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Validation for a Soccer Genius

Johan Cruyff Helped Build the Dutch and Spanish Teams—One Will Win the World Cup

By [MATTHEW FUTTERMAN](#)

Somewhere in Catalonia, a Dutchman is smiling.

His name is Johan Cruyff, and since before the Beatles broke up he has been fighting on behalf of an attack-intensive brand of soccer, a stylish game of short passes and zig-zag dashes that brought pleasure to tens of millions of fans but never produced a world champion.

Johan Cruyff, shown in 1996 while he was manager of Barcelona in the Spanish League.

Over 40 years, he imposed his vision on two national teams, as a player for the Netherlands in the 1970s and as a coach in Spain since 1988, the year he took over FC Barcelona and began selling his style of soccer to the Spanish and their national team.



On Sunday, the Netherlands and Spain will meet in a World Cup final that is a vindication for the thoroughly unfashionable Mr. Cruyff. In Europe and nearly everywhere else, defensive soccer has been ascendant for nearly two decades. But whichever team hoists the trophy Sunday will bear the offense-first imprint of Mr. Cruyff.

"What you are seeing is a victory for attacking football," said Ruud Gullit, a star of the Dutch teams of the 1980s. "It's what people like to see."

This is particularly true of the Spanish. Their devotion to Cruyff-style offensive strategies has earned accolades from each opponent they vanquished, and of course from Mr. Cruyff.

"They are the masters of the game," German coach Joachim Löw said after falling to La Furia Roja on Wednesday night. "You can see it with every pass."

The Oranje of the Netherlands are less loyal to their former star. While they remain a possession-oriented, quick-passing team, they have shifted away from the teachings of the prophet Mr. Cruyff, garnering a tongue-lashing from him for playing a more structured, less free-flowing style. Yet it has succeeded: The Dutch are playing in World Cup final for the first time since 1978.

The final becomes a test of Mr. Cruyff's philosophy: Can his style win in its purest form, or must it be adapted to the modern game? Mr. Cruyff, who lives in Catalonia, declined to be interviewed.

Over the past three decades, the Dutch appeared to come to terms with their place in soccer's natural order. They were the purists who would play the game their way—Mr. Cruyff's way. They would suffer for their art by being knocked out of tournaments but could always tell themselves that they were beaten by less talented teams, or teams that were willing to sacrifice style for success.

Germany and Spain fight for a chance to play the Netherlands in the final Sunday.

Dutch coach Bert Van Marwijk this week called Mr. Cruyff "the best footballer ever." But earlier in the tournament he



also said, "If we can win playing beautiful football that's great, but two years ago when I became coach, I said you have to be able to win ugly games."

In true Cruyff style, Spain tries to avoid that at all costs, even if coach Vicente del Bosque stopped short of crediting the Dutch and Mr. Cruyff for his team's current success and style.

"I don't know if it looks like the Dutch style," he said after defeating Germany. "It is always based on quality of the people in the midfield. If you have order, you can showcase a lot of talent. We have great players, good order and that makes everything much easier."

But Spain's key midfield trio of Xavi, Andres Iniesta and Sergio Busquets all play for Barcelona in a style that evokes the Dutch of the 1970s. Their special awareness, speed of thought and crisp passing are the backbone of the Spanish team.

Mr. Cruyff's captain during much of his time at Barcelona was Pep Guardiola, the current manager of Barcelona, who provided six of Spain's starting 11 against Germany in the semi-final.

As a result, unlike the much-anticipated clash between Germany and the Netherlands, this final won't be about two historic rivals settling old scores on the field. For two countries separated by roughly 500 miles that have been among the best in European soccer for half a generation, Spain and the Netherlands have never played a game with a major title on the line.

Some 400 years ago, Spain and the Netherlands were rivals. But a series of 17th century treaties diminished conflict between the two countries. The two sides are 4-4-1 since 1920, their most recent meeting a 1-0 win for the Netherlands in 2002.

This Dutch team is formidable, having won all six of its World Cup games in South Africa. Since 1958, when the three-match group-play format was instituted, three teams have entered the World Cup final having won all their matches, and all three won the championship.

—Joe E. Melvin, Jonathan Clegg and Ben Cohen contributed to this article.