

[The art of]

zonal marking

Don't tell Claudio Gentile, but man-marking has had its day. Defending space, Alison Ratcliffe discovers, is the mantra now

Additional reporting Christoph Biermann and Xavier Rivoire Photos Empics, Getty Images, Popperfoto

Claudio Gentile did his best to stop the physio getting to Diego Maradona. While Argentina's No10 was being treated Gentile was in vulture-like attendance, his eyes telling the injured genius, "When you get up, I'm still here." That 1982 World Cup match between Italy and Argentina is best remembered for Gentile's ruthlessly effective man-marking job on Maradona. Equally legendary names have suffered at the hands of history's best man-markers: Johan Cruyff, snuffed out in the 1974 World Cup final by 'der Terrier', Berti Vogts; Benfica's Domiciano Cavem nullifying Alfredo Di Stefano in the second half of the 1962 European Cup final. So why do so many teams defend zonally today?

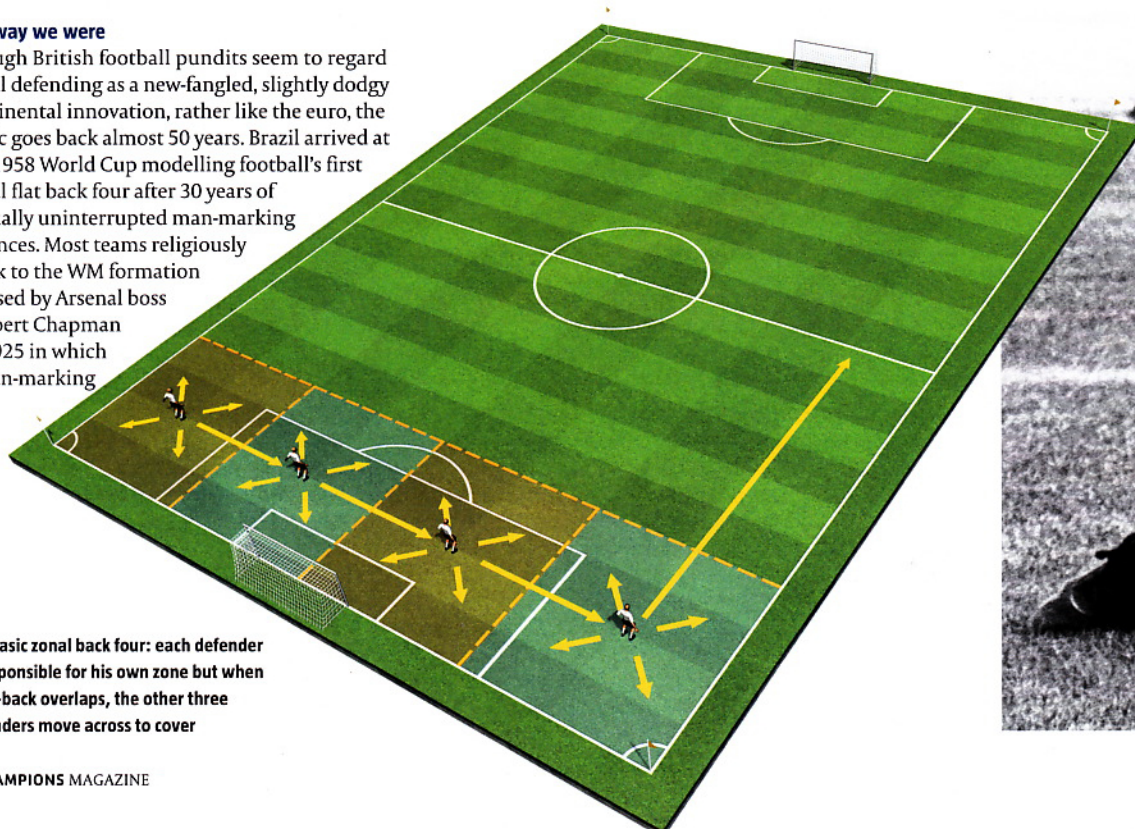
back three picked up the bog-standard three-man forward line. But when the Hungarian golden squad played Nandor Hidegkuti as a withdrawn centre-forward, all hell broke loose – especially in the England defence that conceded 13 goals in two friendlies against the Hungarians in 1953/54. If a centre-back followed Hidegkuti the backline was in tatters; if he didn't, the striker could run amok. The limitations of man-marking were exposed.

Brazil's 1958 World Cup-winning side divided their defensive third into four zones, with a player patrolling each zone. This being Brazil the full-backs were obliged to bomb forward. With two purely defensive centre-backs instead of one they had insurance. The zonal system also meant the defence wasn't

The way we were

Though British football pundits seem to regard zonal defending as a new-fangled, slightly dodgy continental innovation, rather like the euro, the tactic goes back almost 50 years. Brazil arrived at the 1958 World Cup modelling football's first zonal flat back four after 30 years of virtually uninterrupted man-marking defences. Most teams religiously stuck to the WM formation devised by Arsenal boss Herbert Chapman in 1925 in which a man-marking

The basic zonal back four: each defender is responsible for his own zone but when a full-back overlaps, the other three defenders move across to cover



“People regarded us as a weird sect when we first used zonal defence. We cut videos of Sacchi’s Milan and the Soviet Union to prove we hadn’t made it up” Ralf Rangnick



They don't make markers like Claudio Gentile any more. Here he gets up close and personal as he grapples with Zico in 1982

distorted by players intent on dragging out their marker. England, clearly not the most skilful team at the 1966 World Cup, won with a highly organised zonal back four.

But in Italy, strangulating man-marking was alive and working very well. Nereo Rocco at Padova and later Milan, and Helenio Herrera at Inter used a purely defensive sweeper behind three or even four man-markers. In the unlikely event that a particularly tricky forward did break free from his man-marker his path was barred by the sweeper. As successful as it was ugly, *catenaccio* (meaning ‘bolt’) persisted into the 1980s and beyond. Herrera’s Inter and Rocco’s Milan won two European Cups apiece with it during the 1960s.

But the man-markers-plus-sweeper concept doesn’t have to be so turgid. Germany won the 1974 World Cup playing with the traditional German back three, or four, depending on your point of view: two man-markers with a sweeper playing behind them, Franz Beckenbauer, protected by an ultra-defensive midfielder, the *Vorstopper*. The crucial difference from *catenaccio* was that Beckenbauer, as a *libero*, was as much an attacking force breaking from the back as a defensive one.

Daniel Jeandupeux, director of football at Le Mans, has published a book on the working methods of the world’s best coaches. As head coach of Toulouse in the 1980s he led the minnows to fifth place in Ligue 1 playing what was then, in France, a revolutionary zonal defence. He says that Arrigo Sacchi’s Milan pioneered the modern zonal defensive system. “They revolutionised Italian and European football,” he says. “The way the Milan lines moved up and down and stayed compact under Sacchi was formidable.”

An endangered species

There are more theories about why zonal defending has wiped out man-to-man marking than Italy have had 1-0 victories. But many coaches believe zonal defences are simply superior. Schalke 04 boss Ralf Rangnick has been dubbed ‘the Professor’ ever since he appeared at a football show to elaborate on modern tactics. His first brush with zonal defending came courtesy of Valeriy Lobanovskiy’s Dynamo Kyiv. “In the mid 1980s I was player-manager of an amateur side, Victoria Backnang, and we played a friendly against Dynamo Kyiv once a year. During the first match, I started to count their players because I thought they had two extra men on the pitch. We had played against professionals before, but never experienced anything like this: there were always two or three men up against you. According to our football this didn’t exist, as we played man-to-man marking: one man against another man.”

Rangnick studied Kyiv and discussed the system with other coaches. “In 1988 I had my →