If Holland were the team that gave the world Total Football, then Johan Cruyff was THE Total Footballer.

Cruyff was one of a number of youngsters who emerged with Ajax of Amsterdam in the late Sixties and came to dominate European and world football in the early Seventies.

Cruyff was the most outstanding of them all and was seen by many as the natural successor to Pele as the world's greatest player.

He won a hat-trick of European Cups with Ajax, the World Clubs' Cup and was three times European Footballer of the Year. At their peak, the Dutch side he captained were the most exciting and talented team in international football, yet, strangely, they never won a major trophy during his reign.

Total Football was not a new idea when the Dutch picked it up. It had been around since the Fifties when it was known as The Whirl. But it was first Ajax then Holland that brought it to prominence.

The idea was to build a team in which all of the players had equal levels of technical ability and physical strength. In its execution it meant that all the players were capable, at any point in a game, of switching into each
other's roles as circumstances demanded.

Anyone could do anything. Defenders became forwards, forwards became defenders.

Strictly speaking, Cruyff played centre forward in this system. But he would drop deep to confuse his markers or suddenly move to the wing with devastating effect. Once there, according to the reference book Soccer: The World Game, "a favourite trick out on the left-wing was to drag the ball behind him with his right foot, turn through 180 degrees and accelerate away outside a bemused defender."

No one had seen a centre forward like that before.

Cruyff was born in Amsterdam in 1947 close to the Ajax ground. His mother worked as a cleaner at the club and it was she who persuaded the coaches to admit her son to their youth development system at the age of 12.

It was the English coach Vic Buckingham who recommended that the club sign him on a contract and Cruyff made his senior debut when he was 17. Naturally, he scored. Two years later he was playing for Holland, grabbing the last-minute equaliser in his first match - a 2-2 draw against Hungary.

Dutch football, traditionally, had been largely amateur. But by the mid-1960s it was beginning to make the change to a professional game. The most influential man in the development of the country's football was Rinus Michels who became manager of Ajax in 1964. Within seven years his team was the best in Europe.

Bill Shankly's Liverpool suffered an early taste of what was to come, losing 5-1 to Ajax in Amsterdam in a European tie. By 1968 Ajax had won a hat-trick of Dutch Championships and the following season reached the final of the European Cup. They lost 4-1 to AC Milan, but were on the brink of achieving greatness.

Cruyff had grown into a powerful, long-striding athlete. He had wonderful balance, deadly speed and breathtaking ball control. But his greatest quality was vision, based on an acute sense of his team-mates' positions as an attack unfolded.

The sports writer David Miller believed Cruyff superior to any previous player in his ability to extract the most from others. He dubbed him "Pythagorus in boots" for the complexity and precision of his angled passes and wrote: "Few have been able to exact, both physically and mentally, such mesmeric control on a match from one penalty area to another."

His one fault was a questionable temperament which, at times, threatened to undermine his ability. His outspoken nature often led him into trouble, such as when he was sent off against Czechoslovakia in only his second international match and suspended from the Dutch team for a year.

Cruyff's team-mates at Ajax included Piet Keizer, Wim Suurbier and Barry Hulshoff - all of whom were to play in four European Cup Finals. But there was no doubting who was the star among stars.

They reached their second European Cup Final in 1971. This time their opponents were the Greek Champions Panathinaikos. Ajax, inspired by
Cruyff, won 2-0 and the Flying Dutchman became the first player from his country to be voted European Footballer of the Year.

It was the first of three successive triumphs in the European Cup for Cruyff and Ajax. Next Internazionale and later Juventus were to feel the awesome blast of their power in the final of Europe's premier club competition.

Soccer: The Ultimate Encyclopaedia says: "Single-handed, Cruyff not only pulled Internazionale of Italy apart in the 1972 European Cup Final, but scored both goals in Ajax's 2-0 win.

"The next year in Belgrade, he inspired one of the greatest 20-minute spells of football ever seen as Ajax overcame Juventus 1-0." In that 1971-72 season, Cruyff had been the top scorer in the European Cup competition with five goals and he was also the leading marksman in Holland with 25 League goals.

Ajax had now added Johan Neeskens and Rudi Krol to their galaxy of talent and had won the World Clubs' Cup, beating the South American Champions Independiente 4-1 on aggregate, and the first European Super Cup with a 6-3 aggregate victory over Glasgow Rangers.

Cruyff was voted European Footballer of the Year for the second time in 1973, but at the end of the season he left Ajax to join his former manager Rinus Michels who was now in charge at Barcelona. Cruyff cost a world record £922,300 and would be followed by his Ajax team-mate Neeskens.

The Spanish season had already started by the time Cruyff arrived in Barcelona and the Catalans were struggling down the table. The effect of Cruyff's influence was extraordinary. They finished as Champions and their victories included a 5-0 humiliation of arch-rivals Real away in Madrid.

The World Cup of 1974 in West Germany saw a Dutch team, led by Cruyff, at the height of their majestic powers. Nonetheless they had faced difficulties in qualifying. Belgium had held them to goalless draws at home and away, there were rivalries in the camp - Ajax players did not get on with those from bitter enemies Feyenoord - and they were mercenary in their demands for huge payments for appearing in the competition.

Still, they had made it to their first world finals since 1938 and a warm-up 4-1 win over Argentina convinced many that it was to be Holland's year. Holland's first opponents were the ruthless Uruguayans who attempted to kick Cruyff all over the park. They failed. The young master was too elusive and orchestrated a comfortable 2-0 win.

Surprisingly, in their next group match, Holland were held to a 0-0 draw by Sweden, but then Bulgaria were dispatched 4-0.

If anything the Dutch were even more sensational in the second round, again played in groups. They overran Argentina 4-0 in a game in which Cruyff was electric, scoring two of the goals. East Germany were next, easy 2-0 victims.

So far Holland had played five games, scored 12 goals and concede just
one. They seemed light years ahead of any of the opposition. Could anyone stop them?

Next to try were Brazil, the reigning World Champions and three-times winners of the Jules Rimet trophy. It was an unusual Brazilian performance. The swashbuckling image of adventurous, attacking football had undergone a character change.

Brian Glanville writes in his book, The Story of the World Cup: "The Brazilian defence kicked, chopped and hacked from the first; and it must be said that the Dutch, thus provoked, returned the treatment with interest . . . In the first half, Neeskens was knocked cold by Mario Marinho. In the second, he was scythed down by Luis Pereira."

Cruyff then, as so often, took control of the game. A swift passing movement between the captain and Neeskens saw the latter gain revenge for his brutal treatment. And Cruyff settled it by thundering home a volley to put Holland in the final 2-0.

Their opponents were West Germany, playing in front of their own supporters in Munich's Olympic Stadium. The game was billed as the showdown between the Germans' calculating, clinical efficiency and the imaginative flair of the Dutch. Personified, it was Franz Beckenbauer v Johan Cruyff.

Bertie Vogts, the present-day German manager, was chosen to mark Cruyff on the basis that he had once played the Dutchman out of the game in a long ago youth tournament.

Be that as it may, in the opening minute Holland broke away. There were 15 consecutive passes before Cruyff went round Vogts as if he were invisible. He raced into the box where Hoeness lunged and brought him down. Penalty. 1-0. The Germans hadn't even touched the ball. It was the most amazing start ever to a World Cup Final.

For half an hour, the Dutch did much as they pleased. But then Vogts began to shackle Cruyff and the Germans scored two goals, the first a penalty and the winner from the boot of Gerd Muller.

It was a bitter disappointment for the Dutch who undoubtedly were the most gifted team in the competition. It was only the second time they had been beaten in a run of 24 matches stretching back three years.

It was also the first and only time that Cruyff was to appear in a World Cup final tournament. He had been named European Footballer of the Year for the third time, but he would prematurely retire before the 1978 World Cup in Argentina where Holland were, for a second time, beaten finalists - once again losing to the host nation.

Cruyff had played 48 games for Holland and had scored a record 33 goals.

Having quit to concentrate on business, Cruyff changed his mind in 1979 and joined Los Angeles Aztecs in the North American Soccer League. Unsurprisingly, he was named that season's most valuable player in the league.

Next stop was Washington Diplomats before returning to Europe in 1981
to play for Levante, a minor Spanish club, and then rejoining Ajax for a spell which included two more Dutch Championships.

Then Cruyff did the unthinkable. He left Ajax and joined Feyenoord. It was as if the Pope had become a Jehovah's Witness.

Feyenoord had been Holland's top team. They had become the first Dutch club to win the European Cup and the World Clubs' Cup. But they hadn't won a Championship for 10 years and lived in Ajax's shadow. In 1984, led by Cruyff, they achieved the League and Cup double.

The next year he was off again, back to Ajax for the third time and this time as coach. It was a unique situation, because Cruyff did not have the necessary examination qualifications required for the job in Europe. He had scored 215 League goals in Holland, but drew a blank on coaching certificates. No matter, under his direction Ajax won the 1987 European Cup Winners' Cup, beating Lokomotiv Leipzig 1-0. Shortly afterwards, however, that volatile temperament got the better of him and he walked out in a huff.

Back at Barcelona, England's future manager Terry Venables was having a disastrous season. He was fired and Cruyff was appointed to replace him. By the summer of 1989 they had beaten Sampdoria 2-0 to win the European Cup Winners' Cup.

For Barcelona, however, only one thing mattered. The stigma of being Spain's second most famous club after Real Madrid would only be lifted by winning the European Cup. It was Cruyff who would deliver the prize. Again the opponents in the 1992 final were Sampdoria, this time the winning margin only 1-0 and it took extra time to see them off. But Barcelona had achieved their dream. Cruyff was King of Catalonia.

The strain, however, was telling. He had undergone surgery after suffering a heart attack and the impatience of Barcelona's bosses meant they were not content with their European victory. They demanded continuous success.

Cruyff added the European Super Cup to the trophy cabinet with a 3-2 aggregate win over Werder Bremen in 1992 and by 1994 Barcelona had won four successive Spanish Championships.

Then it all went sour. Cruyff was in secret negotiations with the Dutch to manage their 1994 World Cup team in the finals in America but he could not agree terms. Then in the 1994-95 season, with an ageing team, his Barcelona were knocked out of the Spanish Cup at the Nou Camp by Second Division Betis. This was followed by a 3-2 home defeat in the League by Atletico Madrid. In six seasons in charge, Cruyff's team - which included stars such as Stoichkov, Romario and Koeman - had never lost successive games at the Nou Camp.

The knives were being sharpened. He survived for two more years, but in 1996 with Barcelona out of the running in the Championship for the second consecutive season the Barca bosses felt they had had enough of Cruyff's autocratic ways. He was sacked in favour of former England manager Bobby Robson.

Cruyff, whose son Jordi played for him at Barcelona and was later to join Manchester United, collected a £1,25 million pay-off.
His combined record, as player and manager, is probably second to none. To add to his glories with Ajax and Feyenoord, he had won 11 trophies in eight years in charge of Barcelona.

Few great players have become outstanding managers. Cruyff, however, was an innovator. At Barcelona, most of his training sessions consisted of playing two-touch football, six against four, in an area half the size of the penalty area.

Cruyff explained: "In a small area, the movement is necessarily fast and the passes must be pinpoint. Two of the six play wide and change team whenever the other four gain possession. It is always six with the ball against four trying to retrieve it.

"This possession principle should operate in any area of the normal field of play, so our training is intense and is the basis of our game. You can close down space more effectively by accurate passing when you have the ball, forcing opponents into certain positions, than you can by man-marking without the ball."

As a passer of genius, Cruyff also believes it vital that the player receiving the pass should be able to turn away from or past his marker.

"This ability," he says, "is controlled not by the receiver but by the passer. The passer can see the field in a way the receiver cannot. If the receiver has his back to goal, the passer should send the ball to the foot on the side where the receiver should turn, reducing the arc through which he must control the ball to move." These were the techniques used by Barcelona when they stunned Manchester United 4-0 in a European Champions League match in 1994.

"The great strength of the English game, which worries all foreigners, is its pace, the quick movement of the ball forward," says Cruyff. "But midfield carries the balance of every match. Control the midfield and you control the game. So long as English teams allow themselves to be outnumbered in midfield they will not exploit their advantages.

"But the main problem in Britain is that there are too many competitions and too many games. There is no time to prepare properly for Europe or to introduce new ideas because there is far too much emphasis on domestic football."

Another part of the Cruyff creed is to make players work on their weaknesses. For example, right-footed players have more difficulty heading left-to-right than they have with the more instinctive right-to left. That kind of co-ordination could be crucial if the match-winning chance comes on the "wrong" side for a player.

And so, Cruyff would spend long hours with individual players striving to help them overcome their inabilities, in this case endless practicing of standing near the far post meeting crosses coming in from the left. Such individual skill classes are still rare in British football. He goes further. He is adamant that the key stage of a footballer's career comes at 12. "At that age, you know whether or not a boy is going to be a player," says Cruyff. "There are fundamental skills, which you have or don't have, which cannot be taught after that age."
As a lad about whom such a decision was made at that age, he should know.