

Halfway Between Gold and Red

By Justin Kavanagh

*Brilliant Orange:
The neurotic genius of dutch football.*

Why is the brief international history of Dutch football so strewn with spats, splits and strife? Some of the answers are to be found in David Winner's classic soccer book *Brilliant Orange: The neurotic genius of dutch football*.

Brilliant orange. Halfway between gold and red. Such an apt color for the enigmatic legends who have graced—and disgraced—the Dutch national shirt: Always destined for gold, always vulnerable to the red mist.

Brilliant orange. Gaze at it long enough and you'll eventually get a headache.

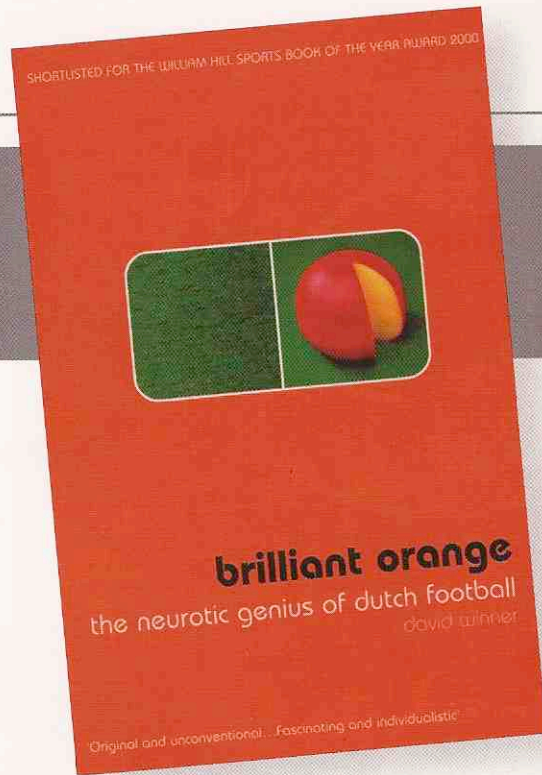
The man with the constant headache these days is current Holland coach, Dick Advocaat. The wild week last November that saw the Dutch secure their place at this summer's European Championship was just business as usual for the world's most argumentative, schizophrenic National Team.

The intrigue began two weeks earlier when Advocaat was forced to sneak into A.C. Milan's training ground—supposedly incognito—to entice the out-of-favor Clarence Seedorf back to the fold. Dick was rumbled. His secret was out.

The coach had publicly stated that he would not “beg” the arrogant and unpopular Seedorf to return to the team. But Seedorf's replacement, PSV Eindhoven's Mark van Bommel had opened up the Ajax/PSV fault line that has long divided the squad, when he criticized his midfield partner and Ajax old-boy Edgar Davids in a friendly against Argentina. The Pitbull with the goggles invited the young upstart outside to settle that particular difference of opinion. And the man who stepped between the battling midfielders was none other than Philip Cocu, himself a former PSV player.

Given that Cocu was the man who the coach was now relying on to replace the injured van Bommel against Scotland, you can begin to see Dick Advocaat's problems. But that's just the start of it.

Another smoldering subplot was bubbling away, fired by the residual ill-feeling held by Ajax old-boys Davids and Patrick Kluivert for



Ruud van Nistelrooy. Davids had clashed with the Manchester United striker in training months earlier and Kluivert's place was now under threat from the man who is known to disapprove of his fast-lane lifestyle.

Coach Advocaat had added fuel to this fire by declaring that Kluivert and van Nistelrooy could not be played together. So many were surprised when the pair both started in the first leg against Scotland. There was no surprise, however, when Kluivert blamed the Netherlands' shock 1-0 defeat on his strike partner: “It's clearly not working with Ruud and me up front, and you have to wonder why we changed it. I should have played up front on my own.” From a player of any other nationality, the outburst would have been extraordinary. For a Dutchman, however, there is nothing strange at all about expressing your opinions on coaching decisions. There are always twelve coaches on the Dutch National Team.

“What this team needs is peace,” said the coach. And what Advocaat needs is therapy... if he really believes he'll ever find peace in the Netherlands camp. This is—after all—his second spell in charge.

But if there is one thing consistent about “the Oranje”—besides their ability to start a row in an empty dressing room—it is their maddening inconsistency. So, after the disaster of Hampden Park, and the worst preparation possible, Holland duly went out and destroyed the Scots 6-0, in the Amsterdam ArenA.

We should not have been surprised. Cast your mind back to their Jekyll and Hyde act at Euro 2000. In front of ecstatic home fans, they put on a performance for the ages to humiliate a fine Yugoslavia team 6-1 in the quarter-final, and appeared to be champions-in-waiting. The only question was how they would overcome France in the final. But five (yes 5) missed penalties against Italy in the semi-final meant they never got there.

It was their third tournament in succession going out on penalties.

Such is the neurotic genius of Dutch football that David Winner goes in search of in his intriguing study, *Brilliant Orange*.

The history of professional football in Holland is less than 50 years old.

Astonishingly, a little over a decade after Dutch players began receiving full-time wages, Ajax had brought three European Cups back to Amsterdam, and Holland had reached two World Cup Finals. Indeed, the substitute who scored their only goal in the 1978 decider in Argentina, Dick Nanninga, sold flowers for a living at the time.

The man at the center of this dramatic blossoming for football in the Netherlands was the incomparable Johan Cruyff. Cruyff was a skinny kid from Amsterdam who came to embody the cultural revolution that transformed the dour post-war capital into a Mecca of modernity and liberal society. He challenged the organization of everything—and the authority behind all organization.

Described by an early coach as “God’s gift to football,” Cruyff fought the Royal Dutch Football Association, (the KNVP), over money, over sponsorship, over hierarchy... and won. With his constant questioning of the status quo—a very Dutch, Calvinist trait, as Winner points out—Johan Cruyff, together with coach Rinus Michels, laid the foundation for a new movement that would shake up the world of soccer. The Ajax think tank created a system that would fully exploit the creative individualism of Cruyff’s gifted generation. They called it Total Football.

Winner’s explanation of Total Football, in the chapter “Dutch space is different,” is one of the most insightful in print. The idea was really an extension of the lowlanders’ genius for land reclamation. In a country where much of the land is below sea level, Michels

and Cruyff applied the deeply ingrained Dutch notion of flexible space to the soccer pitch. The talents and creativity of the new generation were used to alter the dimensions of the field, expanding the space when attacking, crushing the space when defending.

The means to this end was a revolutionary way of assigning positional duties. Rather than each player rigidly fulfilling a set role, Michels coached every player to fulfill the position demanded by the rhythms of the game. So an overlapping fullback, for example, could roam forward, secure in the knowledge that his wide midfielder would drop into the gap he was leaving at the back. Every player in an Ajax shirt, and later in the national side, became adept everywhere on the field, endlessly rotating in patterns that left the world’s best defenses dazed and confused. Even the goalkeeper doubled as a sweeper.

Total football is a philosophy which has permeated right through to the current generation of Dutch stars, many who now play abroad, passing on the torch of Cruyff and Co. throughout the major leagues of Europe. In an interview with the *Observer* last October Ruud van Nistelrooy spoke of the art of “finessing the pass.” His ambition, he claimed, was to combine the best of the No. 9 and the No. 10, “the striker who is also the team player and creator.” No doubt Cruyff smiled benignly in his room in Barcelona where he is said to still study games from around the globe with the dedication of a monk.

And if there was a touch of the spiritual about Cruyff’s magnificent obsession, Winner sets the phenomenon of Total Football in the context of the Dutch Protestant ethic of order and control. But the Calvinist tradition also encouraged followers to ignore priests and study the Bible for themselves, a tendency which had fostered a healthy disregard for authority in Dutch society. And therein lay the seeds of trouble ahead for many a national coach, who found their word seldom revered as gospel.

As Winner’s brilliant book makes clear, one can argue all day about the reasons for these arguments. Is individualism the curse of the Dutch? Is crippling dissent the price of a truly liberal culture? Or, do the Dutch just like a good row? ▶

Or perhaps they just want to be different. The Dutch seem to revel in being creatively contrary, and are happy to live with the results. It may lead to occasional defeats by “inferior” countries like Germany, Italy, and even Scotland, but at least, their reasoning goes, they will never be dull like the Germans or defensibly-obsessed like those nervous Italians.

And the man who sewed this fatalistic thread into Dutch football? You’ve guessed it—Johan Cruyff. The legend still appears occasionally on TV and in newsprint to console the Dutch on the collective trauma that was “The Lost Final.”

The small country has never really come to terms with those dramatic 90 minutes in Munich on July 7, 1974.

It was only a soccer match, but the scars of a more bitter European conflict were still raw when Holland met West Germany in the World Cup Final. The Dutch had thrilled the world with their revolutionary Total Football throughout the tournament, but they shocked the planet in the first 20 minutes of the final.

Straight from the kick-off, the Orange shirts strung together a bewildering web of passes, sixteen in all, before Cruyff picked up the ball deep in midfield and ran straight at the stunned Germans, daring them to try and stop him. All they could do was hack him down, conceding a penalty in the very first minute. Goalkeeper Sepp Maier was the first German to touch the ball, as he picked it out of his net. It was one of the most astonishing sequences in the storied history of soccer.

Today, Cruyff will tell you that what he left behind that day, and at that World Cup, was the memory of football as it should be played—Totally. His satisfaction, he claims, was in showing the world that soccer could be played in a revolutionary new way. He’s right, of course. He usually is.

He’s also right in his claim that it is his team of Total Footballers—and not West Germany—that is remembered and talked about all these years later. But the result is what is written in the history books. And it reads West Germany 2 Holland 1.

With their hands on the prize, the Dutch somehow contrived to blow it. Cruyff was booked for arguing with the referee on the

way to the dressing room at half-time, challenging authority even on this, his day of days. Meanwhile, eleven less gifted Germans got on with the business of securing their World Cup winner’s medals.

Johnny Rep, a Dutch forward that day, who would lose another World Cup Final in 1978, recalls: “We made fun of them and forgot to score the second goal.” His teammate Wim van Hanegem added: “I didn’t mind if we won 1-0, as long as we humiliated them.”

In the end, the humiliation belonged to the team in Orange, whose pride in performance came before their fall. To cushion the blow of this unacceptable defeat to the unspectacular Germans, the “Lost Final” has somehow been rewritten in the Dutch psyche as a victory for the virtue of virtuosity itself.

Thus began a strangely proud tradition of glorious failure, where the performance is all. Dutch football has since demanded that the legacy of Total Football always be honored in the style of the approach.

When it works, as it did against Yugoslavia in 2000, and against Scotland in Amsterdam, they are spectacularly superior to all. Even at their best, the Brazilians are Chaos Theory with 10 match-winners and a non-paying spectator brought along as a scapegoat. But when the Orange mojo is working, all eleven can weave a mesmerizing pattern of geometrical soccer genius. The problem with the Dutch is that they too are often mesmerized by their own brilliance, and can forget to finish off the job. In the modern game, glory often comes down to the clinical professional duty of sticking away a penalty, of simply holding your nerve. Mostly, the Dutch can’t be bothered to practice such practicalities.

Political scientist Paul Scheffer gives one of many interesting perspectives quoted in *Brilliant Orange*. For the Dutch, he claims, “winning is a little bit ugly. It’s only for other people who need it to compensate for some other lack.”

The old enemy, Germany, awaits them in the first round of the European Championships in Portugal this summer. The Germans will take winning ugly. But by then, the Dutch may have already beaten themselves. Again. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

Brilliant Orange: The neurotic genius of dutch football by David Winner is available by order at www.amazon.co.uk or at www.sportspages.co.uk.