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Stillness and speed: my story

Ramón Spaaij

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Stillness and speed: my story, by Dennis Bergkamp with David Winner, London, Simon & Schuster, 2013, 272 pp., £20.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-47112-951-3

Dennis Bergkamp was an extraordinary footballer, one of those great players who, as Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger puts it, 'are guided by how football should be played, and not by how football should serve them.'¹ It should therefore come as no surprise that *Stillness and Speed: My Story* is not your typical football autobiography, but rather a vehicle for Bergkamp to set out his philosophical approach to the game of football. He does so in a way that is arguably even more insightful than comparable recently published memoirs such as *Pep Guardiola: Another Way of Winning*.² The significance of the book is enhanced by its 'Q&A' format. The book is essentially a series of conversations with Bergkamp and the significant others who shaped or experienced first-hand his footballing career from the nurturing grounds of Ajax Amsterdam to Internazionale (Inter Milan) and Arsenal, as well as covering Bergkamp's highs and lows with the Dutch national team and his more recent return to Ajax as an assistant manager.

Credit for *Stillness and Speed*'s unique and compelling approach must go in part to ghost writer David Winner, a journalistic authority on Dutch football. Winner's commitment to dig deeper and ask difficult questions regarding some of the darkest periods of Bergkamp's career produces a revealing account of Bergkamp's single-mindedness and vision. For example, in a chapter called 'The Penalty' (Chapter 17), Winner challenges the striker to analyse his penalty miss against Manchester United in the 1999 FA Cup semi-final, a penalty some argue could have broken United's dominance at the time. Winner's direct and insistent style of questioning in this chapter even leads the pair to have an argument about what distinguishes a good penalty from a bad penalty.

The conversational style of the book reminded me of the groundbreaking dialogical books on education, literacy and critical pedagogy (co-)authored by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Like those scholarly books of the 1980s and 1990s, the conversational format in *Stillness and Speed* leads to a more revealing, rounded and in-depth treatment of both Bergkamp's personality and his philosophical and practical approach to football. I found this approach refreshing and in stark contrast to the typical season-by-season sports autobiographies that fill my bookshelves. The best-selling memoir of Andy van der Meyde, another of Ajax's promising youth talents who also went on to play at Internazionale and in England

(at Everton), comes to mind.³ The ‘sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll’ style of the memoir has catapulted Van der Meyde to Dutch celebrity status and provides some insight into wasted football talent and the pressures of professional football. Yet, critics such as media pundit and former Holland midfielder Willem van Hanegem have called it the lowest low of footballing literature, offering readers an in-your-face account of just some professional footballer’s life.

Stillness and Speed, however, is the complete opposite: it is highly insightful and genuinely Bergkampian, the man and his game. Students of the world game should pay particular attention to Bergkamp’s views on issues such as (persisting differences in) national football cultures and styles in a global age, leadership, motivation, coaching and youth development. For example, he takes aim at Louis van Gaal and other managers who should ‘stop worshipping The System’ and tactics, and instead focus on developing the individual from an early age.⁴ Chapter 15 (‘Leaders’) reveals Bergkamp’s views on and experiences of leadership in football, but also how his leadership was perceived by the players and coaches he worked with during his playing career, including Wenger, Thierry Henry, Tony Adams, Osvaldo Bagnoli (Bergkamp’s first coach at Inter), Riccardo Ferri (former Inter teammate), and Johan Cruyff. Bergkamp’s own reflections on what makes a good leader are in tune with contemporary theory and research on situational leadership: ‘To me a leader is someone who affects people, who makes changes, who makes other players or people better. It’s the opposite of someone doing it for the cameras.’⁵

For the neutral reader, one of the most compelling and unique chapters is likely to be Chapter 4, which covers Bergkamp’s time at Internazionale, a contentious topic which receives considerable attention in the book, through a series of conversations between Winner and the main protagonists. The book contextualizes Bergkamp’s move to Italy by explaining how the striker ‘had unwittingly stepped into the middle of a battle between Italy’s future and its past,’ a battle reflected in the theological and tribal conflict between the two Milan football clubs.⁶ Bergkamp’s Italian adventure never lived up to its promise, and the book expertly explores the reasons for this drawing on both Bergkamp’s own truth and the points of view of his former teammates and managers at Inter, some of whom – like Riccardo Ferri and Giuseppe Bergomi – certainly don’t hold back and are critical of Bergkamp on a number of points. It is brave and honest of Bergkamp to have their opinions in the book despite their side of the story being potentially inconvenient and confronting. ‘No problem. Let’s have it!’, Bergkamp says.⁷

This excellent book is a refreshing contrast to the majority of recent football autobiographies. The style of the book echoes how Bergkamp operated on the pitch, a playmaker and team player with admirable intelligence and passion for how the game should be played.

Notes

1. *Stillness and Speed*, p. 168.
2. Guillem Balague, *Pep Guardiola – Another Way of Winning*. London: Orion, 2012.
3. Thijs Slegers, *Andy van der Meijde: Geen genade*. Amsterdam: Voetbal International, 2012.
4. *Stillness and Speed*, p. 263.

5. Ibid., p. 191.
6. Ibid., p. 53.
7. Ibid., p. 72.

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