THE THINKERS' FACTORY

How Italian Coaching Conquered the World

Karan Tejwani

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1

Calcio's Foreign Origins

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, Italy has produced some of football's greatest coaches. The country has a different way of thinking about the game. A different ideology that challenges itself to keep getting better. For nearly a century, Italy has had a carousel of the sport's finest. Be it Vittorio Pozzo's revolution under pressure, Nereo Rocco's madman innovation, Arrigo Sacchi's flamboyant style, Marcello Lippi's sternness or Carlo Ancelotti's marriage with winning, the Italians just do *calcio* differently.

There's an innate desire to keep creating, and to create like no other. Generations of the game have gone by and, through time, Italy has often been seen as the hub for great coaching ideas. But that inspiration comes from abroad. It all started for Italy through a man from across the peninsula, established as Italy's first *mister*.

Italian football has foreign roots. The first known evidence of the sport in the country goes back to the 1880s, and links to Royal Navy sailors and English workers in Palermo, Trapani and Marsala. Edoardo Bosio, a merchant in Nottingham, England, discovered football in the city before travelling back to his native Turin with a football, with the hope of spreading the game. In 1893, British citizens living in the Riviera founded the Genoa Cricket & Football Club, with local players and workers at a steel factory joining as Englishman James Richardson Spensley led the charge.

Not long after that, in 1899, Milan Football and Cricket Club was founded by a group of English and Scottish businessmen, while Naples FC was founded by an employee of the Liverpool-based sea trade company, White Star Line. Soon after, across Italy, including major cities like Turin, Milan, Florence and the capital of Rome, the English influence gave birth to more football. Given its Anglicised history, it was only fitting that its first chief teacher was an Englishman: William Thomas Garbutt, who took Genoa to new heights.

Prior to Garbutt's arrival, coaching and training in Italy hadn't really seen a level of professionalism. Training sessions were usually conducted by the team captain or, bizarrely, the club's secretary, but that was all about to change after Garbutt's appointment at Genoa. Recommended by Thomas Coggins, the club's Irish translator, Garbutt was appointed by the club's Scottish owner Geo Davidson. At the time of his appointment, Genoa had gone nine years without a title, and Garbutt's role was to change that.

Davidson, who had lived in Italy since he was a child, wanted a winning machine. So keen was he on success that Garbutt became the club's first salaried employee, having registered him as an adviser, guaranteeing him a regular wage.

In a short time, Garbutt became the football wiseman in Italy. His small changes were designed to make football something more serious within the club. He wrote detailed articles for the club's monthly magazine, explaining the secrets behind English training methods, and his tactical nous was revolutionary. Garbutt wanted his players to be athletes; he demanded consistency and discipline. At night, he did rounds at his team hotel before away games to ensure they were asleep. To improve ball control, he created routines to make them better, namely, the *gymkhana*, where players had to speed through poles while passing the ball to each other, without letting a pole fall. He developed exercises to improve two-footedness, and enhanced goalkeeper training to improve his team's set-piece defending.

Beyond the pitch, he also wanted his players taken care of. Garbutt asked Genoa to install hot showers in dressing rooms for his players' comforts, something unheard of. Despite painting a fairly reserved and stern character with his quietness and phlegmatic voice, Garbutt made sure he used his words wisely and for the continuous improvement of his team.

Tactically, he was a game-changer. He adopted the famous W system, or a 2-3-5 formation, developed across the English channel and known as the *metodo* in Italy. It was based on two defenders, normally good on the ball, a midfield consisting of a centre-half – responsible for stopping the opposition and generating attacks – and two wingers, who also had the dual role of contributing heavily in attack and defence. Up front were five forwards, in charge of leading the attack. In goal, Garbutt embraced modernity too, asking his goalkeeper to come off his line more often, at a time when staying all the way back was the norm. Giovanni De Prà, the man between the sticks, who played for Genoa his whole career and made a mark with the Italy national team, was often praised for his bravery and took advice from Liverpool legend Elisha Scott, the Reds' longest-serving player.

Naturally, success followed. He won three league titles with Genoa in 1915, 1923 and 1924, before taking on the role as AS Roma's head coach in 1927, and then moving to Naples after two years. A short stint in Spain with Athletic Bilbao followed before a return to Italy with Milan and Genoa just prior to the breakout of the Second World War. His teams were exciting, as best evident in the 1924/25 season, where they were the defending champions and employed the *cortada* – a short-passing game that involved the formation of triangles on the pitch. He also led the Italian national team in various games in the middle of the 1910s, inspiring a generation of young coaches, and setting the blueprint for the future.

Garbutt's success and inspiration led to a wave of British and Irish coaches finding their way in Italy throughout the

1920s, enjoying varied levels of success across the nation's emerging clubs. After Garbutt's greatness, there was Larry Herbert Burgess, who came to Italy in 1922 after a stint in Hungary and made his mark with Milan and Padova. Burgess's style involved quick, short passes and a developed strategy into the opposition box. Like Garbutt, Burgess was adamant on fitness and discipline across his team. His training sessions involved gym work, playing volleyball using their heads, and routines to improve stamina.

Tactically, he was set up in a way where his wingers would switch places with his centre-halves and join the attack. This was employed best at Roma, where he was appointed in 1929, and almost won the league in 1931, falling just short to Juventus in controversial circumstances, with some suggestions they fixed matches to grab that year's *Scudetto*. Despite his style of football, Burgess was let go that year due to his actions off the pitch. His problems with alcoholism played a role, and the fact he never learned Italian fluently was also a factor. By that year, he was gone, and his career saw flailing success in other parts of Italy.

The influx of British and Irish coaches in that era was still high. Irish boss John Kirwanall made Livorno an exciting outfit in the south of Italy, while Charles Bell led Padova to new heights and James Board took Spezia to another level. Juventus, under the ownership of Edoardo Agnelli, were managed by Scottish manager George Aitken, who developed a positive relationship with Agnelli and was one of the first to implement the famed W-M system – also known as the *sistema* in Italy, which was a staple in football in the 1930s. It didn't go down well at Juventus, who weren't accustomed to the change in tactics, and Aitken was gone. At Inter, Robert Spottishwood was the manager at one time, but poor results made this an insignificant tenure.

The two football schools worked well together, as pointed out by Patrick Donnelly, the Irish coach Inter appointed as

technical advisor in 1937. He had worked across Europe in countries like Belgium, Yugoslavia, Turkey and England, and in just a short time in Italy he recognised the differences in football and mentality, 'My opinion of the major Italian squads is that they are wonderful defence machines,' Donnelly said in 1938. 'The two full-backs play in parallel, whereas the side-halves dedicate themselves completely to the control of the opposite wings, never going to attack. In the same way, the two in-halves work in collaboration with the centre-half by aiming to stop the opponents attacks, rarely trying an assaulting manoeuvre to the other side of the pitch. The three attacking players are, for the most part, well isolated, being rooted in their stationary positions. This style of play is deeply in contrast with the dynamics of English play. Training sessions here are also conducted in a very different way. Italy's most famous players don't work on improving their ball control, because they think it a boring practice. Most players in first division clubs have deep deficiencies in controlling the ball, making it the main reason Italians prefer solid defence to precarious attack.'

He continued, 'As far as refereeing is concerned, they don't tolerate any charges at the goalkeeper, whereas in England to charge with the shoulder is normal play. Finally, I must confess that I had some prejudices about the competence of Italian football audiences, primarily because of my experiences in Zagreb and Istanbul. Instead, football spectators here are very passionate and have lots of expertise, probably the best ones you can find in continental Europe.'

As Italy became a hub for football and innovation, the foreign influence on *calcio* continued to grow, and it wasn't just the British who found their way there. The Austrians, Hungarians and Czechoslovakians, generically titled as the Danubians, also started to have a growing influence in the 1920s. It's important to remember that at that time football wasn't the primary sport in Italy. That was cycling, the more sophisticated sport, which had gained the adoration of the

public two decades before football. However, as football became more popular, it was the Austrians and Hungarians who were setting the benchmark – their manuals for training, professionalism and etiquette were well-regarded across Italy, and they brought a more technical style to the country.

The Danubian game had also been inspired by the British, but in this case it wasn't the English. It was the Scottish, whose robust style that involved quick, short passes, keeping the ball on the ground and implementing more feints and flicks, that had captured the hearts of the Danubians. In time, across Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Austria, the Scottish style had taken over and that would soon find its way to Italy, where foreign footballers had been allowed to play for the very first time in 1920, with a maximum of two players in a team. Following the First World War, Italy, France, Switzerland and Spain had become the home for these Danubians, and it was no different for the coaches.

To understand the impact Danubian figures had in Italy, the Viareggio Charter, established in 1926, highlights the strength of that influence. The Viareggio Charter was the first big reform in Italian football, and it was designed by the growing fascist regime, which also wanted to control sport in the country. The charter had three main aims: first, the professionalism of football was legalised. This happened as a result of the increasing number of working-class footballers, who found it difficult to balance work and playing professionally. Second, and more significantly, there was a big rule on foreign players: they were banned entirely.

This led to a halt in players coming from abroad, which was quite a lot – over 80 in the 1925/26 season, and they were forced to find work elsewhere. Many of these Austrian and Hungarian players chose to remain in football and became managers, forming some of the most successful teams in Italy with their knowledge and tactical nous. The rule, however, didn't apply to the *oriundi* (or *rimpartriato*, as the fascist regime

labelled it) – Italians of foreign descent, especially those from South American nations like Uruguay and Argentina, and that led to Italian clubs scouting heavily for players of that origin. The results were immense: some 118 Italian descendants arrived to play in Italy between 1929 and 1943.

The final change was one in administration, leading to the creation of the Serie A and Serie B we now know. Those two divisions were born in 1929, and the offices for these leagues were based in Bologna, where fascist leader Leandro Arpinati was from, taking it away from major football hubs in the country like Milan and Turin. When Arpinati became undersecretary in the Interior Ministry, leading to his move to the capital, Rome, the offices followed. Arpinati was a major figure in Italian football at the time, and he had a huge say in the national team's World Cup successes in the 1930s. More on him is explored later.

Through the 1920s, the coaches revolutionised the game in Italy. The first was Josepf Ging, a former hero of MTK, the Budapest club that had dominated Hungarian football. The forward was noticed during a game for the Hungarian national team by Giovanni Sacchetti, who was in charge of Fortitudo, the Roman Catholic sports club (which later merged with two others in 1927 to form the AS Roma we now know). There, Sacchetti convinced him to come to Rome, all expenses paid, to teach his players his mastery. Assisted by Ulderico Bellucci, a coach himself, he put them through some intense work and taught them four different ways of kicking a football: inside of the foot, outside of the foot, the instep and using a flat foot.

Beyond that, he improved training drills and instructed them with in-game tactics, provided specific methods for forwards and goalkeepers to follow. The training camp led to a more refined Fortitudo team, who reduced errors in their play and increased efficiency. The results followed: they challenged the upper echelons of Italian football and within two years were fighting the excellent Pro Vercelli team for the title in

1922 (having won the amateur Southern League that year). Sacchetti wouldn't remain at Fortitudo for long, leaving for the riches of Sporting Pisa, where he would challenge Pro Vercelli again. Later on, he would have a return to Fortitudo, before spells at Livorno, Modena and a second at Pisa.

In 1920, another coach, Karl Stürmer, a former Austria defender, worked wonders at Reggiana and later Torino. He was responsible for the creation of Italy's finest youth coaching setup at the time. On the pitch, he set up his Torino team with five forwards, and the act of long and frequent passes to break the opposition's offside traps allowed his side's inside-forwards to get more goals than his centre-forwards. He left Torino in 1924, and his former club went on to win a *Scudetto* in 1927, which was later revoked after allegations of match-fixing in a derby against Juventus that season. His replacement was fellow countryman Anton Cargnelli, whose calm approach had made him a popular figure across Italian football too.

Stürmer would return at the helm of Torino and he would form the Balon Boys, a youth setup named after captain and star midfielder Adolfo Baloncieri. There, future Torino greats of the 1940s, such as Felice Borel and Giacinto Ellena, honed their talents. After his joyous spell at Torino, Stürmer would move to Rome to take charge of Lazio, and he would have an esteemed career in Italian football.

Another Austrian, Hermann Felsner, a lawyer, also made an impact with Bologna. He arrived in the country in 1920 and in a career spanning two decades he became one of the great innovators in Italy. He was scouted by Bologna president Cesare Medica, and even when he was in Italy he carried his part-time career as a correspondent for newspapers in the Austrian capital, Vienna. Felsner's tactical understanding was of a high order – he laid the foundations for *il metodo*, the system which inspired the Italian national team in the 1930s, and his Bologna sides won the *Scudetto* in 1925 and 1929, challenging for it throughout that time. After spells in the

1930s with Fiorentina, Sampierdarenese (now Sampdoria), Genoa and Milan, he returned to Bologna and won two more *Scudetti* in 1939 and 1941, making him one of the best coaches in the game at the time.

Like the Austrians, the Hungarians also found their way in Italy. Many of them departed their country to flee from the reign of Béla Kun, the communist revolutionary whose repressive government forced many to leave the country. Among the Hungarian coaches to star were György Kőszegy at Prato, Leo Schoffer at Brescia, and Imre Payer, who worked at Atalanta, Carrarese and other clubs. The most triumphant were, undoubtedly, Jenő Károly and Arpad Weisz, who established the great eras at two of Italy's biggest clubs: Juventus and Inter.

Károly was the first to arrive, being recruited by Agnelli, and although his time with the *Bianconeri* was tragically short, it was vital. He shared key lessons with his Juventus team: that in previous years they hadn't acted like a team, that they lacked discipline with and without the ball, that they didn't know their true role and function in the team and that they weren't proactive enough to anticipate future moves. In one of his first conversations with Edoardo Agnelli, he said, 'I've never seen a country where such a high percentage of players leave the pitch battered and bruised,' implying that players valued physicality over technical skill with the ball.

Károly was also an alumni of the excellent MTK of Budapest and took over at Juventus in 1924. He was a salaried employee, earning 2,500 lire a month, more than what many doctors and lawyers earned at the time, and his true impact was evident in the 1925/26 season. Juventus were dominant, and were on their way to the title, but just as the Lega Nord final was being played against Bologna, a heart attack killed Károly in his Turin home, denying him the chance to see his side win the *Scudetto*. Still, the title is credited to him, and is a part of his legacy in Italy.

His countryman, Weisz, a former Jewish bank clerk turned footballer who starred on the wing for the Hungarian national team in his playing days, also showed great intelligence. He arrived at Padova in 1925 but injuries halted that playing career abruptly. In his time away from the pitch, he travelled across Argentina and Uruguay, honing his skills, before returning to Inter to become their head coach in 1927. There, he would apply a version of a system that would later be known as the W-M, popularised by the great Herbert Chapman at Arsenal in England.

Beyond the tactics, Weisz revolutionised the way managers behaved. He became the first coach in Italy to personally take charge of training sessions, and he also wore tracksuits and joined his sides on occasion. Weisz also had a keen eye for talent, giving a berth to Giuseppe Meazza, who would forge an excellent career in Milan, and he would also mentor Fulvio Bernadini, whose coaching career would excel two decades later. This level of innovation led to a *Scudetto* win in 1930 with Inter, before joining the mighty Bologna in 1935, winning two more league titles in three years.

Unfortunately, Weisz and his family were victims of Benito Mussolini's cruel regime. He was forced to resign from his role at Bologna in 1938 and had to leave the country by March of the following year. Mussolini's imposed racial laws forced the Weisz family to find home in Paris, before moving to the Netherlands, where he briefly returned to coaching with Dordrecht. However, after the war broke out and the Nazis flooded the Netherlands, the Weisz family was captured and sent to Auschwitz, where his wife and kids were separated from him. In January 1944, some 18 months after his family were killed in the slaughterhouse of Birkenau, Arpad was dead.

Weisz's legacy lives long in the memory – his work and influence is tough to forget and he's remembered for the changes he made to the Italian game. He best exemplified the ethics that made the Danubians so successful. Between 1923

and 1930, they won all the *Scudetti* on offer, and taught football in ways rarely thought of before. At the start of the 1935/36 season, out of the 34 coaches in Serie A and Serie B, 21 were from the Danubian region. The players were of the highest calibre too: the likes of József Viola, Ferenc Hirzer, Anton Powolny, Ferenc Fehér and others all made waves in Italy.

And if Italy developed a knack for being a country where defensive football was mastered, it was the Danubians who set the tone. They established tighter back lines, altering the way defenders functioned and contributed to the attacking and defensive phases of the game. It was they who suggested if one member of the back was more intent on defending, the other would do the opposite. This was evident with partnerships like Umberto Caligaris and Virginio Rosetta at Juventus, as well as Alfredo Foni and Pietro Rava, who succeeded the two at the *Bianconeri*. Additionally, Ernesto Mascheroni and Luigi Allemandi did the same at Inter. This led to a decline in total goals scored, compared to the English top flight, widely considered the best in Europe.

The Danubians were the forerunners in football style and they inspired a generation of Italian coaches. While Italy would later go on to produce the sport's finest managers, it's fair to suggest the Danubians had a huge hand in that, as Vittorio Pozzo, the first great Italian coach, pointed out: 'At the time, the Danubians dictated the law. They repeatedly produced players of the highest class and had the advantage of having the entire movement concentrated in the capitals [of their respective countries]. Cohesion and agreement were simple and natural things, things that were beautiful and done every time, in their respective national teams. Vienna, Budapest, Prague were three great chairs of a historic football university.'

Like many, Pozzo was a great admirer of Weisz's, standing by him in training sessions and observing youth football frequently. Over time, he would shape a legacy of his own and set the tone for what was to come.