so have players' roles within them.

Beware of the fox

Whether a coach favours the chicken or the egg, they still have to contend with the fox. Gone are the days when managers such as Brian Clough could conquer Europe by focusing on his own team's strengths rather than his opponents' tactics and formation.

Today's shrewd manager will assess his opposite number's style – rigid formation or variable shape – because which players and how you play also depends on the opposition. Take Van Gaal's 4-2-3-1, for example: do you use a formation to stop Robben and Ribéry, or a line-up that will exploit the huge gaps behind them?

If the question is which approach will best bring success, perhaps the answer comes in the form of that thoroughly modern manager José Mourinho. Since arriving at Inter, he has bounced between proactive and reactive and come to rest in the middle.

Mourinho arrived eager to foist his dynamic 4-3-3 on a side more used to a strategy of contain and strike. He immediately bought wingers Ricardo Quaresma from Porto and Mancini from Roma – only for these to malfunction. An old-style 4-2-4 couldn't fix that, but slotting them into Roberto Mancini's old 4-4-2 did – albeit with Mourinho's own twist. He solved the problem of Inter's creative midfield link not with wingers but Wes Sneijder behind the strikers in a 4-3-1-2. Sneijder is blossoming after being given the position he has always said he is best suited to, but rarely been played in.

Adaptability is the way forward. Slaven Bilic has said: "Systems are dying. Like 4-5-1, what does it mean? It's only for journalists or at the beginning of each half. When defending, great teams want many behind the ball. When attacking, you want players joining in from all sides. But you have to be compact."

"I can't believe that in England they don't teach young players to be multi-functional," Mourinho once said. "To them, it's just about knowing one position. 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."

The point from the coaches at the vanguard is clear. The modern player should be a Swiss Army knife, especially as the increasing need for squad rotation makes a system based on eleven specific players impractical. Roma and Manchester United have already fielded sides close to a 4-6-0, where the defensive line is almost the only specialisation. As teams evolve, that specialisation may vanish too. ★

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