

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

FOOTBALL

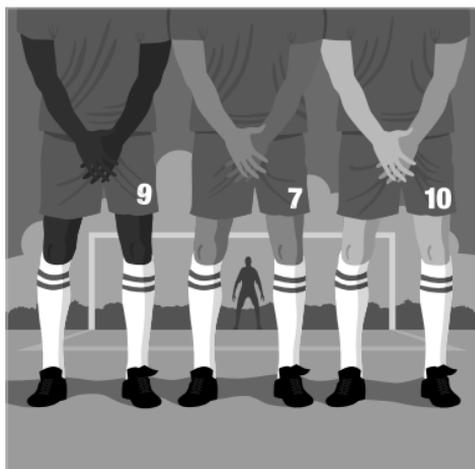
THE
5 MILLION
COPY
BESTSELLING
SERIES



NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*[®] GUIDE TO

FOOTBALL



Mark Mason



Colette House
52-55 Piccadilly
London W1J 0DX
United Kingdom

Email: info@bluffers.com
Website: bluffers.com
Twitter: @BluffersGuide

First published 2001
This edition published 2013
Copyright © Bluffer's® 2013

Publisher: Thomas Drewry
Publishing Director: Brooke McDonald

Series Editor: David Allsop
Design and Illustration: Jim Shannon

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Bluffer's®.

A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Bluffer's Guide®, Bluffer's® and Bluff Your Way® are registered trademarks.

ISBN: 978-1-909365-64-3 (print)
978-1-909365-65-0 (ePub)
978-1-909365-66-7 (Kindle)

CONTENTS

Early Doors	5
Rules of Engagement	9
Taking a Position	27
Silverware	35
Total Football	47
English Teams	59
Footballers: Then and Now	67
Great Players	71
True Colours	79
Attending a Match	87
Screen Play	101
Glossary	108



‘You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it’s important.’

US Senator Eugene McCarthy

EARLY DOORS

Never before has the ability to bluff your way in football been as vital as it is now. From boardroom to building site, from wine bar to pub, every other conversation seems to be about the game. The smartest dinner parties, which once echoed with talk of Plato and The Old Vic, now concern themselves with Messi and Old Trafford. In short, if you cannot talk about football, you cannot take part in modern life.*

If you know that the expression ‘early doors’ derives from the world of theatre (as in a matinée performance), then you know more than most footballers and football fans. But you must also know that it is much better known as a football-related term for the beginning of a game, or indeed any undertaking, as in: ‘We’ve got to make sure that we get stuck in early doors.’

So not only must you never be ‘late doors’, you must be properly prepared as you step through them. If you attempt to improvise in the jungle of trivia, invective and emotion that characterises modern football, you will soon be caught out. For proof of just how easily this can

happen, you need look no further than the political world. Former prime minister Tony Blair, for example, was asked in a BBC radio interview about his 'lifelong' support of Newcastle United. A local newspaper went on to misreport the interview, claiming that Blair said he had fond teenage memories of watching legendary player Jackie Milburn who had actually retired when Blair was four. The myth surrounding this 'claim', however, will take much longer to retire – if it ever does. Football fans can detect the whiff of phoniness from a great distance, and if there's one thing they all agree on, it's to hold in contempt anyone who claims to be a fervent supporter of a particular club when they're demonstrably not.

Another case in point is Salman Rushdie who once wrote a magazine article professing his long-held love for Tottenham Hotspur in which he praised their legendary Scottish manager Bill Nicholson. Nicholson was in fact English.

So, as a bluffer you would be advised to follow the instructions given out by thousands of football managers through the years:

- work hard in training;
- keep your eye on the ball; and
- don't do anything stupid.

In particular, you should remember the words of another politician, US Senator Eugene McCarthy, who compared his job to being involved in football (albeit the American version): 'You have to be smart enough to understand the

game, and dumb enough to think it's important.' Admitting to a lack of understanding about the world's most popular spectator sport is the cultural equivalent to having a bad case of leprosy (in its advanced, pustulent phase).

This book sets out to guide you through the main danger zones encountered in football discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will lend you a few easy-to-learn hints and methods that will allow you to be accepted as a football aficionado of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight about 'the beautiful game' – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between a 'hairdryer' and 'handbags at dawn'.

* Gender matters: It should be made clear that wherever in this book the impression is given that all football fans, players and officials are male, it is for reasons of grammatical convenience. It is not intended to suggest that men are more likely than women to have a keener grasp of the game. And if you should fall into that trap just remind yourself of the fate of 'expert' Sky football presenters Richard Keys and Andy Gray who were required to step down after a notorious sexism row when they questioned the job suitability of female Premier League assistant referee Sian Massey (who clearly knows more about the offside rule than most men).



The jewel in any bluffer's crown is
the ability to explain the offside rule.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The first recorded mention of football was over 2,000 years ago in China. The Yellow Emperor is said to have developed his soldiers' leg muscles by making them play with a stone football. References to heading the ball are notable by their absence.

It has been said that sport is a continuation of war by other means. For much of its history, football has tended to forget about the 'by other means' bit. Games in the British Isles were for centuries little more than an excuse for mass fights, with hundreds of players on each side. The residents of Chester are said to have celebrated victory over the marauding Danes by playing football with the head of a defeated opponent. This attitude to the sport continues to this day among the supporters of Millwall Football Club.

The rules of football were first formalised at Cambridge University in 1846, when Messrs H de Winton and JC Thring met to decide a unified code for the game. Their deliberations took just under eight hours, thereby establishing the tradition that football should always be talked about for far longer than it takes to actually play

the game. This tradition lives on with Sky TV's post-match analyses.

The first meeting of the Football Association (FA) was on 26 October 1863 at the Freemasons' Tavern in London's Covent Garden, near the headquarters of the Freemasons. The bluffer can effect a suitably jaundiced view of the FA by referring to the irony of their early connection to an organisation famed for its secretive practices and refusal to explain itself to the outside world.

The world game is now governed by FIFA, the International Federation of Association Football. The fact that these initials are in the wrong order tells you everything you need to know about this organisation. (Admittedly the French name is actually *Fédération Internationale de Football Association*, but why spoil a good story?) Never overburdened by headlines claiming that their procedures are completely above board and utterly legitimate, FIFA's biggest brush with scandal came during the bidding process for the 2022 World Cup. Having weighed up the respective bids of the various countries competing to host the tournament, Sepp Blatter (the body's Swiss president) announced that he and his cronies – sorry, well-respected fellow bureaucrats – had decided on Qatar. The fact that this former British protectorate sounds like a medical complaint is the least of its worries when it comes to being taken seriously as a home for football's biggest showpiece. There are issues concerning the country's policies on human rights, freedom of the press and – most crucially – the availability

of alcohol. But the main practical problem is that in June and July (when the World Cup is always held) Qatar is so hot that players and fans could suffer serious dehydration (especially if the English supporters are deprived of their prescribed ingestion of generous quantities of lager). One suggestion was that leagues around the world could take a mid-season break to allow the World Cup to run during the winter. You can imagine how well those leagues responded to that. Your line on this is that the World Cup should be awarded to countries that have a tried-and-trusted record of hosting it, and are conspicuously good at hosting big sporting events such as the Olympics; to pick one utterly at random... oh, let's take for example... England. In the months of June and July, countries like Qatar might, meanwhile, be better left to host the world 'Frying an Egg on the Bonnet of a Car' championship.

KICKING THE BLADDER

Those who wish to deride football always refer to it as 22 grown men kicking an inflated pig's bladder around a field. The bluffer, on the other hand, knows that the very essence of football is that it is 22 grown men kicking an inflated pig's bladder around a field. If they happen to be 'professional' footballers, they will probably be paid vast amounts of money for kicking a bladder around. This deeply irks most non-professional footballers and football fans. But they learn to live with it, as they also learn to live with the knowledge that the conjunction of the words 'professional' and 'footballer' is essentially an oxymoron.

Very little needs to be known about the rules. Whichever set of 11 men kicks the bladder between the posts at the other end of the field more often wins. The game really is that simple. Why else do you think Paul Gascoigne was so good at it?

The only rules of football with which it is necessary to be familiar are those that govern what happens when the pig's bladder stops being kicked around the field, and for how long the bladder should be kicked around the field.

STOPPAGES IN PLAY

The throw-in

This occurs when the ball runs over one of the long sides of the pitch (the 'touchline'). The last team to touch the ball concede to their opponents the right to throw it back on. One of the opposing players picks up the ball then surreptitiously edges further and further along the line in an attempt to gain territorial advantage until the referee loses patience and orders him to take the throw-in from where the ball actually crossed the line.

The goal kick

This occurs when the ball runs over one of the short sides of the pitch, where the goals are situated (the 'goal line'). If the last team to touch the ball was the team attacking the goal at that end, they concede to their opponents the right to kick the ball back up the other end of the pitch. This task is normally undertaken by the goalkeeper. You will know that your keeper is having a particularly bad game when he

can't even get the ball to cross the halfway line before it goes off the pitch, thereby giving your opponents a throw-in.

The corner

This occurs when the last team to touch the ball before it crossed the goal line is the team defending the goal at that end. They then concede to their opponents the right to kick the ball back on from the corner of the pitch. Two things always happen at a corner. Firstly, the player taking it kicks the ball in the general direction of the goal, so that his teammates can try to score. And, secondly, the opposition fans clustered around him make intimidating remarks about his haircut/recent drink-driving conviction/wife's sexual proclivities.

The free kick

This occurs when a player commits a 'foul' (*see below*). There are two types: the 'direct' free kick, when a goal can be scored directly from the kick, and the 'indirect' free kick when it must be touched by a second member of the same team before a goal can be scored. The type of free kick awarded depends on the gravity of offence committed, but in both cases the fouled-against team is allowed to kick the ball from the point at which the foul took place, and all members of the team whose player committed the foul must retreat at least 10 yards. That is 10 football yards, a distance roughly equivalent to eight and a half normal yards. Players, especially when the free kick is near their own goal, want to be as close to the ball as possible to prevent it going into that goal. So as soon as the referee has

awarded a free kick, he paces out 10 yards in the direction of the goal, and waits for the wall of opposing players to edge back towards him. This process occurs at the rate of one inch per 15 seconds until the nearest player is in touching distance of him, at which point he can let the free kick be taken without losing too much face.

A player may voluntarily waive the 10-yard rule himself if he thinks that by taking the free kick quickly he can catch the opposition unawares. More often than not, though, such attempts are likely to catch his own side unawares as well, resulting in an argument as to whose fault it was that the free kick was wasted, during which the opposition go up the other end and score.

If a foul has been committed, the referee might sometimes 'play the advantage'. This happens when he decides that the team whose player was fouled has more to gain by carrying on with the game than by stopping to take a free kick. In such circumstances, the team sometimes go on to score a goal, in which case the referee is praised for his common sense and foresight. But usually they don't, and the referee is berated for not giving them the free kick in the first place.

THE SET PIECE

Set pieces are pre-prepared routines that sides employ when awarded a free kick. They will have been practised on the training ground to the point where every single player knows his role by heart. They will then be re-enacted in the match and, inevitably, will bear absolutely no relation to the carefully rehearsed routine in training. Players and

fans alike will watch in open-mouthed amazement as the ball passes harmlessly over everyone's head and bounces off the electronic scoreboard.

Similar advance planning goes into corners. Teams will rehearse a number of options, for which coded signals can then be given to his teammates by the player taking the corner. For instance:

- Raising his right hand before he takes it might mean: 'I'm going to kick this straight out of play before it even reaches the near goalpost, thereby wasting the corner and making you deeply disappointed.'
- Raising his left hand might mean: 'I'm going to kick this straight to their goalkeeper, who'll then be able to boot it right up the field for a goal while you lot are still shouting at me for squandering our chance.'

Solo set pieces are also used. These usually involve 'curl' (or what used to be known as a 'banana' or 'screw shot') and involve bending or swerving the ball around the opposition players giving the goalkeeper little chance of saving it. Well, that's the idea anyway. The effect is achieved by imparting spin on the ball as you kick it. Ex-Arsenal player Thierry Henry was an acknowledged master of this extremely difficult skill, as was the Brazilian Roberto Carlos, whose curled free kick against France in 1997 amazed everyone watching the match. It also led to a surge in business for glaziers, as schoolboys all over the world attempted to recreate the free kick in their back gardens.

THE PENALTY

Around each goal is marked a 'penalty area' (also known as 'the box'). If a player commits a foul inside his own area, he concedes a penalty kick to the opposition.

After the referee has rid himself of the fouling player (and all his teammates protesting about the decision – which normally takes about 20 minutes), he places the ball on the penalty spot, which is directly in front of the goal, 12 yards out. Any member of the team awarded the penalty may then step forward to take it. He and the goalkeeper attempting to



What commentators seldom refer to is the penalty-taker's marathon *Call of Duty* video game session which only ended at six o'clock that morning.

save the penalty are the only two players allowed inside the box until the ball has been struck.

The goal is 24 feet across and eight feet high. Until the penalty-taker has kicked the ball, the goalkeeper is not allowed to advance off his line. In such circumstances, you would think it impossible to miss a penalty. But somehow professional footballers, whose very existence depends on their supposed ability to kick a ball, when faced with the task of aiming a ball at 192 square feet of space protected

by only one man blocking approximately 12 square feet of space, manage week in week out either to have the kick saved or to miss the target completely.

Commentators normally excuse players missing penalties with reference to the pressure, the sheer weight of expectation placed on them by their teammates and supporters, the exposure of human frailty inevitable when two combatants glow incandescent in the crucible of sporting drama. What commentators seldom refer to is the penalty-taker's marathon *Call of Duty* video game session which only ended at six o'clock that morning.

FOULS

Fouls fall into two main categories:

- 1. Fouls against a member of the opposition** This normally boils down to playing your opponent instead of the ball. You might think this equates to tripping him up. But you'd be wrong. Footballers, despite their intellectual inadequacies in other areas of life, are surprisingly cunning when it comes to fouling an opponent. They can disguise their foul as:
 - **a mistimed tackle** ('I'm terribly sorry, was my foot a fraction of a second late there, causing it to connect not with the ball but with your shinbone?');
 - **an attempt to stay on their feet** ('Oh I say, what a shame that in stretching out my arm to maintain my balance I inadvertently placed my elbow at high speed into your eye socket.');

- **a keen interest in fashion** ('On the contrary, the reason I was holding on to the back of your shirt was not to prevent you reaching the ball and scoring a goal, but to see if the shirt really is as silky-smooth as it looks.')
2. **Fouls against a specific law of the game** The most common such foul is 'offside'. This is the cause of so much confusion that it merits its own section (*see* page 20). Other fouls of this type include:
- **Handball** The key here is intent. If a player (other than a goalkeeper inside his own penalty area) deliberately controls the ball with his hand, it is deemed a foul. If the referee judges the contact accidental, no foul is awarded. But you need not concern yourself with such distinctions. If the player involved is on your team, it is not a foul. If he is on the opposition team, it is, and you should join in with your fellow supporters' ritualistic cry of '-andball!', followed by a stream of profanities directed at the referee if he declines to award a free kick (*see* 'Diego Maradona', page 72).
 - **The back pass** This was a law introduced in 1992 to counter the problem of teams protecting their lead at the end of a game by continually passing the ball back to their goalkeeper. It is now illegal for a goalkeeper to pick up the ball if it has been kicked (as opposed to headed or chested) to him by one of his teammates. As well as making

for more exciting, attacking football, this rule change has given goalkeepers – paranoid souls at the best of times – yet another reason for moaning that no one likes them and that the whole game is stacked against them.

- **The six-second rule** Another rule change from the 1990s, to ‘speed up the game’, states that the goalkeeper must not hold on to the ball for longer than six seconds after receiving it. (Previously he could hold on to it for longer, but was not allowed to take more than four steps while doing so.)

As a result, goalkeepers had to develop the ability to drop the ball and control it with their feet. This necessitated a level of footballing skill and fitness that many of them did not previously possess.

BOOKINGS

The referee and/or his two linesmen (*see* page 93) occasionally manage to spot fouls when they occur. If the offence is a particularly bad one, in addition to awarding a free kick, the referee may caution the offending player by showing him a yellow card. (This is also known as ‘booking’ him, because the referee notes the caution in his book.) A second yellow card in one match results in a red card, and the player involved is sent off. He must then leave the field of play, angrily kicking several water bottles along the touchline as he does so. This is a sign to his team’s supporters that he disagrees emphatically with the referee’s decision.

For particularly violent tackles, or if a player raises his arm to hit an opponent, the referee may send a player off without showing him the first yellow card. A notoriously unforgiving midfielder called Vinnie Jones received this sanction so often that towards the end of his career they usually started running his bath just after the match started. (See 'early bath' in 'Glossary'). Another 'competitive' player of this type was the absurdly coiffured Leicester City, Derby County, Birmingham City and Blackburn Rovers midfielder Robbie Savage. As if his surname wasn't clue enough, he also took part in the TV show *Strictly Come Dancing*, providing yet another opportunity to call him a talentless 'hooper'.

However, if you want factual back-up for your nomination of the most violent player in Premier League history, choose Lee Bowyer (pronounced 'bo-ya', though it should perhaps have been 'chop-ya-in-half'), whose clubs included Leeds United, Newcastle United and West Ham United. (United is what most fans were in seeing him as a somewhat over-competitive, unguided missile.) He holds the all-time Premier League record for the most yellow cards received (in the fewest number of games). The figure is either 99 or 100, depending on whether you count the two yellows that lead to a red as separate cards. Some statisticians don't, you see. Throw that into the conversation: it's precisely the sort of arcane statistical debate that has most football fans wetting themselves in excitement.

THE OFFSIDE RULE

The jewel in any bluffer's crown is the ability to explain

the offside rule. It is famous for being very simple to understand (unless you are a Premier League linesman) but very hard to describe.

Never ever attempt to explain the offside rule at a dinner party using wine glasses and salt cellars to represent players. Others before you have tried and ruined not just their evenings but their marriages in the process. These attempts normally start with someone setting up one side of a place mat to symbolise the goal line. They end, several hours later, with at least one member of the party in the bathroom crying and everyone else standing around the table screaming things like, 'No, the pepper pot is the defender, you moron!'

The real trick to explaining the offside rule is to first explain why it was introduced (nobody is quite sure when). It was to counter the problem of 'goalhanging', where one attacker simply stands on the opposition's goal line, waiting for the ball to be knocked forward to him, which allows him to score the simplest and least challenging of goals. (At this point you can, with a knowing smile, add the phrase 'no names, Gary Lineker'.)

Once this fact has been grasped, everything else falls into place. At the moment the ball is played forward to an attacker, he must have at least two opposition players (normally the goalkeeper and a defender) between himself and the goal line. Otherwise he is deemed to be offside, and a free kick is granted to the opposition.

Teams playing a defensive style of football can take advantage of this rule to 'spring the offside trap'. This is

when the entire defence moves forward at the very last moment, thereby stranding the attacker with only the goalkeeper ahead of him. All the defenders then raise their arms to appeal to the linesman. The Arsenal team of the 1980s became so adept at this tactic that their back four usually looked like the front row of a Nuremberg rally.

In recent years the rule has been altered subtly to allow someone to be in an offside position as long as he isn't 'actively involved in play'. This broadly means either that he's not trying to score, or is not distracting the attention of a defender who would otherwise be dealing with the attacker who really is trying to score. In practice, the whole question is clouded in uncertainty and obfuscation (a word little used by professional footballers). If required to deliver a verdict on whether a player was 'actively involved in play', raise a cynical eyebrow and venture: 'As much as he ever is.'

LENGTH OF A MATCH

A football match consists of two 45-minute halves. In addition, 'stoppage time' (aka 'added' time, usually measured quite unscientifically between one and four minutes) is added on at the end of each half in a vague attempt to make up for the time that has been wasted during play. The long-serving Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson became famous for checking officials' assessment of this time, to the point where he was rumoured to be sponsored by Accurist. Intriguingly, keen observers noticed a pattern in his insistence that

there was always too much time added when his team was winning, and too little when it was losing. This curious phenomenon became known as ‘Fergie Time’.

An experiment was once undertaken at a football match to discover just how much time had been frittered away. It was found that the ball had been in play for 43 of the 90 minutes. How those conducting the experiment had managed to pick a match with quite so much genuine action in it remains a mystery, but the discrepancy is easy to explain. Whichever side was in the lead at any given point would have minimised the time remaining for their opponents to equalise by:

- rolling around on the grass pretending to be injured, (a tactic perfected by Luis Suarez of Liverpool at the time of writing, Didier Drogba, formerly of Chelsea, Cristiano Ronaldo currently of Real Madrid, and just about any other striker you can think of);
- letting the ball lie on the ground after it has gone out of play before finally taking the goalkick, throw-in, etc.; and
- substituting players, who saunter slowly off the pitch so their replacements have to wait to come on.

Their opponents would have complained vigorously to the referee about time-wasting until they themselves took the lead, after which they would have indulged in exactly the same practices.

If, in a knock-out cup competition, the scores are level

at the end of 90 minutes and the match has to be decided there and then (in other words, if a replay is not an option), there are two possibilities available:

- 1. Extra time** This is a further period of play, comprising two halves of 15 minutes each. Towards the end of the second half of extra time, the players will have been running around for nearly two hours. As a result their legs will be like jelly, and their brains like blancmange (no change there, then). This is when you will witness some of the most entertainingly incompetent football imaginable.
- 2. Penalty shoot-out** This will take place if neither team has won at the end of extra time. Each side takes five penalty kicks, after which, if no kicks have been missed and the match has still not been decided, the penalties continue until one side scores and the other misses. You will easily recognise a fan who has recently attended a match decided by a penalty shoot-out: he will have no fingernails. Unless he's English, that is. They don't bother with the nail-biting because they know their team is going to lose. This isn't just the innate pessimism associated with the country's national character. It's based on hard evidence: England have lost all but one of the international penalty shoot-outs in which they've been involved. The sole exception was at the 1996 European Championship, when they managed to scrape past Spain. Apart from that they have lost in

World Cups to Germany (1990), Argentina (1998) and Portugal (2006), and in European Championships to Germany (1996), Portugal (2004) and Italy (2012). (For more details on some of these shoot-outs see ‘Total Football’, though if you’re English we wouldn’t advise it.) Such is the pattern that whenever fans mention the famous football game that took place between English and German soldiers in ‘No Man’s Land’ during the 1914 Christmas Day truce in the First World War, someone inevitably suggests that the Germans must have won on penalties. In fact, the game was just an informal kickabout, with no result as such. As ever, though, we recommend not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.