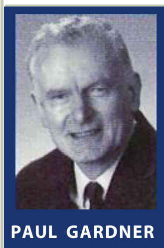
SOCCERTALK

The fateful meeting of Walter and Nandor


PAUL GARDNER

NEW YORK — Two names from the soccer of 50 years ago were in the news recently. Sad news, of course. Both Nandor Hidegkuti, a star with the great Hungarian team of the early 1950s, and Walter Winterbottom, England's first national team coach, are dead.

Both had long lives — Winterbottom was 89, Hidegkuti 10 years younger — and both played key roles in the development of the modern game.

Winterbottom became England's first coach (they call it a manager in England) in 1946. His appointment was the idea of the English FA's secretary, Stanley Rous, later to be president of FIFA.

Getting the appointment made was not easy for Rous. In those days, the selection of the England team was made by a committee of club chairmen who were decidedly reluctant to allow any erosion of their powers.

POPPERFOTO

Walter Winterbottom, who won 78 of 139 games while serving, from 1946 to 1962, as England's first national team coach, addresses his squad during the last year of his tenure.

At least the continual succession of different coaches for each game disappeared, but the committee, incredibly, remained as the team-selectors. Winterbottom had to coach whichever players those club chairmen — always seeking to promote their own players — gave him.

If the soccer-ignorant chairmen did not like the appointment of a coach, the attitude of the players was no better. Winterbottom was regarded with much suspicion by England's top players, who felt they didn't need anyone to tell them how to play the game — especially someone who had played only 27 first-team games for Manchester United (his career was ended by injury).

Four years into his reign, Winterbottom took his team to Brazil for the 1950 World Cup. Rous was there, had taken a look at the USA — England's next opponent — and felt that their determined defense would be difficult to break down. Individual skill, he thought, would be needed.

For that, England had the perfect man: the magnificent winger, Stanley Matthews. Matthews had not played in England's first game, a comfortable 2-0 win over Chile, but Rous suggested to Winterbottom that he should play against the USA. Winterbottom agreed. But the FA biggies were still in charge of selection, and Arthur Drewry — then the FA president — said absolutely not, you don't change winning team.

Winterbottom was put in his place, Matthews did not play — and the USA recorded one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history.

Three years later, England again played the USA, this time in New York. Same problem — the English could not prize open the determined U.S. defense. At halftime, the frustrated Winterbottom uttered words that today would be considered a dreadful betrayal of everything that coaching stands for.

He told his forwards, Tom Finney and Nat Lofthouse (Matthews, yet again, had been ignored by the selection committee): "Forget the team play and the passing. Run at them yourselves and go through on your own." The final score was 6-3 to England, with Finney and Lofthouse getting two goals each.

That score proved an extraordinary omen. A mere five months later, England played in another 6-3 game. But this time, it ended up on the wrong end of the score. The occasion was the visit to Wembley — where England had never lost to a non-British team — of the Hungarians, who were unbeaten in 32 games.

A crowd of more than 100,000 filled the stadium, ready to cheer as the upstart Hungarians were put in their place. In-

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stead, they watched in awe as the Hungarians toyed with England's best, and the realization began to dawn — oh so slowly! — that English soccer was not the world's best, that it now had an old-fashioned look to it.

Chief among England's tormentors that chilly November afternoon was ... Nandor Hidegkuti. Within 60 seconds of the start, he had lashed home Hungary's first goal. When it was over, he had a hat trick to his name.

He also had a new soccer term to his name. He was considered a totally new species: the withdrawn, or deep-lying, center forward.

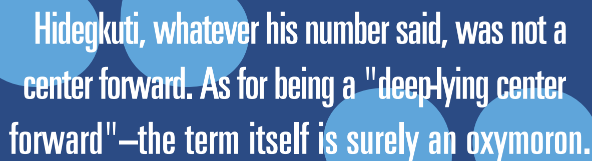
This because he wore the No. 9 shirt — traditionally the center-forward's number — but played more as an inside forward. It is a measure of the naivete that surrounded soccer tactics in those years that the number, rather than the positional play, dominated the thinking.

Hidegkuti, whatever his number said, was not a center forward. As for being a "deep-lying center forward" — the term itself is surely an oxymoron.

talk about the center half when they mean center back), but the process of rethinking began at Wembley in 1953. English stalwarts who might have dismissed the result as a fluke were silenced the following year when Winterbottom's team traveled to Hungry in search of revenge and were crushed, 7-1.

With a 78-33-28 (win-tie-loss) record, Winterbottom's long 17-year spell in charge of England came to an end in 1962. Four years later, England, under Alf Ramsey, won the World Cup — and there were many who felt that Winterbottom, the English pioneer of organization off the field and tactics on it, had contributed greatly to the victory.

That same year, 1966, Hidegkuti — who had grown up in the non-tactical world of Budapest street soccer — commented on the way that his supposed "withdrawn" role had baffled the game's theorists: "I feel that very soon we will see an end of strict positions, and then the numbers of the play-



What Hidegkuti and his fellow "Magic Magyars" had shown to Winterbottom's England was a fluidity to their play that was absent from the stereotyped English game, where No. 9 was *always* the center forward who *always* played in an advanced position the center of the attack, and who was *always* marked by the opposing center half, who *always* wore No. 5.

It took many years for that rigid arrangement to wither away (indeed, the English still

ers will serve only to identify them for spectators."

It is an odd thought that when these two giants — Winterbottom and Hidegkuti — clashed at Wembley nearly 50 years back, at issue was a theme that still bedevils the sport. Winterbottom was trying to make the English realize the importance of coaching and tactics, while Hidegkuti was striking a blow for the freedom of the individual player, for the "end of strict positions." ■