

A black and white photograph of Louis van Gaal, a man with short, dark hair, wearing a white shirt with a dark collar. He is shown from the chest up, in profile, clapping his hands. The background is dark and out of focus.

Louis van Gaal, coach AZ Alkmaar

"The objective creates the exercise"

It was a big disappointment for AZ Alkmaar and Louis van Gaal when a great season came to a bitter end in the play-off game against FC Groningen. We talked to van Gaal and we saw a completely different person than the one we saw during the press conference after that unfortunate game. He was proud of the amount of points the team was able to gather throughout the season and the way in which they played. He was also eagerly looking forward to the season ahead. Van Gaal comes to life when he can finally talk about soccer coaching as opposed to the other issues that surround the game. Full of passion he explains his vision, frequently using the magnetic board. Fortunately he finds it extremely important to be well understood, so from time to time he takes his foot off the gas to explain everything in great detail, making sure we understand what he is saying. Louis van Gaal at his best: on pressing, formations, ball movement and of course dominant play.

By: Hans Slender and Paul van Veen

Van Gaal is known as a fan of dominant play, or dominant soccer. But what is dominant soccer? "Dominant soccer, in my opinion, means that you are the team that decides the flow of the game", van Gaal starts to explain. "Meaning creating more chances than the opponent, playing offensively and doing this based on technical and tactical capacity, whereby the will to win plays an essential role. You therefore assume an offensive rather than defensive organization. The core of this is that you decide what happens on the field; of course this is open for discussion, because when you play from a defensive organization you can also dictate to a degree, as you determine that the opponent attacks in a small space. This, however, is not dominant play, because you do not determine the situation in an offensive manner."

Dominant

Whether dominant soccer is always played on the opponents half is also a discussion point. The manner in which PSV plays

can be called dominant, as they are able to determine much of the play. However they do this more often from a defensive organization, whereby they do not meet the criteria stipulated by van Gaal. "PSV always plays very compact and well organized. This is dominance in another way. I see dominant play as playing offensively and pressing on the opponent's half. This is my perception, as I believe you should always entertain the fans and the fans are, in my opinion, entertained when you play offensive soccer. Whenever you fall back more you will be playing with less initiative and with dominance only in phases. I think the fans will be more entertained by constant offensive play."

Titles

"Whether you are able to play dominant is of course dependent on the quality of your opponent, but even more on the quality of your own team." Van Gaal refers to the words of Van Basten when he was appointed as Dutch National Team coach. He also tries to play dominant soccer, but in reality this is not always possible at that level. However, it does remain the intention with which he plays. The quality of the players is the decisive factor. "There are many great coaches who never received the recognition they deserve. They have booked great successes by getting optimal results with their team. This is however not always recognized by the outside world, because you don't win any prizes when you are not working with the top players. When you have always worked at the top it is easier to win the title then with, for example, AZ Alkmaar."

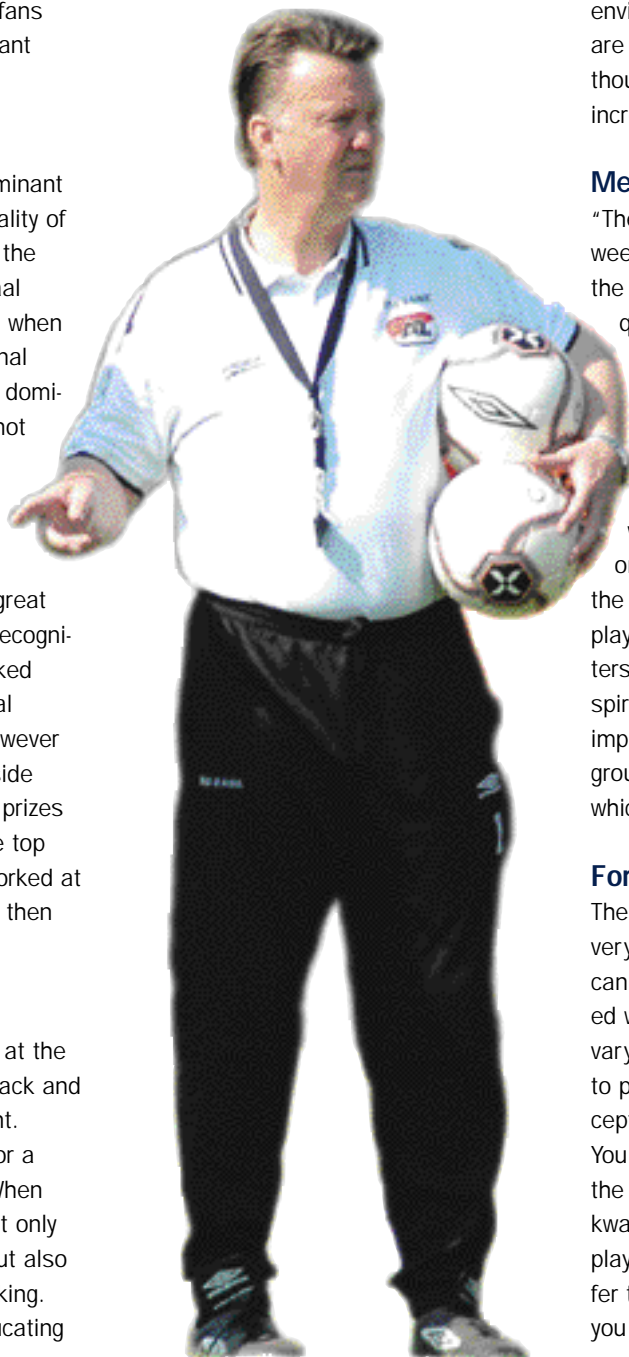
Trust

Of course there are also coaches at the highest level who choose to fall back and leave the initiative to the opponent. According to Van Gaal this asks for a completely different approach. "When you choose to fall back you do not only need different types of players, but also a completely different way of thinking. You must therefore also start educating

your players and scouting differently. In Holland we educate players in an offensive concept. Whenever these players are forced to play in a defensive concept

they have to make a big transition. This becomes obvious whenever you get a chance to pressure an opponent like Ajax; they are not educated on this and

"Dominant soccer, in my opinion, means that you are the deciding team"



will get into a lot of problems trying to deal with such a situation." Dominant play is also largely based on trust. Playing dominant soccer asks for quality players and for guts and trust to execute it. There are a lot of influential aspects surrounding a group of players. In order to attain good results these aspects must be balanced. Whether you eventually play dominantly is influenced by the players, the technical staff, the medical staff, the board and of course the fans and media. At an absolute top club this environment forms a more complicated factor than at AZ. "When I signed at AZ it changed the environment surrounding the club. We are technically still a sub-top club, even though the media attention is rapidly increasing."

Mental

"The product soccer is a cooperation between the players, the technical staff and the medical staff. First of all there is the quality of the players, quickly followed by the quality of the coach. I think the coach is very influential in a team." When Van Gaal signed at AZ there was a lack of balance in the team, they had a fairly small group with, for example, 3 right-wingers and only 1 left wingback. The mentality of the group was, however, excellent. The players fit well together based on characters and personalities. It was this team spirit, the norms and values at AZ, which impressed him, the most. "We have a group of players who want to work hard, which is very important."

Formation

The formation, in which a team plays, is very influential on the way in which you can play. Louis van Gaal has always played with the 1-4-3-3, but does of course vary within this formation. "When you opt to play with a 1-4-3-3 you will, in my perception, have optimal field positioning. You can then decide whether to play with the point (in midfield) forwards or backwards. A lot of teams nowadays opt to play with the point backwards, but I prefer to play with the point forwards. When you want to move one player up from the



Diagrams 1 and 2: OS: "When you want to move one player up from the back there will be more room to do this when you are playing with the point forward, then when you are playing with the point backward"

Diagrams 3 and 4: OS: 1-4-4-2 merely has 3 or 4 lines, 1-4-3-3 about 6

back there will be more room to do this when you are playing with the point forward (diagrams 1 and 2). You automatically create more space to move up from the back. When you play with the point backwards you will have to create this space by moving out of the way. Furthermore, I believe that when you play with the point backwards the distance to the striker generally speaking becomes too big. The striker will therefore often be isolated from the rest of the team. It is then up to the quality of the midfielders whether they are able to de-isolate the striker or not." Van Gaal reaffirms that the choice of system is dependent on the quality of the players. You

must choose a system in which your players' qualities will be utilized to the fullest. "The beautiful thing about my choice of system is that it creates a lot of lines. When you play with a 1-4-4-2 you have a flat four in midfield, creating only 3-4 lines. In our system of play we usually have about 6 lines (diagrams 3 and 4). So from a mathematical point of view you are creating a lot more passing opportunities. Your positioning is not only better in attack, but also in defense."

Defense

Within this formation you always have the positioning whereby there is one pla-



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“Against three strikers our number 10 will always be able to cover through, because I am one of the only coaches who believes three defenders is enough to cover the last line”

yer who can execute pressure on the ball. When you are playing next to each other an opponent can easily find the

free space by executing a couple of back passes (diagram 5). One of your players will then have to move up, which takes time and usually means you are too late. When you play next to each other it is mathematically harder to constrain your opponent, because there is always a player who needs to get out of position. When you are playing with more lines it will be easier to constrain your opponent. It is always about occupying regions. Take Barcelona for example, they play with the point

backwards in midfield. They pressure on the side where the ball is with a lot of players and leave the other side free (diagram 6).

Whenever you pressure the ball correctly, they opponent will never pass to the other side of the field anyways. This is, however, only possible when you have good field possession, more lines make it easier to surround the opponent and pressure the ball.”

The individual distances are important in this way of pressing. The players on the opposite side of the ball have to move in. All players have to be willing to do something. Due to the many lines the individual distances are never more than 5-10 meters, making it easier for the players to cover them.

Opponent

The opponents’ formation does play a role, but it does not change much.

“Because our field possession is always the same it means that we have to cover less space,” Van Gaal reiterates.

“When the opponent is playing with 4 defenders, our left winger, for example, can move in provoking a pass to their right wingback. From there we can we can constrain them.” The opponent’s numerical advantage will therefore be eliminated.



Diagram 5: OS: When you play next to each other there is always one player who needs to move up to solve the situation.



Diagram 6: OS: “Barcelona executes pressure on the side of the ball with a lot of players and will leave the other side free”



"The beautiful thing about the system of my choice is that it creates a lot of lines"



"If the opponent's lesser build up player is covering the center, the striker can force him to gain possession by covering the other central defender. The individual distances are again very small meaning pressure can immediately be executed (diagrams 7 and 8)." These issues always deal with your own qualities and the qualities of the opponent. The strikers have to be able to cover a player in such a way that the opponent is forced to play in a manner the own team want them to play. By analyzing the opponent's build up one can gather how they prefer to build up. The preferred build up has to be made impossible. "It may also occur that we constrain the opponent entirely by moving in our number 10. We then play 1v1 across the entire field."

Diagrams 7 and 8: "Forcing the lesser build up player into possession"



Diagrams 9 and 10: OS: Against two strikers you can put one midfielder back or play in the zone.



Against two strikers

"The toughest situation for us occurs when we are playing against two strikers and we want to defend forward. This is due to the large spaces in the back, which makes the 1v1 situation very dangerous. Usually I will add a player in between (diagram 9). The problem then is that the spaces on midfield will become larger, so are number 10 will have to play in midfield. The result of this is that the opponent will have an extra player in defense and will outnumber us in that area 4 versus 3. We will be playing in a 3-4-3 formation, whereby our number 10

is a fourth midfielder instead of a second striker. In this situation you will have to play with a different number 10." Another solution is to allow the back to squeeze more and pressure the side of the ball. They will guard the opponent in the zone at first (diagram 10) "Defending will become harder as the half winger will now be able to easily receive the ball. You will often be too late to interfere as the distances are too large." The problem lies predominantly in the covering through of the number 10. "Against three strikers our number 10 will always be able to cover through, because I am one of the only coaches who believes three defenders is enough to cover the last line, by means of accurate sagging and shifting. This is however impossible with two defenders. In this case it is dependent on the opponent's strikers. In a situation like this they must not be quick and agile, because if they are you will be unable to play 2v2 in such a large area. Against two stiffer strikers this may be a little easier. In my opinion the way in which we can pressure is therefore dependent on the opponent's formation. You must always respect your opponent and acknowledge their qualities. This information is important to determine whether you, as a coach, can decide to play 1v1 and whether your number 10 can function as a second striker."

Long pass

A lot of teams nowadays opt for the long pass, in order to move the problem to the opponent's half. "I always try to teach my team to build up from the back. Sometimes this is, however, fatal because the opponent will block you completely, you then have to play the long ball and the team will have to position themselves accordingly. When you know this you will also have to change your mental state. You have to ensure you have a man more in the location of the second ball. Within your tactics you have to increase your chances that your team creates a man more in the correct location. Of course the players must have the mental state to fight for the second ball." The same thing applies when the opponent opts for the long pass. Then also must there be enough

people to win the second ball.

Furthermore the defenders must be well prepared for the long pass. "The defenders must always be well instructed. It is not about the opponent, it is not about the ball, it is about the space the ball may be played into and the opponent may come into. You must be able to predict this beforehand. When you know which opponent will play the long ball at which moment(s), the defender has to ensure he is positioned in such a way that you can play the space behind you better than the opponent can enter it. You do not do this alone, but with all three defenders. Or with all four defenders, the latter being easier because you will have an extra man. However, you must communicate better because the spaces are smaller. You will more easily think that your teammate will solve it, while it is your task. This is why I believe that it is sometimes better to play 1v1, because it will be clear who has to play in which space." The players have to learn to read the game themselves. They have to recognize how the opponent is playing and what their own team can do to counter that. Louis van Gaal thinks it is important that the team solves and executes this together. "Of course they will not always agree with one another. The coach therefore has to be very clear, making sure that the team will come to one solution."

Attacking

AZ is not known for their defense, but rather for the offense. They are both intertwined. Van Gaal has already made it clear that creating lines is important for good position play. "When you play fast circulation soccer you will be able to continuously pressure the opponent. Whenever you circulate the ball a lot, the opponent will likewise have to circulate a lot, increasing their chances of making a positional mistake. When a player is not moving or dribbling slowly you are making it easy for the opponent. Not moving for 2 seconds means an opponent can correct a positional mistake. When a player immediately decides to initiate a quick dribble the opponent will not have a chance to recover. The problem with quickly moving the play is that the oppo-

ponent can make it harder by playing compact, also a cross pass can easily be intercepted creating a dangerous situation." Van Gaal rather uses the word ball movement instead of ball circulation, because a ball, which is being passed around in one area of the field does not create any problems for the opponent. "Ball movement does not necessarily mean that you can't dribble. You have to recognize the moment in which you can



Diagram 11: OS: "When a player steps out of the organization, the quality of the dominant team lies within being able to play a through ball"



Diagram 12: OS: "The 6 and 8 are often positioned more outside and are therefore free to receive a pass"

create a 2v1 situation. Whenever the opponent has moved in such a way that they can pick up their man and provide cover you should not initiate a dribble, because you will be outnumbered 1v2."

Creative players

"The attacking team must ensure that the creative players will get as many chances as possible to decide the moment in which a dribble or action can be made. These players have the quality to create something, where other player may not have this." You therefore especially need players who can move the game so that the creative players can be brought into play, whereby they have enough time and space to make the difference. Creative players can determine whether or not to initiate a risky continuation in a small space. "When you have midfielder who can also make the right decisions in the small spaces you are in luck as a coach."

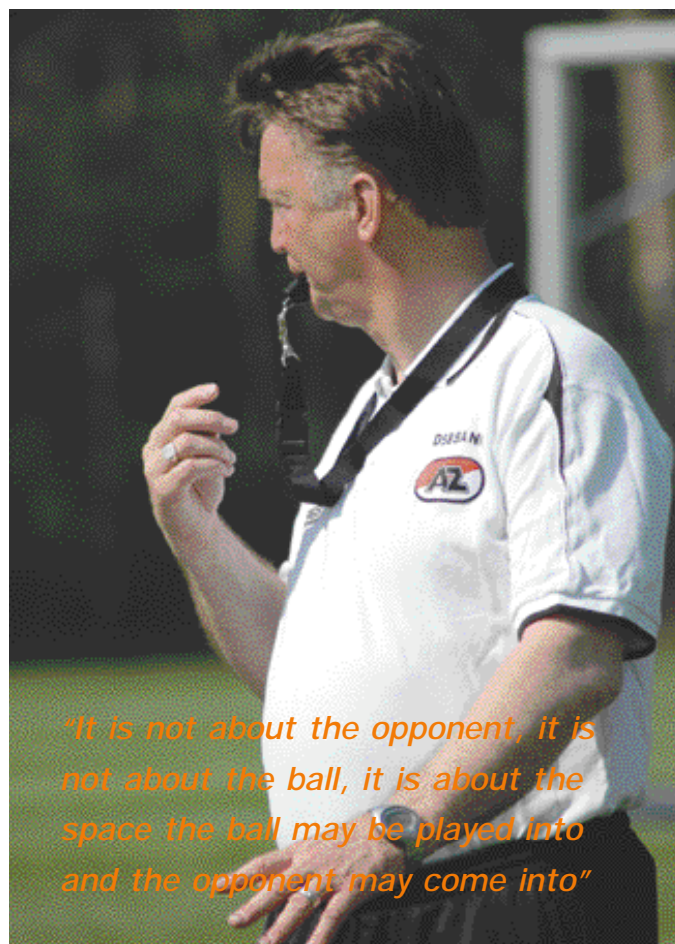
Opponent falls back

"When the opponent plays compact and falls back, you will not be able to move the ball quickly. Or the ball has to be

passed back and moved through the last line. The fans will often react negatively to this situation."

According to van Gaal there is also little understanding from the media for the fact that AZ is unable to move the play quickly in a situation like this, making it hard to play an attractive game. For example in the Champions League final, where Arsenal is faced with a 10v11 situation to their disadvantage and falls back. Even a top team like Barcelona is unable to move the play quickly

against Arsenal's 10 players and unable to create the many chances you would expect to see. "When the opponent falls back in a compact block, they will create short distances amongst themselves. I believe moving play by means of the last line is an excellent way of dealing with this. This is however not very difficult for the opponent to play against as they do not have to make a lot of meters up, because they are playing compact. This small movement of the ball does not cost the opponent a lot of energy. The key thing here is concentration. When a player steps out of the organization, even if it is just a meter, the quality of the dominant team lies within being able to play a through ball (diagram 11). This is determined by quality." Sometimes the opponent forces you to take the ball out and move it. The key thing is making sure you get your creative players in ball possession. "When you move the ball the opponent has to constantly be concentrated. And some weaker teams are unable to do this. They are mentally unable to adhere to the positional organization for 90 minutes."



"It is not about the opponent, it is not about the ball, it is about the space the ball may be played into and the opponent may come into"

Assist

"You sometimes see the midfielders, who must move the play, searching for an assist, but they are link players, who must be able to hold on to the ball. The creative midfielder must be the ones searching for the assist, because the capacity to place the ball with precision and the right ball speed amongst all those defenders is exceptionally difficult. The 6 and 8 are often positioned more outside and are therefore often free to receive a pass. The opponent will allow them more space, which frequently makes them believe that they can bring that creativity (diagram 12). However, they must ensure that 10 will become free to receive the pass, because he is much closer to the goal. A pass from a ball-holding midfielder to the strikers is much harder than a pass from that creative midfielder."

Positional changes

Positional changes are according to Van Gaal not the solution to a break a compact defense. "When they play compact and we change positions, they we just stay in position. They will pick the opponent up only at the moment the ball can be played. At least when it is a good opponent, against weaker team's positional changes may be an option to break the defense. I, however, believe that a player should be able to operate from his position. This position is, however, not bound to a line. The position is about an area in which a player should and must play. For the left winger (11) is this, for example, the space between the penalty area and the middle line on the side of the field (diagram 13). He must see this space in relation to his teammates and his opponents. From this position he must make room for his teammates, but he must also join at the right moment. He must especially learn to create space for himself by making a pre-move at the right moment, but must do this at a time when there is a chance he will get the ball. You are going to train this by putting him under pressure from an opponent, whereby you may include a third man who can play a

role in this. You can coach on this in exercises and small sided games."

Exercises

This is a tricky issue. Van Gaal is not for books with exercises. He trains from an objective and develops his exercises accordingly. "This past season I made the players at AZ play from within their position in position games.

The players and

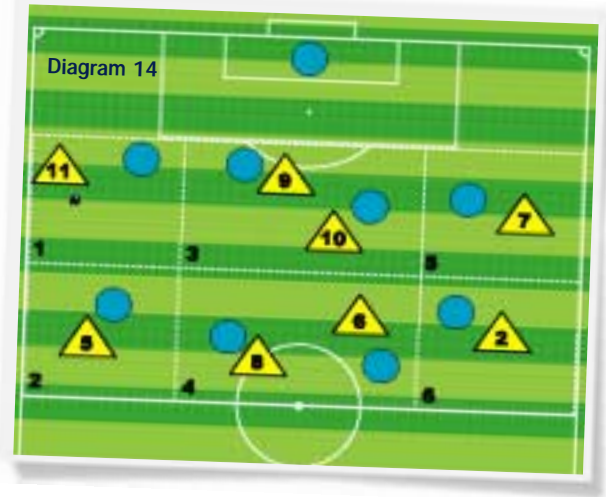


Diagram 14: OS: Everyone plays with the position game from their own position

assistants never saw this before. When you are given a space in which you must operate you will automatically learn to communicate with your teammates and opponents within this space. You will, for example, tell 11 to only play in area 1 and 2 in a positional game and this is how you have everyone play from within their own position (diagram 14). By including goalkeepers you can train to build up. A coach must be creative with things like this. You can also just play across the right side, or the left side, or via a certain line." It is not about the exercise, but about the objective. The objective must create the exercise. "You create exercises from the game situation. You look at what players do well and not so well and you emulate these situations in your practice.

Winning

After the elimination from the play-offs last year Van Gaal is already looking ahead. He came to AZ in order to win a championship or cup with the club for the first time in 25 years. They were close his first season, but you never know how many chances you will get in soccer. For the next two seasons Van Gaal wants to try to make progress every time. "When you look at how we were eliminated last year you can conclude this was more so due to ourselves than due to our opponents. This has to do with the mental aspects of the game. This team was never thought to win all the time. Two seasons ago Co Adriaanse started this process and we continued it last season. In order to create that feeling of being unbeatable in the team you need time. Say this does not work; you will then have to look at scouting new players. Barcelona also did this two years ago. The team lost too much and thereby also lost that feeling of being unbeatable." Louis van Gaal experienced a period of being unbeatable at Ajax. PSV had this the past two seasons, especially in the Dutch competition, something Guus Hiddink created. This was not done with a playing style, which Van Gaal wants to emulate, but he does have a lot of respect for it. Besides attention to detail on technical and tactical areas Van Gaal is also very interested in these aspects. He mentioned wanting to study psychology at some point, but for now he will focus on coaching and winning prizes with AZ.

Diagram 13: Player 11 has multiple options within the space which he can utilize