

Evolution of Systems of Play, Part III

The three-part series concludes with a look at the systems employed at the 1998 World Cup

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In this article, we will look at the strengths and weaknesses of the host team and others in the 1998 World Cup.

The world champion: France's 4-3-3

The system of play used by France in the 1998 World Cup was basically a 4-3-3 with a 4-4-2 in defense. The three top attackers were mobile, slipping into midfield and sometimes into defense, particularly in the second half of the final when the team went into a mass defense. The strong points of the team were speed, strength, determination, courage and general skill. A noted weakness was inaccurate finishing during the run of play. The key players were Zidane, Barthez, Desailly, Deschamps and Thuram.

In defense, the offside trap was used effectively in the second half of the final game, and the markings were mainly man-to-man. Deschamps played as the anchorman in front of the defense. There was a general high standard of skill, heading, passing, individual technique and positioning. There was great support from the midfield and attack.

The attacking buildups were very methodical. There was an emphasis on wing play, and in changing the point of attack, particularly on the right side to take advantage of Thuram coming from behind.

Summary: Excellent tactics, good organization, close team work and the individual performances of certain players were the key factors in the French victory.

The runner-up: Brazil's 4-2-2-2

The Brazilian style of play was a 4-2-2-2. The strong points of the team were great technique and individual qualities, especially in attacking situations. The Brazilians were good at dictating the pace of the game and excelled in the use of long diagonal passes, especially left to right. Their primary weakness was poor defending against corners and free kicks. They also had problems when opponents (i.e., Zidane) ran at them with the ball. They defended too deep in the box and they did not maintain defensive compactness as a unit. When attacking, they were easily caught offside.

In defense they were zonal, with Dunga attempting to pick up midfield runners from France. Dunga, in combination with Sampaio, tried to block the route through the middle. They were very strong in the air but lacked coordination defending as a block.

Summary: A team totally oriented toward attack. They utilized running with the ball through central areas, playing combinations or releasing the fullbacks to deliver

crosses. They attacked with six players and defended with a six-man base. In the final they played poorly as a defensive unit. In attack, there was a lack of movement and penetrating passes.

Germany's 3-5-2

The team demonstrated very good tactical understanding, always holding effective positions and maintaining cohesion. Each player played for the team. They utilized a combination of zonal and man marking. All three defenders were mobile and skillful, and read the game well. The sweeper was in line with the stoppers, and often interchanged positions. The strikers used the space effectively for themselves and there was good coordination with the midfielders.

Summary: A well-balanced performance from a technical, tactical, conditioning, psychological and competitive point of view. Good balance in defending and attacking activities. The team was able to dictate the rhythm of the game and controlled the result effectively.

The USA's 3-6-1

The system was probably more closely depicted as a 3-5.5-1.5 with a "*libero*" behind the defensive line and one striker (Wynalda) supported by a player who switched from midfield to attack (Stewart). With the exception of the first 20 minutes of the second half of the Germany match, the team lacked fighting spirit. No offside tactic was utilized and the team combined zonal and man marking.

Summary: Lack of confidence and the pressure of the first match against one of the favorites were the main reasons the team did not perform up to potential.

Selecting a system

Your system can be based on some of the following factors:

- Technical ability of the players;
- An understanding by the players of their roles in the game;
- The fitness necessary for particular systems;
- The system used by the opposing teams.

The principles of the game must be the foundation upon which systems of play and tactical considerations are developed. Instruction in the basic principles of play will result in greater understanding of the game and give the coach an opportunity to assess the ability of the players in a variety of situations. Through this assessment the coach may evolve a style of play that allows his/her players to perform to the best of their ability.

The development of a system of play is the recognition of where space is important. Through the specific arrangement of players on the field, the coach endeavors to close dangerous spaces when defending and take advantage of open spaces when attacking. This consideration of space requires a great deal of understanding on the

part of the players. To simply put players in positions and expect them to emulate a successful system is not involving them in a realistic understanding of their role in the game.

A system must fit the abilities and playing characteristics of the team members. A group of players should not be given a system; the system should fit the players as clothes fit a person. Too often a new system is seen as the solution to all problems and is forced on unwilling players. A failing of most coaches at all levels is to impose a popular system on players of all ages regardless of their ability and understanding.

Finally, systems of play must be sufficiently elastic to enable the different individual strengths of players to be used to the maximum effect, and also to allow temporary changes to take place according to the problems that may be posed by the opponents.

Principles of defense

Delay. Forcing the attacking team to take time in organizing its attack so defenders have time to build a collective defending action between the ball and the goal. The work of the first defender should implement the principle of delay.

Depth. The organization of players behind the first defender to provide cover. Specifically, the work of the second defender.

Balance. The positioning of defenders relative to the possibilities of penetration by attackers away from the area of the ball. The work of the third defender, who tracks down attackers making runs toward goal.

Concentration. The limiting of space, and therefore time, by defenders squeezing centrally behind the ball. Prevention of the ball being played through or over the collective defending action.

Principles of attack

Penetration. Getting the ball behind opponents by shooting, dribbling or passing. The work of the first attacker should implement the principle of penetration.

Depth. The organization of players behind and in front of the first attacker. Assists the first attacker in penetration through combination play and the ability to maintain possession. The work of the second attacker.

Mobility. The attempt by attacking players to penetrate and unbalance the collective defending action. The work of the third attacker.

Width. The disposition of attackers across the field to pull apart the collective defending action.

4-4-2 strengths

- Team consists of two equally balanced vertical halves of field;
- Four midfield players receive the ball facing forward;
- Allows for two players in each central channel;
- More space for the two strikers;
- Easy to change point of attack;

- Eight defenders behind the ball;
- Difficult to unbalance;
- A good high-pressing system.

4-4-2 weaknesses

- Numbers down in midfield against a 3-5-2;
- How to match up against two forwards?;
- Susceptible to counterattack if midfield balance is lost;
- Forwards can get isolated.

3-5-2 strengths

- Creates ability to balance in central midfield (composition);
- Numerical advantage in midfield;
- Immediate support for strikers;
- Easier to spring flank midfield players during change in point of attack;
- Effective against teams that play an indirect style;
- Allows for assignments for man-marking;
- Use of holding midfield player eliminates fear of counterattack.

3-5-2 weaknesses

- Concedes a tremendous amount of space on flanks;
- Difficult to high-pressure from the alignment;
- Difficult to prevent opponents from building out of the back;
- Fewer numbers in the back leads to cover and balance problems.

4-3-3/3-4-3 strengths

- Front line positioned to attack when ball is won;
- Three targets rather than two;
- Easier to attack critical spaces;
- Width in attack is assured;
- Allows for pressure closer to opponent's goal;
- Puts tremendous pressure on a weak opponent;
- Forces your opponent to adjust.

4-3-3/3-4-3 weaknesses

- Three front players can be played out of the game immediately;
- Three players with back to goal;
- Can easily be outnumbered in midfield;
- Defends with only seven players.