



## COLOMBIA

The World Cup of 2014 was to be the year of Jogo Bonito; the year we would be enthralled watching the famous yellow shirts gleaming in the sunshine as the ball moved effortlessly from player to player. Players would dribble past opponents with skill and speed and we would all marvel at the skill of the South Americans. Goals would be celebrated joyously with players dancing at the corner flag.

We can't deny that we saw all of these things, although [it wasn't the Brazil team](#) capturing the hearts of the watching public, rather the yellow shirts of Colombia.

Throughout the tournament Colombia played some of the most intelligent, attacking football that we have seen at international level for some time. They scored 12 goals over the course of their five matches and in James Rodríguez they had arguably the player of the tournament. Colombia approached every match in the same way and looked to attack using a quick, short passing game, looking to switch the angle and depth of their attack. They also played with a sense of freedom that saw players commit their opponents and try to beat them in one-on-one situations.

This style of play, however, has not come from out of the blue. Instead it comes as part of a long process that has seen Colombia develop a footballing identity that closely ties in with the historic

development of the game in the South American nation. To fully understand the way that Colombia played in the World Cup we need to look more closely at the development of their national game.

The early stages the development followed the same pathway to much of South America with a group of British Railway Engineers bringing the game to the country and forming the first formal clubs. It is after this initial period that Argentine influence really began to grow. During the 1940s a national league was created outwith the remit of FIFA and Colombian clubs began to court well-known foreign imports in the knowledge that given their lack of affiliation to any governing body they would not have to pay transfer fees and could afford higher wages. It was this process that led to the great Alfredo Di Stéfano and many of his Argentine contemporaries moving north.

This influx of talent brought with it the short passing style associated with the game in Argentina. Colombia adapted the short, intricate passing and combined it with the capacity and willingness to dribble the ball in tight situations to create their own identity and style. It was this style that we saw in abundance during the World Cup, but it was perhaps further enhanced by the coach that led them during the finals – José Pékerman, an Argentine.

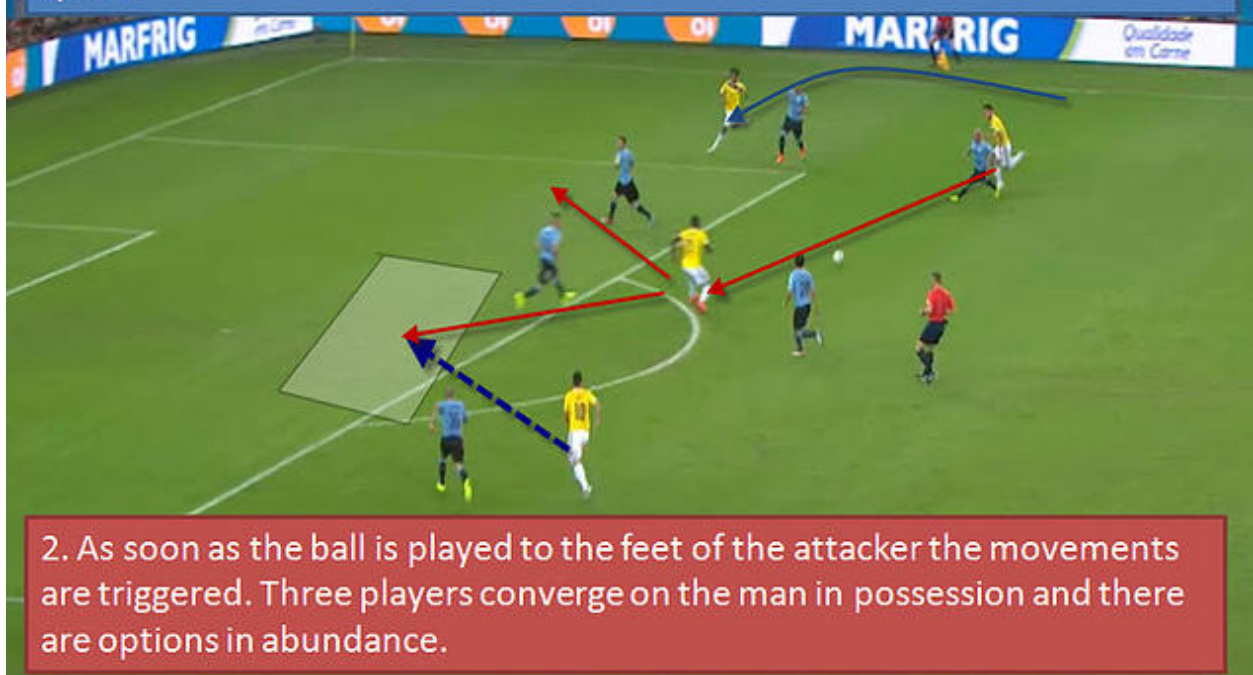
Prior to taking charge of Colombia, Pékerman was best known for his time in charge of the Argentine national team having lead them at the World Cup in 2006 - a tournament that was ultimately unsuccessful but that saw Argentina play an expansive brand of passing football - and for his successful period coaching the national U17 and U20 squads. In taking charge of Colombia in 2012, Pékerman found a system that was perfectly in tune with his own footballing philosophy. During the World Cup there were two tactical trends within the greater Colombian style that show their identity perfectly.

## **SHORT PASSING AND CLOSE CONNECTIONS**

What is the **secret of possession**? It is not, as some people believe, a willingness to sit deep in your own half and only play safe passes amongst your defence and the base of your midfield. The secret of possession is to ensure that the player in ownership of the ball has a variety of options in close proximity so that the ball can be safely shifted to change the angle or the depth of the attack.

The best modern teams combine this secret with a willingness to encourage players to stretch the field wide. The trick is to encourage an almost fluid system whereby a players position in the attacking phase is almost purely determined by the position of the ball. Players can move in and out of the web of connections but at all times there should be a player stretching the width of the field and creating space in the opposition defensive setup. This brand of modern attacking football was executed perfectly by Colombia during the World Cup.

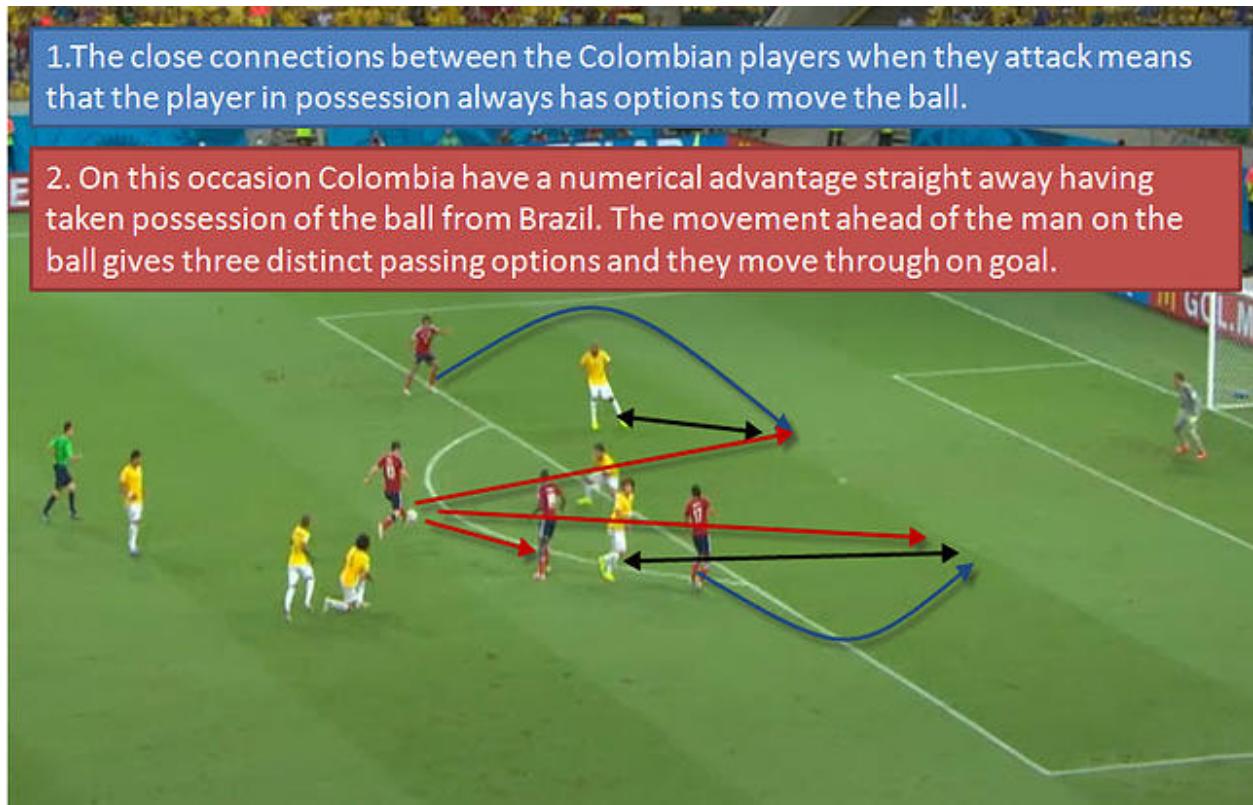
1. As soon as the attacking phase moves towards the oppositions area Colombia start to attack the box from a variety of angles. Both wide players make individual movements to stretch the opposition defence and create space.



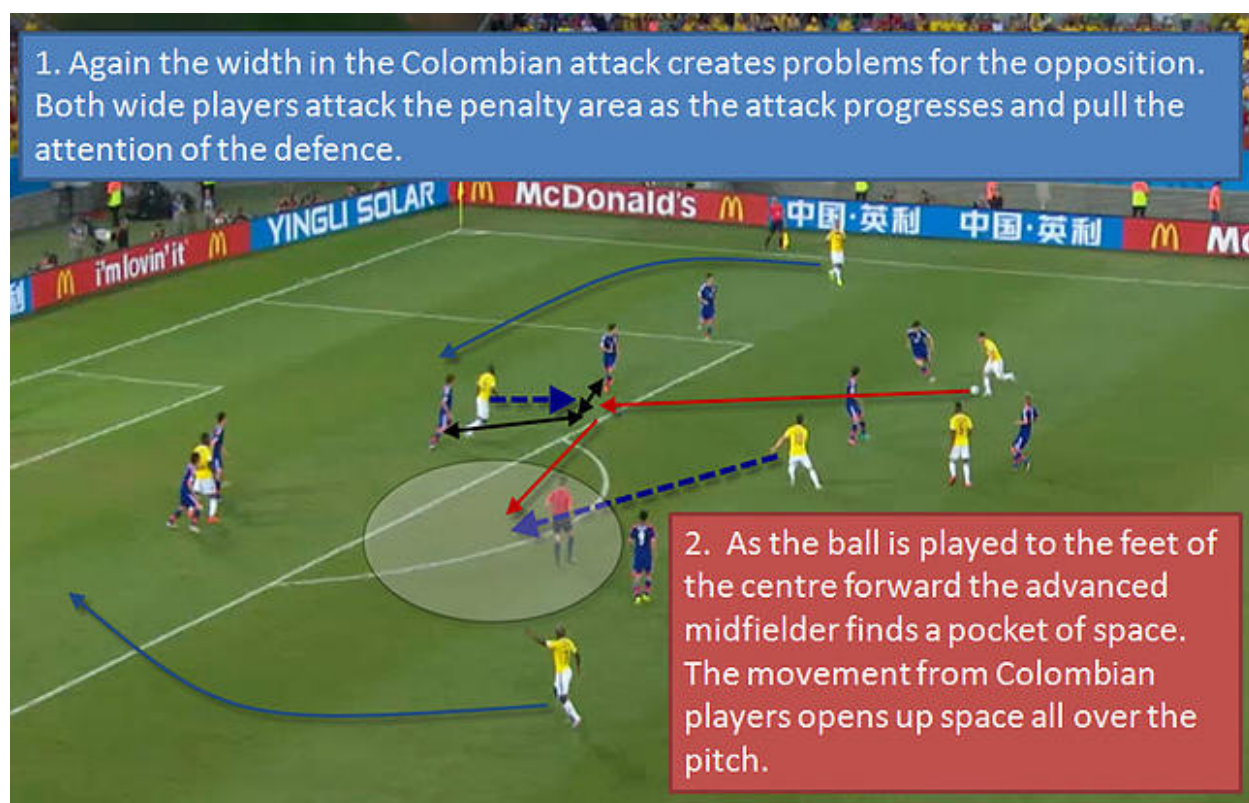
2. As soon as the ball is played to the feet of the attacker the movements are triggered. Three players converge on the man in possession and there are options in abundance.

You can see that as Colombia move the ball to the final phase of the attacking movement their players are all looking to attack space using the position of the ball as a reference. The ball is played in to the central striker who is looking to drop off the defensive line to pull the central defenders out of position. As soon as he takes possession of the ball the two flanking attacking players attack the space that his initial movement has created. On the near side (closest to the ball) the wide player is holding a much wider position to create space while on the far side the wide attacking player has already moved in to connect with the play. Their movement into the box vary in terms of angle and depth, but the striker is able to turn on the ball before playing a simple pass in to either.





This time the image is taken from the final match Colombia played at the World Cup against Brazil. On this occasion, Colombia have only just forced Brazil in to turning over possession deep inside their own half and they only have four players available for the attacking phase. The right sided attacking player makes a movement from in to out creating width and forcing one of the few Brazilian defenders to mirror his run. The player closest to the man in possession holds his position to offer the one-two option and the far sided attacker bends a run in behind his defender. These chains of movements occur over a very short period of time but are so well ingrained in to the games of the players that they occur naturally. The man in possession has three passing options advancing on goal and the option to drive in to the box himself past the defender that has been isolated.



Once again the ball is being played to the central striker from the inside right position. You can clearly see the two players holding a wide position stretching the opposing defence and looking to move in behind the defensive line after the ball is received by the striker. It is the movement of the most advanced central midfielder here that is most impressive. The movement of the centre forward is small but in shifting position he pulls the right sided central defender out of position slightly and opens up a larger gap that the advanced midfielder is then able to drift in to. As soon as the striker gets the ball he can immediately shift it on to the player that now finds himself in a large pocket of space. At this stage the options open out for either a shot, a run in to the box, a slipped central pass or a slipped pass to the advancing wide player. All of this is made easier by the close connections of the Colombian players.

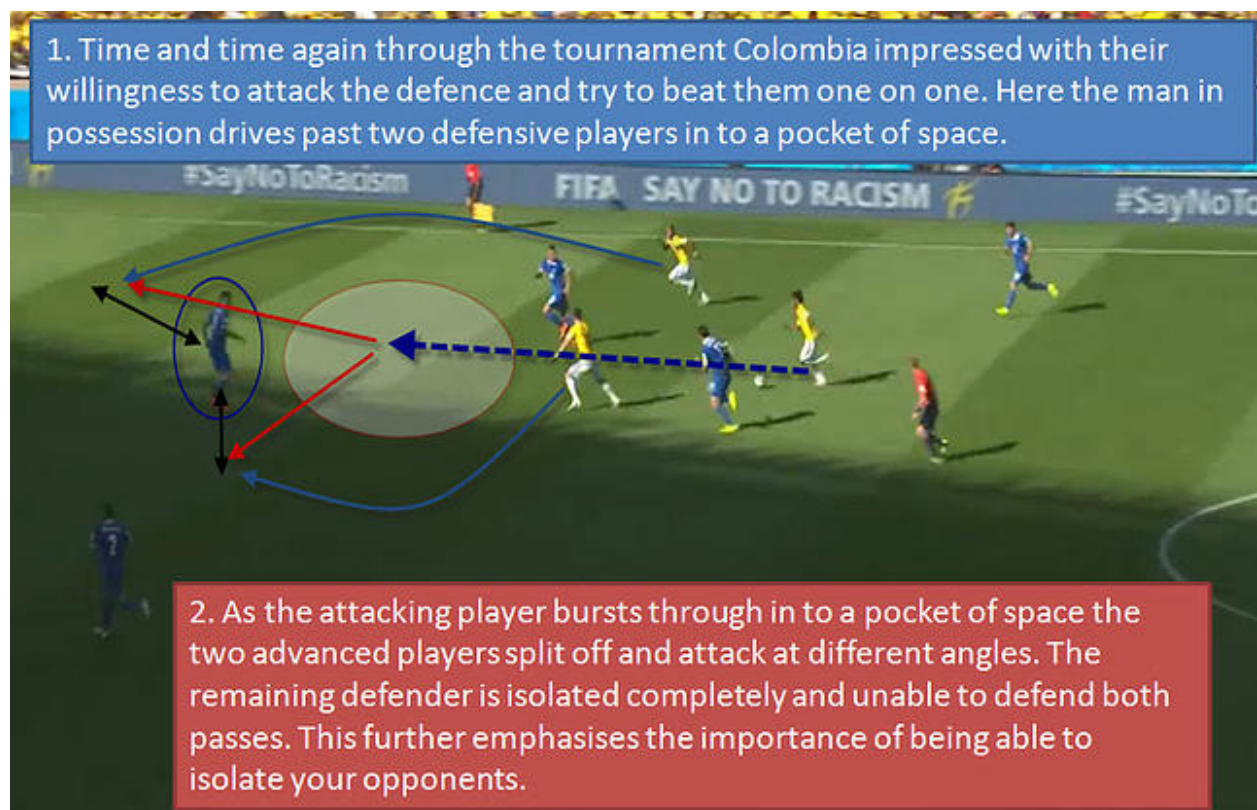
## WILLINGNESS TO DRIVE WITH THE BALL

“Football is throwing the opposition into chaos. If you get past your man, you throw the opposition into chaos. Creating a one man advantage using positional play has the same effect. If you don’t get past your man, or create that extra man advantage, then the opposition stays organised and nothing happens.”

The above is a quote from the great **Johan Cruyff** and it encapsulates perfectly the importance of having a group of players that are both willing and able to engage their direct opponent and beat them via a piece of individual skill or by using pace and power. As soon as that player is







The attack is once again coming down the inside right side and the player in possession of the ball is comfortable enough with the ball at his feet to drive past two opponents into a large pocket of space. In some teams where possession is the most important thing, the ball would have been turned back here instead of moving into space surrounded by opponents. Colombia, however, trust their own ability with the ball. As the play progresses there is a single defender that is completely isolated by this attacking movement, and as the two more advanced players split off at angles, he is left exposed and unable to defend the pass. Something as simple as a small piece of movement and a player taking the initiative has led to a complete overload of the opposition.

Identity is the current buzz word through the media. **Spain** and Germany have a clear identity and that is why they have been successful while Brazil has lost its footballing identity and that is why they failed at their own World Cup. And England? **Well, England has no identity at all** and no plan for the development of the national game. There is no doubt that having a set footballing identity is extremely important in the modern game. Both club and national teams need to have a set blueprint of who they are and how they want their game to be played.

Colombia arrived with a well-defined identity and, perhaps more importantly, a coach that shared that identity and they provided us with some of the best and most expansive football in the tournament. A modern coach looking to develop a football philosophy for his side or an

association looking to develop a path to success for their national team could do a lot worse than emulate the willingness to drive with the ball and provide passing options and connections to the man in possession that we saw from Colombia.