

Notes on Passing Rhythms Liverpool FC and the Transformation of Football

Bill Shankly and Liverpool

From 1976 to 1990 Liverpool won an astonishing 10 League titles in 15 seasons, finishing 2nd in all other seasons except 1980,81 – they also won the FA Cup twice and the European Club Champions 4 times. By way of contrast, in the 1990s, Liverpool won but 2 trophies.

Bill Shankly, Liverpool manager from 1959 – 1974 became the founding father of the ‘modern’ Liverpool club. The playing styles adopted by Liverpool teams emphasized passing and movement with the importance of teamwork.

Upon Shankly’s arrival in 1959, he convinced the board to ‘modernize’ the poorly developed training facilities at Melwood and transferred out 24 players in just over a years time, bringing in key young replacements.

He will make players learn to kill the ball and move it all in the same action ... he will make them practice complete mastery of the ball.

In addition to Shankly, the most important of all the coaching staff was Bob Paisley. He often compared players to racehorses, noting their common ‘edginess’, and also the ways in which both responded to different sorts of training , dependent upon their temperament. Paisley was more a players’ pal than was Shankly.

Nine points of Shankly:

Obsession :- he was so obsessed that he would relate any topic of conversation to football. There are many quotes, too numerous to mention, to make the point.

Scottish Socialism: - part of the Liverpool success at the time was built around the socialist ethic of collective effort with equal wages and no prima donnas. There was no room for anyone thinking he was above the club. Building a strong team spirit and the fact that no one player was more important than the greater good were his cornerstones.

Simple Strategy: - “You pass the ball to another red shirt and then take up another available position.” Pass, move, receive the ball. A very basic man with a simple approach – the way to learn how to play football was by practicing with a ball against better and better players.

Tough, Skillful Northern Players who had Served Apprenticeships: --

The Liverpool way was to sign skillful, resilient players who could fit into the passing and movement game, players who would respond to tough training principles and serve an apprenticeship in playing the Liverpool way, players who could take responsibility for

themselves and make decisions on the pitch for the good of the team. He was keen to sign players with character and commitment.

A Way with Words: - He had a way with words and a means of attracting an audience. He is often quoted and his humor and seriousness often mix. He always had something to say about anything.

Our Players are Better than Their Players: - he had a way of reducing the opposition to utter rubbish, hoping to create a mental edge with his players. His humor before a game had a way to relax the players before the task at hand. The basic message was - Our players are great, their team is terrible.

The Network of Friends (off the pitch): - He was everybody's friend, a great networker. He brought the entire Liverpool community into the spirit of the team. The most brilliant part of his networking was his boot-room team – the assistant coaches and staff. He was a considerate man and if football was your fancy, he connected with you. He related everything in life to football.

Reaching the People: - He could orchestrate a crowd. He had 2 clear messages that he delivered in simple language – we have the greatest team in the world and you are the greatest fans. He built fans' confidence in the team. The fans worshipped the team.

Always a Player: Shankly's life had a theme of informal small-sided games. He was obsessed with 5 a side. Even as a manager, he regularly joined in and played whenever the chance presented itself. He would form a staff team and play anyone who could find for informal games.

The transformative effect wrought by Bill Shankly's arrival as manager in December of 1959, followed by 15 years of building a style, on and off the pitch, then became known as 'the Liverpool way.'

Passing Rhythms

The whole method was simple. It was based on a rapport with management, good management, good players and the freedom to express themselves. The watchword of Liverpool's approach was simplicity, encouraging the players to do the simple things correctly. The key elements revolved around 'good players, playing with freedom, within a sensible framework.'

The primary training tool was the 5 a sides that dominated training during the season. Shankly was keen on a structured and methodical training regime. Intuition, psychology, man-management, all were facets of the Shankly character that were channeled obsessively towards playing the game.

A collective approach, based on the understanding that the team is all, and the individual is nothing without the team, helped to produce a team ethos founded on self-respect, discipline, trust, and dedication to the overall cause.

Liverpool's football was primarily based on two touches – pass and move. If you passed the ball and didn't move 2 or 3 yards you were penalized, and that soon taught you that you had to move.

Liverpool believed that everything we faced in 5 a side would be encountered again on match day Liverpool's training characterizes Liverpool's play – uncomplicated but devastatingly effective.

The code at Anfield was simply – ‘run on the pitch and win.’

Bob Paisley, Shankly's successor, is regarded uniformly by his players as a deep thinker about the game, an excellent judge of a player's physical condition, but generally a poor communicator. Paisley's attributes went largely unrecorded and underestimated, and he did not mind.

Paisley makes a strong case (1983) for the ‘setting up of special schools where their football talent would run parallel to their general, academic education. The lads would have the benefit of their natural talent being nurtured and developed by expert coaches.’ He wanted to avoid the young players who had already formed too many bad habits when they were ready to become professionals.’

Paisley pointed out that Liverpool, in its history, have now won or been runners-up in the League, FA Cup and European Cup 36 times. ‘And I've been involved on 26 of those as player, assistant manager or manager.’

Some of Paisley's advice was: ‘if you receive a controlled pass along the ground, give a controlled pass along the ground. The longer you keep the ball the less time the next man has to receive it.’ This became known as the ‘early ball.’

A crucial aspect of Paisley's approach was the search for players who could display flexibility out on the pitch, who were intelligent enough to make decisions and communicate with each other during the heat of the game, and who did not ‘hide’, but actively sought out responsibility.

As Tom Saunders, long time Youth development coach, observed, ‘I can't recall a time here when players have been looking towards the bench for advice for what should happen next..... It's a decision-making game, and you want men who can assume responsibility and make decisions on the pitch while the game's going on.’

Paisley used to say the first 2 yards of professional football was in the head.

The ‘Liverpool way’ emphasizes the hard work involved in winning, and then repeatedly winning over and over, season after season.

Liverpool's emphasis upon passing the ball, maintaining options for the players in possession through unceasing movement of, and off the ball, and defending collectively

when the ball was lost, was not necessarily European in its inspiration. However, it is true that Liverpool's style did develop, as they annually qualified for European competition from 1964 through 1985. This exposure to European influence would help to shape their approach to the game.

Liverpool learned the virtues of patience and possession. Away from home, Liverpool teams attempted to maintain possession in a systematic fashion, often moving the ball around the back four, frustrating the opposition and quietening the crowd. Attempting to 'draw the opposition to them', Liverpool hoped to exploit counter-attacking opportunities as they arose.

'The top Europeans showed us how to break out of defense effectively. The pace of their movements was dictated by the first pass. We had to learn to be patient and think about the next 2 or 3 moves ahead when we had the ball.'

Life at Liverpool was simple. No wild predictions, no arrogance, no petulance. The largest part of our game is still ball control, accurate passing and good movement. And it's about patience, which demands intense concentration.

In midfield, Liverpool relied on the complementary virtues of good passing, strong running, physical and mental toughness.

Building for a successful future requires a recognition that the game has changed radically.

Liverpool Fan Culture

In the early 1960's, Liverpool FC was becoming an international focus because of the music (Beatles and others) and football in the city and the cultural inventiveness of its fans: in the 1970's the spotlight was on the excellence and dominance of the club's extraordinary football team and management: in the 1980's it was more footballing excellence, but also on the fatal hooliganism at Heysel and Hillsborough: by the 1990's the focus was on the prospects for reviving the club's status in a new, global era, but also on the economics of the sport, a talented foreign coach and a roster of imported foreign players.

The English terraces were described as 'the privileged places of working-class communion.' They were hideously uncomfortable. The steps are as greasy as a schoolyard playground lavatory in the rain. The air is rancid with beer and onions and belching and worse. The language is a gross purple of obscenity.

The regular televising of football highlights on the BBC began in Britain in August 1964, at Anfield.

The popular song, '**You'll never walk alone**', reworked by local band, Gerry and the Pacemakers, reached #1 on the singles chart and began to be sung in the Kop by the Liverpool faithful. It was most appropriate as the themes of the song were ---

struggle, pride, community, 'hope in the heart' – seemed ideal for the trials and emotions of football fans.

Liverpool's famous all-red kit was first introduced as a "European" strip against Anderlecht in 1964. Convinced the new gear made his players look more fearsome, Shankly insisted that this should be the club's new strip.

Liverpool's fans were considered to be more knowledgeable and more sporting than those elsewhere in England. The general sense of the club and its supporters as passionate and insightful and gracious about the game was sustained at least in the 1960's and 1970's. The generosity of the footballing spirit lives on at Anfield, as almost always, the fans show their respect for 'good football' played by the opposition.

In 19 seasons from 1972/3 Liverpool won an astonishing 11 League titles, finishing out of the top 2 clubs only once.

The sourness of the Liverpool / Manchester United relationship is widely traced to an alleged lack of media respect for the great Liverpool teams of the 1970' and 80's, and the corresponding supposed fawning by the media over less successful United teams of the same era and since.

The sad, but inescapable, truth is that the game has already changed out of recognition in a very short space of time. We are still nostalgic for the Shankly and paisley eras, when what you achieved on the pitch determined whether you were considered a contender for the greatest club in the world. These days, performance on the pitch seem to matter less than shares of dividends and corporate marketing strategies, You there, just pay up and shut up ! where has the 'knowledgeable' supporter got to ? He's been replaced by MISTER LIVERPOOL .. their lack of knowledge and patience is doing my head in.

Racism in Liverpool

How strange that the city of Liverpool was the home of one of the longest-established black communities in Britain, yet its 2 great football teams had somehow remained almost totally white during a 25 year period in which black players had become conspicuous at just about every other professional club in England.

In the mid 1980's, racism was the subject that no one in positions of influence or authority in football could be bothered to talk about. Today, it is talked about constantly. Racism is now at the center of football debate, and this can be largely traced back directly to the trials and triumphs of John Barnes of Liverpool.

Barnes had proved to be such an impressive ambassador for 'blackness' and thanks to him, it was made easier for those who followed. Barnes had a simple strategy: 'for me the solution was simple – deliver on the pitch to make the fans love me.' He turned in 3 marvellous away performances before his home debut ay Anfield and by then the fans were falling at his feet Barnes knew that his adoration was highly conditional –

He knew that any letup in form would be costly and the supporters could turn on him.

Liverpool FC continues to have next to no effective 'grass roots' community mechanism that really reaches into the black parts of the city.

The Fall of Liverpool FC

For an unprecedented 25 years, from the mid 1960s to 1990, under the football management of Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley, Joe Fagan and Kenny Dalglish, Liverpool FC were the dominant force in English football and, for 7 years from 1977 to 1984, unquestionably the strongest club side in Europe.

Football in England in the early 1990s had begun to hum to the new rhythms of global capitalism and to an increasingly internationalized market for both players and coaches.

“Winning’ football clubs have, or have had, distinct capabilities which, by their very nature, are exceptional attributes which cannot be easily reproduced elsewhere. There are 4 such capabilities:

First, **strategic assets**, refers to a scarce resource which provides an advantage in competition which, once possessed by one club, cannot be possessed by others.

At Liverpool, a set of practices with regard to preparation of players had been laid down, a coaching team had been groomed to succeed Shankly, and senior players in the club were charged with the responsibility and leadership.

The second advantage was **innovation**, the ability to generate incremental improvements to existing products. Liverpool’s routine involvement in European competition from 1965 up to 1985 provided extensive opportunities for cross-fertilization of systems and ideas which came much less frequently to other English clubs.

The third asset, **reputation**, is the established position of a product in the marketplace. A good reputation makes a product more attractive to the consumers. Reputation is hard to replicate or imitate, it is something that can only be acquired.

The fourth asset, **architecture**, a unique organizational structure that exists throughout the entire organization, even to the supporters.

The changing times caught up to Kenny Dalglish as he took over the managerial reins and realized that Liverpool today was different from Liverpool in years past. The entire landscape of the game had changed. His instant promotion from player to player-manager would be impossible in, say, Italy or Germany, where football coaches are required to be formally qualified for their jobs. Dalglish’s ‘qualifications’ were that he was arguably the most talented British player of his generation, he had a shrewd knowledge of the game, and he knew Liverpool Football Club.

By installing a bar in his own office at Anfield, Dalglish crucially re-directed some of the important post match drink and gossip among coaches and managers away from the

infamous boot room. This was probably the first concrete sign of a real shift in the successful Anfield coaching dynasty which had been inspired by Shankly from the late 1950s. failing to match up to stringent Anfield standards, self-doubt and gloom began to envelop a clearly strained Dalglish.

The boot room was central to Liverpool FC and its successes and may also be central to its decline. The dismantling of the boot room indicated a major change in the operations of the Liverpool Football Club. The boot room represented a record of the club's spirit, its attitudes and its philosophy.

Graeme Souness became the Liverpool manager in 1991. He was welcomed back to the club by most fans because of his uncompromising competitiveness and supposed winning mentality. Above all, he was welcomed back because of his Liverpool FC heritage. His approach to playing the game – his calculated violence and intimidation, mixed with cunning and great skill, made him an unlikely candidate to 'fit in' with the established management traditions at Anfield. He strove for change on the playing and coaching ide.

Souness had taken over the club at a time when it lacked real stability and enough top quality on the playing side, and when it was missing effective boardroom leadership and real vision and dynamism in the area of club administration.

The truth about Souness is that he had arrived at the club as its distinct capabilities were already being allowed to drain away. But Souness was also a poor man manager, and, at best, an inconsistent judge of top players.

In 1994, the club turned to what seemed the greater certainty and stability offered by a recognized boot room disciple, Roy Evans, 20 years on the Liverpool coaching staff. Under Evans, Liverpool re-established their national credentials as the passing team in England in the mid 1990s. They kept possession, passed the ball relentlessly, committed fewer fouls and played the purest football, in keeping with the club's ethos of simplicity and teamwork.

Evans, a traditional English club coach, rather than a football manager, was essentially a nice man who lacked the cunning and disciplinary ruthlessness of some of his Anfield predecessors. Evans seemed a weak character who had problems facing up to difficult decisions.

In 1996/97, John Barnes was sent by Liverpool to observe the famous Ajax youth system. A new \$12 million Academy for youth development was established, under ex-player Steve Heighway. The club's new Academy was quickly nationally acclaimed and was producing first team candidates.

Liverpool was now faced with players who were choosing their English clubs on the basis of current European credentials and lifestyle choices, **and not in terms of past footballing glories.** Liverpool took up a new direction with Gerard Houllier.

Gerard Houllier and the New Liverpool 'Imaginary'

Houllier was a long time admirer of the club, who came to the city in 1969 in order to work on his Masters dissertation on poverty in the city. He lived and taught school in the north of the city and supported Liverpool from the Kop.

Gerard Houllier made his way in the sport in France as a young, innovative coach with a reputation for meticulous attention to detail and a determination to apply a more 'scientific' approach to player preparation and strategies for play.

By 1988, he had been appointed assistant to French national team coach Michel Platini, eventually taking over the top job in 1992. When his time ended with the national team (after 16 months in charge), he concentrated on youth development in France. He became widely respected throughout soccer for his role in transforming the moribund French game as evidenced by the 1998 World Cup team and the 2000 European Cup team.

Houllier favored the importance of the initial pass forward on the counter-attack. He also stressed the need for players who can demonstrate flexibility during matches, who have the intelligence to see the broad contours of the game, and to adapt according to different challenges that will be posed by tactically astute opponents.

Houllier's vision was of responsible, mature, intelligent and astute footballers who can also cope with the physical demands of the English game. Houllier was a knowledgeable respecter of the club's traditions and he was always completely 'mad' about Liverpool. In addition to physical strength and athletic ability, passing and movement, particularly forward passing was a main theme. "You must go deeper with passes."

Houllier had warned that it may take 5 years for Liverpool to even begin to close in on previous heights. By 2000, they were reaching the minimum level of acceptance at Liverpool, top 4 position and a European qualification spot.

"To me, the best football means that you master the rhythm."

On development into a professional player: "to be a professional player at the age of 20, you need 5 years of hard work as a professional, youth trainee. The Academy system means that you must learn your trade. And you learn your trade through physical strengthening, the technical, the tactical and the mental processes."

The good thing about buying a French player is that he has a good education, good attitude, very professional, very focused, and tactically fully aware.

"Players expect 3 qualities from their manager: you must be an expert in football. You must also be able to communicate the message, you must have a strong personality. The third thing is that you must have a plan, a logic or a strategy. " --- You must keep enterprise and initiative as well as having a strong spirit and a strong team."

“ Players here can sign the biggest contract in the world, but as soon as they pass the gate (into Melwood, the team’s training center), everybody is worth the same rate, they have no privileges and they do the work. Some players may fool some of the fans by not being committed, but they don’t fool me. “

Liverpool and the Global Football Age

In football it is easy to focus on tradition in the wrong way, only focusing on what was good. But viewed the right way, tradition is very important and a great strength. It is essential to identify the values, the principles, the essence of what a club such as Liverpool is all about, because these provide a stable framework.

The real secret of Liverpool’s success was the ability to spot players who were also winners, players who would add something to the team. Look at the number of games won in the last few minutes - this comes down to character and determination and self-belief.

New and lucrative TV deals will add much to the new game, generating massive amounts of revenues to be invested in talent from all over the world.

The debate over the creation of the European Super League where the big get bigger and the small slowly fade out.

The Bosman ruling which allowed players at the end of their contract to negotiate their best deal. Loyalty to a club took a severe hit.

The worldwide exploitation of commercial opportunities lessens the close local ties that were so important in the past.

The anticipation of a new stadium at Stanley Park, increased capacity and revenues and also providing more local jobs for the citizens. A recent report by the Football Research Unit at the University of Liverpool concluded that 3,000 full time and 1,400 part time jobs are dependent on the presence of the 2 Merseyside teams and that 750,000 visitors come to the city every year because of football.

A continued determination to develop the club’s new Academy at Kirkby and the investment of over \$10 million is a clear statement of the club’s recognition that the development of young players is more important than ever. It is no coincidence that the address of the Academy is “The Liverpool Way.”