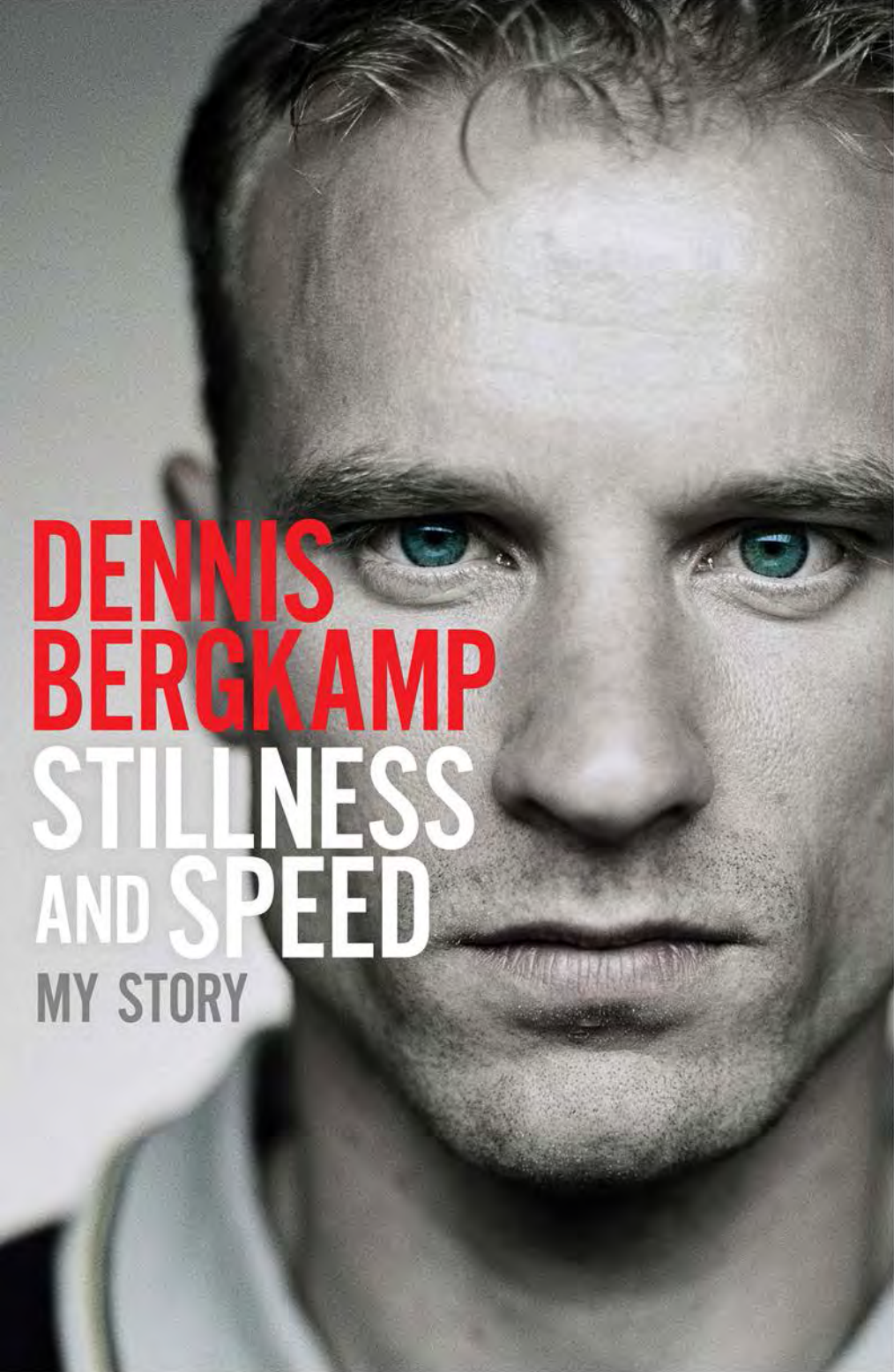
DENNIS
BERGKAMP
STILLNESS
AND SPEED
MY STORY

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DENNIS BERGKAMP

WITH DAVID WINNER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

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A NOTE ON THE ENGLISH EDITION

I NEVER SAW THE 1980s comedy *Twins* but the poster was fantastic. It showed tiny, squidgy-looking Danny DeVito leaning into muscle-bound giant Arnold Schwarzenegger under the tagline 'Only Their Mother Can Tell Them Apart'.

The object you hold in your hands is basically Danny DeVito. Its giant twin – remarkably similar yet entirely different – is the Dutch edition of this book, written by my esteemed colleague Jaap Visser. He has created a coffee-table colossus covering every aspect of Dennis Bergkamp's life and career chronologically. That version is illustrated with many hundreds of colour pictures and will surely one day govern California.

Dennis, naturally, is the biological parent of both editions.

The form, we feel, fits the man. A footballer like no other ought to have a book (or books) no less distinctive. In the film, the brothers share genetic material. We did something similar. Broadly speaking, Jaap's research and interviews with Dennis covered his Dutch years while I dealt with his time in Italy and England. Then we pooled everything.

The Dutch edition is in the classic tradition of football biography.

The English one is more experimental, its structure influenced, among other things, by *Puskas on Puskas*, Rogan Taylor and Klara Jamrich's wonderful book of interviews with and about Ferenc Puskas, and by Francois Truffaut's book of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock. I am not remotely comparable to Truffaut and Dennis is certainly much nicer than the Master of Suspense. But, like him, he is a unique and influential genius in his chosen art form. Much of the book concerns Dennis's technique and creative process.

On the field, Dennis usually played as a deft and original 'shadow striker', operating between the lines, using his skills and understanding of space to help colleagues and create moments of beauty that won football matches. In print, he now does much the same, playing off interviews with colleagues, coaches and fellow footballing greats like Johan Cruyff, Arsene Wenger, Thierry Henry and Tony Adams. The result, we hope, is both unique and revealing.

When he retired from Arsenal in 2006, Dennis had no plans to write a book. But the more he moved into coaching with his boyhood club Ajax, the more he realised he had something of value to say. That turned out to be an understatement . . .

David Winner
London, 2013

I

THE WALL

'You get used to the noise,' says Dennis, smiling. 'You hardly notice it'.

We are standing a few yards from Dennis's childhood home beside the A10 motorway that circles Amsterdam. Up until the 1950s the road was a muddy field where cows grazed on the extreme western edge of the city. By the time the Bergkamp family moved here in 1970 construction had begun. As a toddler, Dennis, watching from his high chair by the window, was enchanted by the sand trucks, bulldozers and cranes at work. These days, mature trees and glass barriers reduce the sound of traffic but in the seventies nothing stood between the flat and the roaring torrent of cars and lorries. Yet the recollection delights him. Dennis even remembers how the road ended up being useful. 'When it was finished it ran all the way around the city, so it took me six minutes to get to training. Through town it would have taken me forty-five minutes.' As we stroll through his old neighbourhood his memories are all happy ones.

Dennis was the youngest of four sons in a hard-working and devoutly Catholic family. Wim, his dad, was a modest, twinkly-eyed craftsman and perfectionist. He worked as an electrician, played football with the Wilskracht club (the name means 'Willpower') and loved making and repairing things: furniture, toys, puzzles, anything. Dennis's mum, Tonny, an accomplished amateur gymnast in her youth, ran the family home here on James Rosskade (the 'Kade'), adored all her boys and was renowned for her warmth, strength and neighbourliness.

Dennis crosses the wide pavement towards the entrance to number 22. 'Look up there on the first floor: that was my bedroom. And this is where we played football, here on the pavement.' His old building appears rundown but Dennis doesn't mind. He gazes contentedly up at the wall of brick and messy balconies. He is beaming. 'It's fair to say I had a perfect childhood here.'

Football was a huge part of it. The Bergkamp boys – Wim Jr, Ronald, Marcel and Dennis – played not only here in the street, but in the corridor of the flat and on local patches of grass. When the security guy with the large dog guarding it were away, they even used the real grass pitch on the far side of the motorway, reached through a tunnel and over a wooden plank across a ditch. Televised football was rare by today's standards. On Saturday evenings the family would hurry to Mass at nearby St Joseph's Church – but only after watching German football on television. The FA Cup final, one of the few English games shown live, was a special treat. Legend has it that Dennis was named after his father's favourite player, Denis Law. The legend is true. For the different spelling, though, we have to thank Wim Jr, ten years old at the time, and Ronald, aged seven, who thought 'Dennis' sounded 'less girly' than 'Denis'. Their little brother grew up to like Glenn Hoddle better. 'I'm not sure why, but the thing that always interested me most was *controlling* the ball, especially when it was in the air. I wasn't

interested in dribbling or doing tricks or scoring goals. Control. That was my thing. We saw some English football on TV and the player who really stood out for me was Glenn Hoddle, because he was always in balance. I loved the way he plucked the ball out of the air and controlled it. Instant control. His touch was perfect.'

At school Dennis's teacher, Mr De Boer, let the kids play five-a-side in the gym. 'We finished school at twelve, ran home as fast as we could for a quick sandwich and then went straight back to school. At half-past twelve we'd be back in the gym playing *paaltjesvoetbal* (literally, 'little-stick football'). Everyone had their own stick and you had to defend that against the ball. My stick was Maradona. I made him in my arts and crafts class. I filed the wood away so he had a neck, a head and a torso and I painted him in blue and white stripes with a number 10 on the back.

'We played football all the time, especially here. The Kade was wider in those days, and there weren't so many cars. It was real street football: four against five or five against five or four against four. You had to have a certain level of skill and balance because the concrete was hard and if you fell, you'd hurt yourself. One goal was that tree over there. It was a brilliant feeling to score there. The tree was a small target so you had to be so precise. And this door would be the other goal. You had to be clever and use what was around. You could play a one-two off the wall, or a car, but you weren't allowed to hit the door of the car so you aimed for the wheel. Be precise, invent … that was the idea. You were always looking for solutions.'

Not that there was anything wrong with just sticking down jumpers for goalposts and spending most of your time running to collect the ball after a goal. 'We did that too! And in the evenings we'd have games on the grass behind the flats. With all the Dutch kids and Turkish and Moroccan kids living here, then it would be Holland v Morocco, or Holland v Turkey or whatever. It was really

interesting. With the apartments all around and people watching from their balconies after dinner, it was like a stadium.'

Later, as his brothers had done, he joined Wilskracht. His all-round athletic talent had been obvious from an early age. 'I enjoyed cross-country runs in the park during PE lessons. In fact I loved all PE, except gymnastics which just wasn't my thing and Mum was disappointed about that. But rope-climbing, baseball, basketball . . . I was good at everything.' At the age of nine, he joined the nearby AAC athletics club and proceeded to win medals for sprinting, the 1500 metres, the long jump, everything. One of his favourite events was the shot putt. 'We used to take the shot and measuring tape with us on holidays. When we had to do the washing-up after dinner, I'd say to my brothers, "Sorry guys, but I have to go outside with Dad and practise my shot putting." Mum would stand and watch, and after every throw she would call out, "Nice throw, Den."'

It has been said that Johan Cruyff, Louis Van Gaal or one of the youth trainers at Ajax must have taught or developed Dennis's unique touch with a football. But it turns out Dennis taught himself. 'I'm not the "product" of any manager. My best trainers were the ones who let me do my own thing: Cruyff, Wenger and Guus Hiddink in the national team. They understood me.' He gives greater credit to his brothers. 'They acted as a sounding board, and I needed that more than I needed a manager. I never had many friends as a kid. I didn't need any because I had my best three at home.'

The brothers themselves – Wim, now an accountant, molecular biologist Ronald and Marcel, an IT expert – seem stunned into silence when they hear Dennis regards them more significant to his development than the likes of Cruyff and Van Gaal. Eventually Ronald reacts: 'Dennis does us a great honour. We were never trainers. We were always there for him and that made him feel

comfortable, that's all,' Wim adds: 'Dennis is always there for us too, you know', and Marcel completes the thought: 'We're always there for each other.' The brothers insist that Dennis was an autodidact. For Marcel, the key was his powers of observation. 'When he came to see me playing he saw everything down to the smallest detail. Afterwards he could always tell you exactly how situations had unfolded and who was standing where. Dennis was always an excellent observer. He plays golf, but he's never had lessons. He learned by watching. It was the same with tennis and snooker, too.' Wim confirms: 'Dennis would watch and watch and watch, then he'd do it himself. Dennis wanted to achieve perfection. He got that from Dad, who was never content with the work he'd done or the things he'd made. Dad's motto was: *you can always do better*. And that became Dennis's motto, too.'

No one in the history of football has had a touch quite as soft, precise, masterful and elegant as Dennis. When he retired in 2006, the *Financial Times* writer Simon Kuper recalled a dinner he had attended in Amsterdam the previous year with 'some legends of Dutch football'. Around midnight the conversation turned to an old question: who was the best Dutch footballer ever? According to Kuper: 'Dutchmen have been voted European Footballer of the Year seven times, more than any other nationality except Germans. Yet Jan Mulder, a great centre-forward turned writer, chose a player who had never even threatened to win the award nor, at the time, a Champions League. "Bergkamp. He had the finest technique." Guus Hiddink, the great Dutch manager, nodded, and so the matter was settled.'

A few years later, in a Dutch TV interview, Robin van Persie explained what Bergkamp's example meant to him. Speaking with the writer Henk Spaan, he recalled an afternoon at the Arsenal

training ground when he was a youngster and Dennis was a veteran. Van Persie had finished earlier and was sitting in a Jacuzzi which happened to be by a window. Out on the field he noticed Dennis doing a complicated exercise involving shooting, and receiving and giving passes at speed. Robin decided to get out of the bath as soon as Dennis made a mistake.

'That man, he's just bizarre!' says Van Persie. 'He'd been injured and he was on his way back, and he was training with one boy of about fifteen and with another boy of sixteen or seventeen and with the fitness coach. They were doing some passing and kicking with those mannequins. It was a forty-five-minute session and there wasn't one pass Dennis gave that wasn't perfect. He just didn't make a single mistake! And he did everything one hundred per cent, to the max, shooting as hard as possible, controlling, playing, direct passing … That was so beautiful! To me it was plainly art. My hands got all wrinkled in the bath but I just stayed there. I sat and watched and I waited, looking for one single mistake. But the mistake never came. And that was the answer for me.

'Watching that training session answered so many questions I had. I can pass the ball well, too. I'm a good football player as well. But this man did it so well and with such drive. He had such total focus. I found myself thinking: "OK, wait a minute, I can play football well enough, but I've still got an enormous step to take to get to that level." And that's when I realised, if I want to become really good, then I have to be able to do that, too. From that moment on I started doing every exercise with total commitment. With every simple passing or kicking practice, I did everything at one hundred per cent, just so I wouldn't make mistakes. And when I did make a mistake I was angry. Because I wanted to be like Bergkamp.'

So Dennis's search for perfection began below his bedroom window on the James Rosskade, where he would kick a ball against a wall. Hour after hour. Day after day. Year after year.

* * *

I'M TRYING TO picture you aged about eight, kicking a ball against this wall. What would you be thinking?

Dennis: 'It's not thinking. It's *doing*. And in doing, I find my way. I used the brickwork around the entrance to the building. You see that line of vertical bricks, like a crossbar? Most of the time I was by myself, just kicking the ball against the wall, seeing how it bounces, how it comes back, just controlling it. I found that so interesting! Trying it different ways: first one foot, then the other foot, looking for new things: inside of the foot, outside of the foot, laces . . . getting a sort of rhythm going, speeding it up, slowing it down. Sometimes I'd aim at a certain brick, or at the crossbar. Left foot, right foot, making the ball spin. Again and again. It was just fun. I was enjoying it. It interested me. Maybe other people wouldn't bother. Maybe they wouldn't find it interesting. But I was fascinated. Much later, you could give a pass in a game and you could maybe look back and see: "Oh, wait a minute, I know where that touch comes from." But as a kid you're just kicking a ball against the wall. You're not thinking of a pass. You're just enjoying the mechanics of it, the pleasure of doing it.

'Later, I'd say: "With every pass, there needs to be a message or a thought behind it." But that was there from very early, in my body and in my mind. When I was kicking the ball against the wall I'd be trying to hit a certain brick or trying to control the ball in a certain way. You play around with the possibilities, with bounces, for example. You hit the wall and the ball comes back with one bounce. Then you say, "Let's try to do it with two bounces," so you hit it against the wall a little bit softer, a little bit higher. With two bounces, it means probably that both bounces are a little bit higher, so you have to control it again, in a different way. You're always playing around. I wasn't obsessed. I was just very intrigued

by how the ball moves, how the spin worked, what you could do with spin.

'In every sport with a ball, it's the same thing. If you watch Roger Federer play tennis against a big serve-and-volley player, they're totally different! So what interests you the most? Is it the result? Is it winning? Federer could play thirty years more because he just loves the game. He loves the bounce. He loves to make those little tricks. And it's effective as well. I recognise that.'

You're really not a serve-and-volley kind of guy yourself, are you?

'I really love that Federer way of playing. To have such control that you can trick a goalkeeper, trick the opponent. Like Federer's drop volleys, the little disguised lob. To be able to do something like that, yeah … to do something that others don't do or don't understand or are not capable of doing. That's my interest; not following, but creating your own thing.'

So all this comes from yourself? You're not doing stuff you've seen on television.

'Oh, I'm doing that as well. You see a lot of things on television. Like watching Hoddle. After one World Cup – at least I think it was a World Cup – Marcel and I would be in the hallway kicking our soft foam ball. Maybe I'd head the ball and it would be a goal and I'd celebrate with my hands in the air shouting like this: "*Graaa-zi-aaaaaaniiii!*" Yeah! [*Laughs*] I loved that. [It turns out this was the 1982 World Cup, where Dennis and Marcel, who was four years older, took a shine to Francesco Graziani, mainly on account of his thrillingly Italian name and the exuberant way he celebrated his goal against Cameroon. Graziani had run off, clenched fists raised, leaping and shouting for joy. Dennis and Marcel copied him at every chance they got, yelling Graziani's name as the TV commentator had done.]

'And Maradona. I loved seeing him, too. Of course, later, when I was at Ajax, I'd see Cruyff and Van Basten doing all sorts of things

and you wouldn't exactly copy it, but you'd sort of file it away and think: "That's interesting."'

Did you stand out in your street games? Were you playing in an original way then?

'No, no. I'd be doing quite normal things. I mean I'm probably better than other kids, but it's not like I'm there at that age. I'm a bit quicker than the others. I can control the ball. I can go past someone – light feet, quick feet, that sort of stuff.'

What position did you play?

'Striker. And I scored plenty of goals because I had a good kick. I often scored free-kicks above the heads of the small goalkeepers. They were too short to reach! And when I was nine or ten I used to like scoring direct from corners. I mean it wasn't on a full-sized pitch, but later even on a full-pitch I enjoyed that. And, remember, thirty years ago we played a lot eleven v eleven on full-sized pitches. It wasn't like now where the kids play on reduced-size pitches. The idea was: "If you can play proper football, you can play on a proper pitch."

'So, yeah, I was quite a conventional player back then. The main thing was my pace. I could go past my defender, or a pass would be played behind the full-back and I could beat him that way. Quite conventional skills, really. But I was inventive in scoring goals, like lobbing the goalkeeper. I always liked that. Always with a thought, not just hit it but thinking: "What can I do?" But even with the lobs it wasn't an invention of mine. I'd seen that on TV. I think Cruyff scored a famous one against Haarlem in his first game back at Ajax, didn't he? And Glenn Hoddle did a famous one. We even had a word for it in Dutch: *stiftje*. It's like a wedge shot in golf with the clubface open … and it drops over the goalkeeper. I got a lot of pleasure from those shots. It's fun, but it's also effective. I got upset when people complained about me only doing it "the nice way". I said, "No, it's the *best* way. There's a lot of space above the goalkeeper."

'I was lucky because in my generation, where I lived, there were a lot of boys my age. Out of school, all the time it was: "Come on, let's play football." I always had about five or six boys playing football with me. It's the classic way of street football, isn't it? But my brother Marcel didn't have that because there were only girls at his age. So for him it was completely different. He had no one his age to play with. So he had to play either with me and my friends or with Ronald, who's older. So when people ask me: "How did you become a professional football player?" maybe that's one of the reasons. Ronald was like me in school as well. If he got nine out of ten, he was never pleased with that. He'd say, "What did I do wrong? Why didn't I get a ten?" I was like that. And that's why I like what Wenger said about being a perfectionist: "He wants to strive for perfection." Even if I don't reach it, I can be happy as long as I'm striving for it. You're taking small steps all the time, improving, moving on.

So you had quite an old-fashioned childhood, really? No video games, not many cars about. You were like the generation of '74 who grew up playing football on empty streets after the war.

'Yeah, in those days when you had a holiday, you didn't go abroad. You stayed [at home] and played. I think my generation was the last that had that. Later, it was a different kind of street football which took place in the "courts", like a basketball court with a high fence around it. The Surinamese guys had those; there were competitions between courts in different neighbourhoods around Amsterdam and that's how they learned.'

And how was it when you got to Ajax?

'Very different from now. It's one of the things we talk about as coaches. At that time, we had the strict shouting coaches who'd take you through an exercise you had to try to copy. Almost like a military thing. I had one trainer called Bormann. He was a nice guy, but he had a real military air about him. That was for two years.

Then we had Dirk de Groot, who was really strict; there'd be a lot of shouting and you'd be a little bit scared, like "Oh no, I'm going to get *him*". [*Laughs*] But he was a lovely guy as well. And in the A Juniors we had Cor van der Hart, with his hoarse voice. Also a nice guy, but very strict. And sometimes we had Tonny Bruins Slot [Cruyff's assistant]. So the discussion we have now is "So how did you become a good player then?" If you look at the coaches we have now, they're so different. They all have their badges, and they are all very sympathetic and know exactly how to play football and what kind of exercises you should do, and for how many minutes, and the distances between the goals, and where the cones should be where you're playing positional games. And they know not to play too long – one and a half hours maximum. They all know exactly how *everything* should be done. Maybe that's the problem. We never had that sort of attention, so we were more self-taught. Even with all the shouting, you just created your own thing.

'Sometimes we even played pickup games like we were on the street. You know: sixteen guys, and the two captains play *poting*, which is like scissors, paper, stone but with the feet, and whoever wins that gets first pick. So one captain picks the best player, then the other one makes his pick, and so on. This is really true! This is how we made teams! And then we'd play a game. This is thirty years ago. We're in the Ajax Youth, but it's like the street. And one of the coaches is supervising, but more like a referee. "This is a goal, that's a foul . . ." Not at all like now. Nowadays the coach stops the game and says: "Hey, guy, if you've got the ball here, where do you have to be now?" and shows the player everything. For us it was much more like it was in Cruyff's time. It was really quite free for you to teach yourself. There's no shouting or military guys any more, but it's more strict in the football sense. Everyone is a head coach, everyone is a manager, everyone has their badges, and everything is done by the book. Is it too much? Probably. Everything is

done for the kids now. They're picked up from school by minivans. The food is there, the teaching is there. Everything. "OK, guys, we're going to do the warm-up. Do two laps now. OK, now you're going to do this, now you're going to do that . . ." How can they develop themselves if everything is done for them? We've got players in the first team now who've come through the Youth and are used to playing a certain style and doing certain things. And as soon as it's a little bit different it's: "Oh no! I don't know what to do!" You see them looking at the bench to find out what they should do.

'It's really a problem. You can see the difference with Luis Suarez when he was here [at Ajax]. Of course, maybe you wouldn't agree with the things he did, but he was always trying to create something, always thinking: "How can I get the best out of this situation? Do I have to pull the shirt of the defender to get in front of him? Do I get out of position to control the ball?" His mind is always busy thinking. And sometimes he steps on someone's foot or he uses his hand. Silly things. But the idea in his head is not bad. And he's very creative. So that's one of the things we try to do with the training now in the Youth – give players the chance to develop themselves into creative, special, unique individuals. We can't copy what we had in the past. Somehow we have to find a different way, so the players who come into the first team are creative again, can think for themselves, can make a difference, basically. Be special. Be unique. That's what we want. You can't be unique if you do the same thing as the ten other players. You have to find that uniqueness in yourself.'