
Sir Walter Winterbottom: The Father of Modern English Football



28th November 1955: England team manager Walter Winterbottom (1913 - 2002) giving a team talk during a training session at Stamford Bridge, London.

Walter Winterbottom was appointed England manager at the age of 34, fulfilling the position along with the role of FA Director of Coaching for 16 years. Considered a pioneer of coaching and outstanding teacher, Winterbottom is the subject of Graham Morse's new book, a tribute to the man believed to be the father of modern English football.

Writing in the Daily Mail Jeff Powell described Walter Winterbottom as "The father of modern English football." It was an apt description. A pioneer of coaching and an outstanding teacher, Walter worked tirelessly to overcome resistance to coaching and drag English football into the modern era, encouraging players, clubs and administrators to change the way they thought about the game. It was a monumental task that occupied all of his 16 years as the FA Director of Coaching and England team manager.

He will be remembered by many as the first England manager but few will be aware of the profound effect he had on football coaching.

Winterbottom, himself, noted much resistance to football coaching at the start of his career: "Nobody believed in coaches at first. I wanted to change the whole attitude to coaching in this country." He founded the national coaching centre at Lilleshall and ran summer residential courses where famous players as well as schoolmasters qualified as coaches.

He chipped away against scepticism concerning the value of coaching and was the leading technical thinker and exponent of coaching of his generation.

It seems extraordinary that at the age of only 34 and with no experience of managing any football team this remarkable man was chosen as the first England team manager, a position he held for 16 years.

England were the masters who had taken football to the world but he saw that things were changing. Now the pupils could teach the masters. Embarrassed by the

United States in 1950 and humiliated by Hungary in 1953, Walter used these setbacks as evidence to convince club managers to accept new ideas.

Gradually he brought about radical change within the national team set up. He argued that in order to compete at the highest level England had to be more professional in their preparations.

His record during his remarkable sixteen year reign as England manager stands comparison with any: played 139, won 78, drawn 33, lost 28, (a win rate of 56%). England only lost six games at home in his time.

When Sir Stanley Rous, the FA Secretary, left the organisation it was widely expected that Walter would succeed his mentor. But The FA councillors voted instead for their treasurer. Bitterly disappointed by the snub and unhappy with the way the matter was conducted he resigned.

As a person he was patient, kind, generous, loyal and universally liked. Players had great respect and affection for him. Bobby Charlton said in 1967: "There cannot be many men in the game who see the theory, practice and politics of football as clearly as Walter does." Jimmy Greaves said he had "the shrewdest football brain in the country."

Surprisingly Walter's story has never been told. It is the story of a remarkable man who overcame many obstacles and setbacks in his life. He was devoid of ego, a modest man who shunned personal ambition but achieved great things. Above all he was dedicated to a life of service.

Sir Walter Winterbottom, The Father of Modern English Football is available in hardback, ebook, Kindle and audio book. Books can be purchased from Waterstones, most good bookshops and Amazon.co.uk.

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