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The Evolution of Football Passing in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract

Passing is a fundamental and frequent activity in the modern game of association football, which has been exemplified by teams e.g. Barcelona, Manchester City and Spain; yet, its development has not been researched in detail. There are match reports of passing in 1860s Sheffield and it would appear that passing and combination play were a natural development of competitive territorial games. Football in the mid-nineteenth century was often conducted in a pack with individual players dribbling the ball; yet, this strategy proved ineffective compared to combined play with players positioned across the playing field. The tactical developments in the game were interlinked with the evolution of the rules and particularly the offside rule which was different in Sheffield and Scotland compared to the Football Association's more stringent rule employed in London. This encouraged passing and forward kicking sometimes with long balls which also encouraged heading.

Key words: passing, combination football, team formations, heading.

Where did passing a football begin?

Passing is a fundamental and the most frequent activity of the modern game of association football and the tiki taka of short passing and possession have been particularly exemplified by teams such as Barcelona, Manchester City and Spain.[1] Yet, passing has had little investigation of how it developed prior to and during the early years of association football. In football: 'A pass is an event where the player in possession of the ball kicks the ball to a teammate with the intention that the receiver will be able to control the ball and thus obtain possession.'[2] Significantly, it is legal under the laws of association football to not pass the ball. If having received the ball a player dribbled the full length of the pitch and scored a goal without making a single pass, they wouldn't be penalized, and the goal would stand. A memorable example of this was the individual goal by Maradona in the 1986 World Cup quarter final match between Argentina and England which was described by FIFA as a goal of the century.[3] Maradona went past seven England players and made no passes on his way to

scoring a completely legitimate goal, in stark contrast to his 'hand of god' goal earlier in the same game.

Yet, passing was not always a key part of the game. During the evolution of football in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, dribbling the ball individually was considered to be the appropriate way to play football and it was often described as the 'dribbling game' to distinguish it from the 'carrying game', which was rugby football.[4] Dribbling was defined by FA Secretary Charles Alcock, 'as manoeuvring the ball with the foot,' and in advice about practising this skill recommended: 'Keep it as close to you as possible, for then you have more command over its movements than when you allow it to get beyond reach.'[5] The player dribbling the ball was often followed by their teammates in a close pack and the ball was only delegated or passed on when it was in danger of being lost to the opposition. Football was a pastime and for many gentlemen amateurs the result of the game was less important than the personal enjoyment of playing. This was illustrated by the Hon. A. Lyttleton who described his reason for not passing the ball to Billy Mosforth: 'because I was playing for my own pleasure'.[6]

Passing – i.e. the moving of the ball between at least two players, with the intention of creating an advantage – is often presented in popular literature, media and some academic sources as being pioneered in Scotland. For example, Wilson maintained that: 'The spread of passing itself – that 'united action' – can be traced back to one game, football's first international, played between England and Scotland at Partick, the West of Scotland cricket ground, in 1872.'[7]

Kitching stated:

> There has been some debate over who introduced "the passing game" to association football, with the Royal Engineers and Sheffield teams sometimes being credited along with the Scots … Reports dating between March 1875 and March 1880, and including several matches between Queen's Park (and other Glasgow teams and clubs) and the Royal Engineers, Sheffield, and the leading English team of this period – the Wanderers – show clearly that the Scots *were* [sic] the pioneers here.[8]

These statements, however, would appear to be inaccurate and there are contemporary reports or indications of passing prior to this match; i.e. passing was reported as part of the Sheffield game of football in 1865,[9] and possibly as early as 1861.[10] Wilson's and Kitching's assertions will be tested through an investigation of the history of passing/combination play and an examination of how it co-evolved alongside the development of positional formations and the laws of the game. Extensive use of contemporary reports will draw from the rich football history of Sheffield in particular. In addition, key terms which were used in contemporary accounts of the game will be defined and there will also be a description of how Sheffield's style of football influenced clubs and individuals, and had an impact on one of the most important matches in Association football history.

The Research Approach

The investigation of the literature included: core texts addressing the period, and especially the Alcock Annuals and the digitized British Newspaper Archive (BNA).[11] National searches

of the BNA were conducted for the periods 1850s, 1860s and 1870s and, in particular, September – March/April which was the football season. Further research was then focused on Derby, London, Nottingham, Scotland and Sheffield publications. The BNA and Alcock annuals are especially valuable because they provide contemporary accounts albeit that the newspaper reports were often written by the club secretary who may have had limited understanding of wider football considerations.[12] The searches on the BNA of contemporary match reports used a number of search terms including: 'combination', 'useful', 'worked together', 'scientific', and 'passing'. In particular, there was a focus on named individuals passing the ball which would provide a more precise confirmation of passing than vague statements such as 'worked together' or 'combination' which could sometimes mean 'backing up' but not necessarily passing. To address Wilson's and Kitching's statements that passing began in Scotland this research draws substantially on accounts of passing in Sheffield.

There are two main aims of this paper, firstly, to investigate the development of passing. Secondly, to use the BNA to identify the earliest descriptions of passing in modern football (i.e. 1850 – 1880). In addition, there are two research questions:

1. How has passing evolved?
2. What is the earliest identified source of passing in the modern game?

Strategic Intent in Football

The main objective of a football match is to win and, as John Cruyff said: 'To win you have to score one more goal than your opponent.'[13] To successfully achieve this requires a range of integrated elements such as technical skills, strategies, and formations which were gradually evolving during the mid-nineteenth century. At the same time, the laws of the game were still being formulated and stress-tested on playing fields, and these laws had an interactive relationship with the strategies, tactics and formations which teams adopted. Strategy, within the laws of the game, is a critical dimension as Buekers et al noted:

> When asked about the importance of strategy and tactics for team sports, the answers of trainers and coaches appear to be univocal and clear. Strategy and tactics are crucial to the game as they define the intentions of the players and set the boundaries that define the defensive and offensive actions of the player.[14]

The challenge for a team of implementing its strategy, of course, is that the other team also has a strategy and both will dynamically respond to the actions of the other.[15] This was illustrated in boxing when Mike Tyson, ahead of his fight against Tyrell Biggs, said: 'Everyone has a plan until they get hit for the first time.'[16] These real-time reactions to the ebb and flow of the game have been described as an 'ecological-dynamic approach' in which players and teams adapt to the environmental conditions in which they are operating.[17]

In games which do not have rules there are few constraints about what is and is not acceptable. An instance of strategic innovations in folk/mob football was described by Alcock:

> Many tales are told of the strategy games by which the players succeeded in effecting the fall of the hostile goal. The most usual was to remove the cork

> shavings and smuggle the cover under a countryman's frock or woman's gown to the desired place.[18]

This example from folk/mob football illustrates the ingenuity of players seeking to achieve competitive advantage and it is the same imperative which drove teams in the nineteenth century, and today, to seek advantageous opportunities within the laws of the game.

This adaptation to accommodate the circumstances of the game can be at an individual level with a player self-organising and responding to the ball's location and those of other players.[19] This adjustment can also be provided through directions received from the captain or the coach, e.g. early Sheffield players being directed by the captain John Marsh.[20] A consequence of these dynamic interactions is that football, albeit a relatively simple game,[21] is complex and multidimensional due, in part, to passing and: 'The ability to transmit the football is the only action in football that makes a team a dynamical group of interacting individuals.[22]

Playing Up, Backing Up and Passing On

In the mid-nineteenth century, football was very much an individual endeavour with players dribbling the ball towards the opposition goal. With this focus on one person dribbling of the ball there was the potential for the other players to take a rest or as Alcock said: 'in slang parlance, a "gentle breather"'.[23] This practice, Alcock considered, was discreditable and that the player 'should be discountenanced as a pestilential person likely to contaminate and ruin a whole eleven'.[24] Instead, Alcock maintained that the principle of 'playing up', or 'keeping on the ball throughout the game', i.e. supporting the other players encouraged a team approach rather than an individually focussed one.[25] This playing up, Alcock regarded as, 'the first and golden rule of football'.[26]

In many cases, but not always, individual players were closely followed by their teammates in a pack. It was only when they were about to lose possession of the ball to the opposition that they might kick the ball ahead, pass on to allow a teammate to continue with the ball, or concede possession to the opposition. To prevent the latter happening, Alcock advised the strategy of 'backing up' which he defined as: 'the process of following closely on a fellow player, to assist him if required, and to take on the ball if he be attacked or prevented from continuing his onward course'.[27] Backing up also involved closely following a player to 'hustle or ward off any interference by the opposite forwards or backs'.[28]

From the above description, it would appear that 'backing up' involved the close transfer of the ball between two team players which was necessitated by the potential of the opposing team to take control of the ball. In order to pre-empt the loss of the ball, Alcock recommended that the ball should be passed before there was an imminent danger of losing it, stating:

> "Passing on" is different to "backing-up", and it was only the evident aversion to pass on *at the proper time* that suggested the necessity of more general passing on, and placed dribblers comparatively at a discount. It has been the combination of dribbling and passing that has made the Queen's Park Eleven such a splendid team.[29]

In his advice to footballers on how to play the game, Alcock recommended that players should pass the ball, and observed that:

> The "passing-on" game, which was first introduced in any great degree of perfection by the Northerners in the early matches between London and Sheffield, has certainly gained a powerful host of disciples, and, it seems to be the whole aim of certain football elevens.[30]

Alcock particularly admired the dribbling game stating: 'To see some players guide and steer a ball through a circle of opposing legs, twisting and turning as occasion requires, is a sight not to be forgotten.'[31] However, he then described how this was often a selfish pursuit which was unlikely to lead to success and that an average organized team working together was more successful even against more skilful opponents who were disorganized. Alcock was pragmatic enough to acknowledge that the principal outcome of this strategic development was that 'the dribbler pure and simple became extinct and the individual gradually became absorbed in the general mechanism of the side'.[32]

Team Formations and Positions

> Football is not just about players. It is about shape and about space, about the intelligent deployment of players, and their movement within that deployment.[33]

In order for players to pass-on the ball rather than closely backing-up there needs to be some distance between them indicating that they might strategically position themselves over the playing area. The earliest mention of field positions was described by Richard Mulcaster, headmaster of Merchant Taylors School in London. In his 1581 book *Positions* he wrote about the health and educational benefits of the game of *Footeball* and described: 'Some smaller number with such overlooking, sorted into sides and standings'. These 'standings' indicate that there were allocated positions for players to play the game which would appear to be somewhat different to the 'pack' game which was evident in the nineteenth century.[34]

One of the earliest indications of the positioning of players was described in a report of a game between Leeds Football Club and Sheffield Norfolk at Leeds Royal Park in1865. The *Leeds Evening Express* noted that:

> Sheffield kicked off, and a very cautious play took place for some time, each party watching the tactics of their adversaries. Even now it could be seen that Sheffield played in a more scientific manner than Leeds, the way in which the men were placed being excellent.[35]

This account of tactical developments provides us with evidence demonstrating that the Sheffield Norfolk side had intentionally planned to place their players in specific positions as part of their strategy to win the game. The implication of this positioning is that one would not do this if it was not also to be able to pass the ball between your players, to more scientifically move the ball together as a team.

The above game was also reported in the *Leeds Intelligencer* which made several observations:

> Sheffield kicking off, which they did in a way altogether different from that generally practised by the Leeds club, less-showy but more scientific and useful. They "dribbled" it at first just kicking the ball gently from one player to another and trying to run it round by stratagem.[36]

The Leeds Intelligencer report continued: 'It was soon evident that Sheffield had far more skill and worked together better than they of Leeds did.' So again, more indication of a Sheffield team passing in a fashion designed to strategically move the ball around the pitch and in a way that impressed. In the return match, played in Sheffield's Norfolk Park, there is continuing evidence of team organisation. *The Sportsman* reported: 'We cannot help recording the really scientific play with which the Sheffield men back each other up.'[37]

Further evidence of Sheffield FC having an impact and achieving success by following an expansive positional strategy comes from a match played against Newark in late 1869. The report stated: 'Newark's great defect is not organising their field.'[38] The *Nottinghamshire Guardian* also reported the same match and made a similar observation as to why Newark was eventually heavily beaten 5-1: 'The Newark players seeming quite lost in the field and evidently too fond of following the ball instead of playing their respective places in the field.'[39]

Formational tactics were also in evidence in a game between Manchester v Garrick (Sheffield) and the match report stated:

> After changing sides, it was soon apparent that the Manchester Club were short of strategy and system in placing their men … [T]here can be little doubt that the Manchester club lost ultimately though not placing their men.[40]

The growing recognition of the benefits of field positions was also evident in a game between The Wednesday v Derby. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* advised:

> One of the most necessary things for the Derby players to practice is playing to a proper system and to proper places. By a systematic distribution of their forces and by practice they will at some future time make an excellent club.[41]

A match between Sheffield (3) v London (1) at Bramall Lane in 1871 provided further evidence of strategic positioning. The success of the Sheffield team was credited to their organization with the match report stating:

> This victory may be attributed to the Sheffield field being better fixed, a fact creditable to J. Marsh (captain), both the defensive and aggressive tactics being superior to the London team, who play the bulk of their players in the middle.[42]

In a reflection on why Sheffield was again successful against London, the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* commented:

> The only difference is the "throw in" instead of "kick in" from the boundary, and the off side rule. This system finds no favour in Sheffield where they have adopted a very scientific and strategic disposition of their forces over the field. This is our great forte, and has been the means of many brilliant victories achieved by the Sheffield clubs. Football without a plan and system is a wild

> chase after the ball, likely to bring nearly all the players together and leave the major portion of the ground entirely unprotected save by the goal keeper. Our men have their particular spheres of action marked out for them, and should they sometimes get beyond the boundary, are quickly brought back by the captain.[43]

The positional organisation of players as a coordinated team, in contrast to a group of individuals, was also illustrated in the superior performance of the Scotland team which played England in the first international match on 30 November 1872. The English team deployed a formation which had previously been recommended by Alcock who advised that:

> The best method of placing a field, according to the game adopted by the Association" was to have a goal-keeper and two back players with seven or eight forwards. The Scottish team, who were substantially smaller in stature and weight, however, worked together in pairs allowing them to support each other and so were able to successfully compete, with the game ending 0 - 0.[44]

Where might this positionism have emerged from? Sheffield FC was formed out of Sheffield Cricket Club in October 1857. Almost all the early Sheffield clubs, including Wednesday, emerged from existing cricket clubs. Like many early organized football clubs in Sheffield, these cricketing roots would become crucial to how Sheffield's football game developed. Cricket teams had their players positioned across the field and it would be unsurprising if this background in the use of formation did not also transfer to football tactics.[45] Play guided by a captain positioning the players on the field was part of cricketing tactics long before football, and football captain John Marsh was known to direct players on the pitch. Cricket terminology also transferred to football with: 'Messrs. Marsh and Stacey, at cover point on opposite sides, then respectively exhibited some fine specimens of heavy kicking.'[46] Similarly, Alcock, who also organized the first cricket test match between England and Australia in 1880, gave advice on: 'The best method of placing a field[er]', and added: 'a good field[er] at cricket will have certainly the materials for a good goal-keeper'. [47]

It should also be noted that the positions of players were not always fixed for the duration of a game. Reporting on a trial game Reds and Blues the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* stated: 'Mr J. Marsh (the captain) by pushing forward three men, circumscribing the area of play, which tactics somewhat baffled his less experienced opponents.'[48]

Nowadays, the importance of positional play and formations is widely recognized. For example, research by González-Rodenas *et al*, of team formations in the Spanish La Liga during the seasons 2012/13 to 2020/21, observed how they changed during this period.[49] They concluded that: 'There has been a constant evolution of TFs [team formations] throughout the history of soccer.' Similarly, and demonstrating strategic intent as discussed earlier, a paper on football team formations noted:

> The history of football tactics, crystallised in the use of different formations, is a fascinating case of cultural evolution, involving cumulative change over more than a century driven by numerous innovators from across the world, each modifying what had gone before to achieve success within the tightest of margins.[50]

In the next section this positional play will be examined in relation to the passing of the ball over close and longer distances.

Historical Passing

From the above discussion, it follows that if players occupied specific positions on the pitch, rather than moving forward as an individual or tight pack, the ball would need to be passed from one to another in order to advance and avoid the player being enveloped by the opposing pack and thereby losing possession of the ball. An early description of passing was present in the Chinese game of Zhu Qiu, a relation of cuju, in the Tang (618-907 CE) and Song (960-1279 CE) dynasties.[51] Also, Athenaeus wrote about the ancient Greek game of harpastum: 'He seized the ball and passed it on to a teammate while dodging another and laughing.'[52] Another early description of passing is to be found in the *Vocabula* by David Wedderburn (1636) an Aberdonian schoolmaster who titled one section on football as 'pila pedalis' i.e. ball kicking. This section contained a number of short sentences to be translated into Latin by the grammar school pupils involving actions such as the selection of sides, kicking off, and scoring goals; and, more relevant to this paper, were the phrases: 'Pass it here', and, 'Pass the ball back'.[53]

Another allusion to passing from c1624 can be found in a poem by Edmund Waller describing shepherds playing a type of football: 'They ply their feet, and still the restless ball, Toss'd to and fro, is urged by them all.'[54] Another illustration from 1650 of possible passing was described by Baxter: 'like a Footbal in the midst of a crowd of Boyes, tost about in contention from one to another'.[55] A further indication of passing is portrayed in camping football by Moor: 'throws the ball (he must in no case give it) to some less beleaguered friend more free and more in breath than himself'.[56] And, yet another example of Scottish football passing involved Walter Scott the younger which is described by Gibson and Pickford:

> Amongst the heaving mass two stalwart Selkirk men were to be seen. One of them eventually got the ball and threw it to the other, who, not being so much in the thick of the fight, ran off as hard as he could towards the woods of Bow Hill, intending, albeit by a long circuit, to reach the Yarrow goal, and thus bring victory to his side. He would doubtless have succeeded had not a horseman run him down; and so keen was the excitement that the mounted man had some difficulty in getting away from the infuriated players.[57]

These historical examples of passing the ball cannot be directly transferred to association football but they do indicate that the strategic intentions of winning a territorial game, as discussed above, resulted in many experiments and innovations, each team attempting to gain an advantage over the other.[58] Moreover, Rule 11 of the first issued Football Association code from 8 December1863 stated: 'A player shall not be allowed to throw the ball or pass it to another with his hands.' This rule acknowledged that passing was already known and probably used during games.

Passing and the Combination Game

As we have noted above, the dribbling game was found to be tactically inferior to a coordinated team working together and Alcock stated: 'Nothing succeeds better than what I may call a 'combination game,' which he defined as: 'the process of following closely on a fellow player, to assist him if required, and to take on the ball if he be attacked or prevented from continuing his onward course'.[59] From this, it would appear that the term 'combination'

was used to distinguish it from the action of dribbling alone. The use of the term 'combination' would not always appear to be consistently used and Alcock amended his view and stated: 'By combination I mean much more than the mere "passing on" which seems to be the one common idea of perfection among a large number of English Associationists.'[60] In a similar manner, there would appear to be a distinction in the use of the terms 'combination' and 'passing' in an article in the *Saturday Review* titled 'Professionals in English Sport' which bemoaned professionalism and stated: 'combination and passing has replaced skill and dash'.[61] The use of 'combination', in this context, possibly relates to backing up and close passing/passing on, which would tend to concur with the partial clarification above by Alcock who separated 'passing on' from general passing.

What would appear clear was the value of a team working together and Alcock quoted the words of W.N. Cobbold an old Carthusian and captain of the 1885 Cambridge University eleven: 'The first idea of any forward should be that he is only a connecting link in a chain which should, as a rule, be kept in line, and that the whole secret of good play lies in combination.'[62] Cobbold also provided advice to forwards including the notion of positioning: 'let the centre place himself judiciously, so that an inside man can give him a pass when he is clear from the centre half-back'. He further added that: 'a good forward must, of course, be able to pass with both the inside and *outside* of his feet', and should 'always pass slightly ahead of the player passed to'.[63]

In an 1861 match between Sheffield FC v Hallam FC at Hyde Park, Sheffield FC archives describe a match report detailing that: 'Prest, Chambers and Appleton showing some good, combined play, speedily had the ball in the Hallam quarters.'[64] Other accounts of the same match communicated that Sheffield players were playing a passing game with the *Nottingham Journal* impressed by: 'Gould, Prest and Appleton's superior longs'.[65] Long balls, of course, are a form of play designed to get the ball to reach teammates or for teammates to run on to a ball.

More evidence of passing is found in an 1865 report of Nottinghamshire v Sheffield which described a Sheffield goal as being 'two touched to base' indicating that this was created by two players combining together.[66] Yet another account of the same game noted: 'The Sheffield party, however, eventually took the lead through some scientific movements.'[67]

The Leeds Intelligencer makes several observations of a game between Leeds and Sheffield Norfolk which is one of the earliest illustrations of the use of passing rather than combination. The account stated:

> Sheffield kicking off, which they did in a way altogether different from that generally practised by the Leeds club, less-showy but more scientific and useful. They "dribbled" it at first just kicking the ball gently from one player to another and trying to run it round by stratagem … It was soon evident that Sheffield had far more skill and worked together better than they of Leeds did.[68]

In 1868, it could be seen that Sheffield's game continued to develop as a passing and tactically positioned form of football. A Sheffield goal is clearly described as the result of a movement between three separate players. *The Sportsman* report of a Sheffield FC v Lincoln match stated: 'a remarkably neat and quick piece of play on the part of K Smith, Denton & J Knowles resulted in a goal for Sheffield'.[69] This piece of three-player coordination happened despite the match being played to the Lincoln rules which included offside. This suggests that

Sheffield's game had developed to the point where it could operate successfully even during a match where their expansive play was limited by having to account for a potential offside penalisation. The effectiveness of the passing game was illustrated by a number of other examples of goals being scored e.g.: 'Messrs. Barrowclough and Carr, by dexterous manoeuvring, scored the first goal for Norfolk'.[70] 'In just five minutes Donavon passed to Sampson to score.'[71]

In an 1872 match held between Derby v Sheffield FC, *The Derby Mercury* reported: 'W. Orton, by a specimen of careful play, running the ball up in close proximity to the goal, from which it was returned to J. Marsh, who by a fine straight shot kicked it through.'[72] This match report also described a technical skill innovation: 'This goal was supplemented by one of T. Butler's most successful expositions of the art of corkscrew play and deceptive tactics which had the effect of exciting the risibility of the spectators.' Another report of a match played in the same month between Sheffield Club v Notts noted:

> the only goal scored in the match was obtained by Sheffield, owing to a good run up the field by Steel, who passed if judiciously to Matthews, and the latter, by a good straight kick, landed it through the goal out of reach of the custodian.[73]

It was not just Sheffield FC which was involved with these developments in team formations and passing, they were also evident elsewhere in the Sheffield Football Association and teams such as: Wednesday, Norfolk, Exchange, Heeley, Providence, Garrick etc, added to the vitality of the first footballing culture.[74] There are also a number of references to visiting teams needing to learn how to place players, fix a goalkeeper and appoint a captain to orchestrate players, references to all forms of passing suggest it was deployed in the 1860s and firmly embedded by the mid-1870s.

Passing the ball was also developing in Scotland and there were several instances of passing described for a fourth-round FA Challenge Cup match between Wanderers v Queen's Park in 1872. It was reported that:

> the Scotchmen played in such energetic style and followed the ball up so quickly, after the Sheffield fashion, that for the first quarter of an hour they rather surprised their English opponents … Their [Queen's Park] style of play is very much after the fashion of Sheffield, as they dribble little and usually convey the ball by a series of long kicks, combined with a judicious plan of passing on.[75]

Terms like 'backed each other up' and 'played well together' seem common around 1872 and 1873 for Queens Park and reports also mention scrummages, runs, dribbling, and long kicks. The passing of Queen's Park was also employed by the Scottish national team versus England in November 1872. A report explained that: 'The Southrons [English], however, did not play to each other so well as their opponents, who seem to be adepts in passing the ball.'[76] There are no descriptions of fixed positions in 1860s Scottish games nor an explicit mention of a named player-to-player of a Queen's Park passing move. The earliest identified named Glasgow player-to-player passing move was in 1874 for a Sheffield v Glasgow game at Bramall Lane: 'W. McKinnon kicked it in from the side to Harry M'Neill, who in turn handed it to Anderson.'[77]

The phrase 'working well together' is not conclusively linked to combined play or passing and may also mean backing up. There are two 'worked well together' references regarding

the Scotland performance in the 30 November 1872 game, but this benchmark has not been applied to similar reports for Sheffield so these have not been incorporated. Having looked extensively (since 1865) for words like 'combined' or the ball moving between at least two players or 'useful' or 'scientific' (in the right context) or even the word 'passing', the earliest Scottish reference which has been found so far is a 'combined dribbling' reference to a Clydesdale v Granville game in mid-March 1873;[78] and a 'combined play' reference to a Queens Park v Glasgow Wanderers game in the Glasgow Herald on the 7 April 1873.[79]

Another illustration of the success of Scottish passing was demonstrated in an 1874 game between Scotland v England at the West of Scotland Cricket Ground: 'Angus Mackinnon [Scotland] soon shot out in front, and the pair, by 'passing', piloted the ball clean through the English backs.'[80]

Not all goals are scored by shooting or heading the ball, sometimes good, combined play results in a player only having to pass the ball into the goal. This may have been the situation in a game between Third Lanarkshire Rifle Volunteers v Sheffield Heeley at Cathkin Park: 'A well contested game ended in a draw, each club having passed the ball between the posts.'[81] It would appear that early Queens Park and Scottish passing, possibly like early Sheffield passing, was rudimentary which gradually evolved from backing up and close combination play. An important, and probably significant factor was that both played by limited offside rules in comparison to the relatively tight offside rule of the FA which required three opposition players between the receiving player and the goal.[82] It was also noted by Alcock:

> The rules affected by the Sheffield Association gave rise to a loose and disjointed game, which directly encouraged the adoption of a certain kind of passing, and, in fact, the main feature of the general play of Sheffield teams was the transmission of the ball from one player to another according to their stations arranged on a definite plan.[83]

It was also possible that both styles evolved separately from one another; however, a significant element to consider was that contemporary newspapers were syndicated and widely distributed across Britain. Innovations and developments in the game, therefore, would have been widely read and possibly disseminated to teams looking for a competitive advantage.[84]

Long Passing and Crossing

In addition to close passing and passing on, it would appear that long passing along the ground or in the air were commonly practiced during matches in order to overcome the tactics and positioning of the opposition. Short passing would often appear to be between the forwards and long passing was often delivered by the backs clearing their lines. Cobbold advised that:

> As regards actual combination, my firm belief is that a judicious mixture of long and short passing is the most effective. If the ball be near one's own goal, let it be at once transferred to the outside right or left, as the case may be, and let him, in conjunction with his partner, go down the wing. When the time comes for middling (unless occasion shall have arisen before for him to pass), let him send

> the ball hard right across, along the ground if possible, or close to it, thus giving the centre and other wing men all a chance. The time for middling comes, as a rule, some time before the goal-line is reached, for a forward should rarely, if ever, try to get round the last back, but middle just before he comes to him. How often is a really good run down the wing spoilt by a middle coming too late, when the backs have returned to defend the goal, or by a high centre, which an opposing back has no difficulty in heading away.
>
> Often when a good run is being made by one of the wings, the backs on the other side gradually come across and leave the extreme part of their own side quite unguarded. This is the time for a hard pass – some forty or fifty yards, it may be. With regard to all passing the forward must use his judgement and decide quickly, and always pass slightly ahead of the player passed to.[85]

Long balls, of course, are a form of play designed to get the ball to reach teammates or for teammates to run onto a ball. Alcock recommended that: 'With regard to long passing … let it be done directly one sees one of the outside men with a clear opening.'[86] This approach was illustrated in *The Nottingham Journal*'s account of match between Sheffield FC vs Hallam FC which was impressed by 'Gould, Prest and Appleton's superior longs'.[87] It was also a 'long' ball pass that won the first cup final, the final of the March 1867 Youdan Cup played to Sheffield rules. 'The ball was kicked by Elliott, not through the goal, but just over it, and was touched down by Ash in splendid style.'[88] Ash had to run around two Norfolk players to score the rouge for victorious Hallam showing that the play was a kick forward in the anticipation that a player running onto passes put themselves in a potential scoring position.

A report of the 1872 Association Challenge Cup match between Wanderers v Queen's Park in London stated: Queen's Park 'dribble little and usually convey the ball by a series of long kicks'.[89] This practice was not exclusive to Queen's Park with Wanderers also demonstrating longer kicking: 'The next event was a good run down the side of the ground by C.W. Alcock, at the end of which the ball was well middled to Pelham.'

In an 1870 game between Manchester Athenaum and Sheffield Garrick, there is evidence of crossing: 'One of the Garrick players, with good judgment, put the ball directly in front of the goal, where W. Ward was waiting for it, and by a dexterous and well-directed kick put it through a second time.'[90] In an 1871 game featuring Garrick, against Leeds, there is an example of crossing: 'Garrick scored their first goal; obtained by W. Horton crossing the ball to W. Ward, who put it through in a clever manner.'[91] A few years later during an 1873 representative match between London v Sheffield, another goal was described:

> and after a good run by each of the Brothers Clegg. one of whom passed the ball over to Gregory, who in turn again gave way to W. E. Clegg, the latter crossed it to Sampson, who shot it through the goal amid loud applause.[92]

Passing and Heading the Ball

Heading the ball is often used as a form of passing and its introduction was thought to be a consequence of the phasing out of the fair catch rule in January 1871 which effectively outlawed handling for all on-field players except for the goal keeper. The fair catch in Sheffield was banned in 1867 but reintroduced in 1868, and in 1869 gaining a free kick from

a fair catch was stopped and in January 1871 the fair catch law was completely abolished. A heading reference was reported in an 1871 Sheffield v Derby match which explained: 'and catching being disallowed, the players naturally headed'.[93] Heading the ball was not common practice across Britain and several reports of a match played between London and Sheffield at the Oval in January 1872 remarked about this unusual behaviour:

> The first to show conspicuously was G. H. Sampson who played the ball with his head, which caused some amusement. This was the kind of play which the Sheffield team often indulged during the contest, the Londoners preferring to use the foot."[94]

> The use of the hands being entirely forbidden, the visitors resorted to an ingenious method of 'heading' the ball, i.e. stopping it with the head so placed as to make the ball rebound in the direction it came from.[95]

> Sampson headed the ball judiciously. This style of play was evidently new to the Cockneys and caused a hearty laugh.[96]

However, it would appear that heading the ball was a practice which preceded the removal of the fair catch rule. The earliest identified account of a headed goal was from a match played between 14 of Sheffield FC and 14 of Hallam FC to raise funds for Sheffield Hospital and Dispensary on 28 December 1861:

> Time was now fast approaching, and just when the spectators had made up their minds that a draw was inevitable, Warburton was seen making tracks for the 'Gents' goal, and a great shout went up when he was seen to head one safely under the cross-bar.[97]

Another documented account of a headed goal was for Perseverance v Oxford at Ecclesall Road, Sheffield, in 1873: 'The first goal was obtained by good play on the part of J.H. Banks, and the second was "headed" through by T. Heeley.'[98]

Heading the ball may have developed independently in Sheffield and Glasgow, but not in London. In the first inter-association game between London and Sheffield, there was surprise at the Sheffield team heading the ball. Heading the ball implies that the ball was kicked high so that players could receive it on their heads. During the 1872 match between Wanderers v Queen's Park, it was reported that Queen's Park's 'method of driving the ball with the head is precisely the same as that adopted in Sheffield'.[99]

Passing – An Act of Faith?

It would appear that passing in the 1860s and 1870s was as much an act of faith as a decisive tactic. That a passing game was sometimes ineffective even against the most basic kick and rush tactics on rough or saturated ground and that other techniques such as positional play, dribbling, combination play, pressing, tackling and tactical innovations such as a move to 2-3-5 were equally important in determining success. Alcock expressed his reservations about the effectiveness of passing:

> The ”passing-on” game, which was first introduced in any great degree of perfection by the Northerners in the early matches between London and Sheffield, seems to be the whole aim of certain football elevens. Whether such a wholesale system pays or not is a question open to doubt. For myself I think that it does not.[100]

The limitations of passing were also described about an 1865 game between Leeds v Sheffield Norfolk at Leeds Royal Park. The report of the game noted that:

> Even now it could be seen that Sheffield played in a more scientific manner than Leeds, the way in which the men were placed being excellent. But it was soon seen that this would avail nothing, for Leeds, determined at once to force the game, brought most of the players up to the scratch, only one or two being left to defend the goal.[101]

Similar experiences were also occurring in the North-East with Kitching noting:

> Moreover, a number of the *Northern Athletic* match reports for the 1883-4 season indeed suggest that initial experiments with passing were often unsuccessful and led to frequent loss of possession and this may have reinforced old preferences for shoving, dribbling and for individual running with the ball (with “back-up”).[102]

It would appear that passing during Victorian times was not always effective in winning matches. The same can be said about the modern game in that there are numerous examples of games being played where the team with high levels of possession may still end up losing.[103] An example of this is the Spain team during the 2022 Qatar World Cup when they recorded a remarkable number of 1,058 passes but still lost 1 – 2 to Japan; and were also defeated on penalties against Morocco despite having 1,019 passes but only one shot on goal.[104] Pumping the route-one ball into the penalty area ‘mixer’ where there is a position of maximum opportunity (POMO) can sometimes short-circuit the occasional sterility of sideways and backwards passing.[105]

A Transitional Period, Uneven Evolution and Learning Through Experience and Observation

It is evident from the numerous reports of football dating from the middle to late nineteenth century that football did not evolve progressively and evenly across Britain.[106] This was a period of substantial change and transition with, for example, football and rugby gradually diverging from one another, yet with teams often continuing to play by both football and rugby codes (as well as local ones) depending on who their opponents were. Tactics and formations were evolving through a trial-and-error approach which Kitching described as a ‘learning through playing’ and he added:

> In fact, the northeast of England, as a relatively late starter in adopting soccer, was able to short circuit its own learning by copying teams from Teesside and Cleveland, and (even more noticeably) from Scotland, who had made these developments earlier.[107]

This learning from others and learning from practice had been described much earlier by Alcock: 'Football, however, is of such a Protean nature, that it is difficult to offer a prescription for all the different phases of the game, which can only be gained by the crucial test of experience.'[108] As we have already discussed, the passing game can sometimes be beaten by direct play and players forming a tight pack, e.g. Leeds' success over Sheffield Norfolk. It is perhaps for reasons such as this that not all evolution results in progress and that players and teams my revert to earlier practices. One critic of Sheffield's defeats against London described how 'at one time they were one of the best passing players in the kingdom, whereas now they had become one of the most selfish'.[109] Kitching's teleological perspective suggests that there is continuous progress of football development which is not substantiated, i.e. it can reverse from passing to individual dribbling.[110] In addition, his choice of reports from March 1875 – March 1880 do not take into account the evidence of passing we have discussed from the previous decade and the earlier years in the 1870s.

The successful outcomes of matches did not always arise from superior tactics but sometimes from other factors. For example, the Sheffield Association compared unfavourably with Glasgow in terms of selection and preparation, with a general consensus in contemporary reports that the selections were unrepresentative with players coming only from favoured clubs. Alongside unfashionable but successful clubs like Pitsmoor and Attercliffe, Sheffield Club's rejection of local competition was resented, and although Sheffield FC were not very successful on the pitch, a few of its stars were overlooked. This dissatisfaction was voiced in letters to the *Sheffield Independent* stating: 'if the association will follow the Scotchmen's style of choosing their team, they will find some good players, and give a deal more satisfaction'.[111]

Marsh, rated by the London press as the best captain in the country, must have upset someone. Likewise, Hunter and Sorby fell foul of this favouritism too. Given the high level of official incompetence/amateurism in the Association, Sheffield's early success against London was remarkable and later disappointments understandable. Pierce Dix, the Sheffield FA secretary, rejected overtures from the New Association – established for new clubs because the Sheffield Football Association did not allow entry to clubs under two years of age – so new teams did not contribute players. Furthermore, the best semi-professionals, players like Mosforth and Hunter, prioritized getting paid over representation and gave themselves exhausting schedules. Add to this the lack of practice matches and teams being sent North without having played together to face excellently prepared Glasgow sides picked from the wider district, led to an institutionalized failure. Sheffield did not play practice matches before the intercity games until 1876, and when they finally got prepared the 1879 *Glasgow Herald* lauded their 'essay in passing' and organisation.[112]

Where did passing a football begin?

From the above discussions, it is evident that passing has been a core ingredient of many football codes and there would appear to be no original starting point for passing which is probably a natural development within competitive invasion/territorial sports. The earliest identified reports of passing in association football involved Sheffield teams in the 1860s, with the finesse of passing in Scottish teams emerging some years later. It is evident that Wilson's and Kitching's statements that passing began in Scotland are not correct.[113] It would appear that passing was effectively deployed, but not necessarily invented in Scotland.

The dynamic interaction of strategies, formations, and tactics also had an impact on passing. It is possible that the passing game may have evolved independently in Sheffield and Glasgow as a result of their less restrictive offside rules, and there was also a substantial amount of 'learning through playing' and the copying of other teams' practices throughout Britain. In addition, newspaper and other publications' syndication and distribution may also have assisted in the dissemination of football tactics and formations.

In conclusion, Sheffield possessed the first football culture and newspaper and contemporary reports strongly indicate a passing game also developed there.[114] Sheffield's Jack Hunter who went on to manage and captain Blackburn Olympic used scientific methods such as passing, formations, training, diet, and rest to enable them to defeat Old Etonians in the 1883 FA Cup final. Alcock commended this play and noted that 'the first English team to give an exhibition of a systematic passing game in London was the Blackburn Olympic'.[115] This match marked a significant milestone in the game from a dribbling one to a passing one, and Wilson described this as: 'the final flourish of the dribbling game'.[116]

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