

# The great innovator

*From the Tottenham Hotspur Opus, 2007*

As the man who introduced push-and-run football, Arthur Rowe went on not only to revolutionise the English game, but also establish a style of play with which Tottenham Hotspur will be forever associated...

True visionaries in British football come along once in a blue moon, but Arthur Rowe, the tactical genius who devised Tottenham Hotspur's famous 'push-and-run' strategy in the post-War years, was worthy of the accolade.

The beauty of Rowe's tactical masterplan was its simplicity. Based on the principles that he and thousands of boys adopted when playing with tennis balls in the streets, Rowe asked his players to imagine they were using their team-mates like a kerb or a wall, playing one-twos and taking the return pass.

The mottoes he invented were posted on the dressing-room walls at White Hart Lane, so they could be embedded in the minds of his players and, most importantly, be passed on from generation to generation of Spurs players, 'a rolling ball gathers no moss' and, "make it simple, make it quick".

The only man who could claim to have been more influential in developing the style that made Spurs one of the world's great clubs was Bill Nicholson, and he always acknowledged that he learnt much of his trade as an apprentice to the sorcerer that was Rowe.

Fittingly, Arthur Sydney Rowe was born in Tottenham, just 10 minutes from White Hart Lane, on September 1, 1906. From the moment his father took him to his first Spurs game at the age of six, he was destined to support what was his local side; to later play for and manage the team must have been beyond the wildest dreams of the young boy.

Initially a talented right-winger, Rowe played for Tottenham and London schools, and might have played for the young England team but for injury ruling him out of the trials. He trained with Spurs as a schoolboy and at 16 followed a well-trodden path to the club's nursery team, Northfleet, where he combined playing with completing his apprenticeship as an upholsterer. By the time he turned professional, in 1928, he had become an attacking centre-half, and went on to play 201 games for Spurs over the next 11 years, during which time he also gained a full international cap for England. He spent three seasons as captain before a knee injury ended his career shortly before the outbreak of World War II.

Rowe described himself, modestly, as "not an outstanding player". Nicholson said: "Arthur was on the short side for a centre-half, but was strong and good in the air. He was born in Tottenham and had a feeling for the place. What really marked Rowe out as different, however, was his desire to study the game, to think about tactics and to learn even while he was playing.

In Deryk Brown's history, *The Tottenham Hotspur Story*, he describes the origin of push-and-run thus: "If push-and-run was born at a certain time and place, it was on November 25, 1932 at Valley Parade, Bradford. Tottenham Hotspur were playing a Second Division match there and the score was 0-0 with a minute to go. Rowe played a one-two with [William] Felton on the edge of his own penalty area and when he took the return Spurs had a numerical advantage, which they quickly made use of. Four more short passes and the ball was with [James] McCormick on the right-wing. He centred and [George] Hunt scored. The team talked about little else on the way back to London. They analysed back to Rowe's original pass. It had been simple and quick. It was the germ of an idea."

The germ became a seed that would eventually flourish, but first World War II intervened: Rowe became a fitness instructor in the Army and took charge of the Army football team.

When the war was over, Rowe moved into management with Chelmsford City, leading the non-league club to a Southern League and Cup double after introducing progressive and revolutionary ideas about how players, especially defenders, should use the ball constructively rather than simply clearing upfield – contrary to the doctrine laid out in *The FA Coaching Manual*. Rowe wanted his players to "play football all the time" and he felt the best way to implement that idea was by using quick, short passes and then moving into space to receive the ball.

Although his achievements had been low key, Rowe's potential was recognised by the Tottenham Hotspur board and he was handed the role of first-team manager on May 4, 1949, succeeding Joe Hulme, the former Arsenal winger.

Thrilled at his appointment, Rowe said of his beloved Spurs: "Watching them was nothing short of uplifting. I used to wish that all teams could have played like it for the benefit of the game. The fans at White Hart Lane loved us and that was a crowd that was well educated because they had seen good football through the years. Fathers watched it and brought up their sons on it; that was the Tottenham tradition. There was no thuggery in our game, it had no part. We played football and we won the ball by positional sense. We played them out of the game. We did it in style, no jealousies, all pals together. It would have been great to have had all those wonderful games on tape so that you could take them out when you wanted and enjoy them all over again."

The club's directors had wanted to invest in an individual who had not only a strong affinity for the club, but also a degree of foresight that would lead to long-term success. Rowe inherited Ted Ditchburn, Eddie Baily, Nicholson, Ron Burgess, and Alf Ramsey, the Southampton and England full-back who had been signed by caretaker manager Jimmy Anderson.

Rowe then assembled a squad of like-minded souls who would act out his vision on the field, Rowe said in an interview with the BBC in 1970: "I asked the boys to accept my thoughts about the game: that it was a simple game if you kept possession and passed accurately to the same shirts that you wore. The more accurately you did it, the quicker and better your attack would be. There was no diabolical change in the team for tactical purposes."

“I always used to speak to Ramsey and Burgess, telling them what I was thinking of doing. I would ask for their thoughts and the response from Burgess usually came within 20 seconds and was usually the same, ‘If you say so Art, that’ll do’. There would be another time lag and Alf would say, ‘Yes, I think you are probably right’. It was tremendous reassurance to myself.”

Rowe wanted to encourage his troops to think for themselves and prompted them to fulfil their potential as part of a unit. Baily said: “Arthur had arrived at a club of natural footballers. He did not come in with some great system and tell us exactly what to do. He encouraged us in certain directions, got us thinking, trying things and then, when it all came together, he would say, ‘That’s it, that’s the way to play’.”

As a former captain and a natural leader, Rowe had good man-management skills and did not over-complicate instructions for his players. Nicholson, a wing-half, said: “Arthur had this vision about the game which was summed up by the catchphrase ‘Make it simple, make it quick’. The basis of push-and-run was keeping possession of the ball by quick, short and accurate passes. It demanded great skill, particularly in movement off the ball, and fortunately Spurs had the players on their staff at the time capable of playing it effectively.”

In 1949/1950, his inaugural season in charge, Rowe’s pioneers were crowned Second Division champions, finishing nine points ahead of Sheffield Wednesday. The title was secured with seven games still remaining and Spurs scored 85 goals while conceding just 35. Push-and-run had taken English football’s second tier by storm.

The key factor behind the team’s on-field success was continuity, superior fitness and having a thorough understanding of their roles within the framework of the team. Nicholson said: “It also demanded maximum fitness because it was not possible to play that way unless all 10 outfield players were 100 per cent fit. In the 1949/1950 season, when Spurs were promoted with 61 points, the club used 18 players, of whom six made four appearances or fewer.”

Back in the First Division, Tottenham Hotspur proceeded to steamroller their opponents with a brisk, concise style of play. By December 30, 1950, Spurs were top of the league and on March 3 began an eight-game unbeaten run. After a 1-0 home win against Sheffield Wednesday in their penultimate game on April 28, 1951, they were confirmed as champions, beating Manchester United by four points.

Rowe’s philosophy had changed the outlook of English football and, after presenting the team with the trophy, Arthur Drewry, chairman of the Football League, said: “I not only congratulate them on having won it, but also on the manner in which they did so.”

Spurs ended as First Division runners-up – four points adrift of United – in 1951/1952, but their momentum faded as the years took a toll on the glorious championship-winning side. Losing 3-1 to York City, of the Third Division North, in The FA Cup on February 19, 1955, proved to be the final straw and a distraught Rowe stepped down from his post, citing health reasons. His assistant, Jimmy Anderson,

took over, initially on a temporary basis, before Rowe officially parted company with Tottenham Hotspur in July 1955.

Rowe carried on working in football, holding a variety of roles at West Bromwich Albion, Crystal Palace, Leyton Orient and Millwall right up until his death on November 5, 1993, aged 87. But his legacy will always be as the man who had the vision to revolutionise English football.

*Words / Gerry Cox*