

Introducing the Eight-Square Game

London, January 1927

Broadcasting was in its infancy. The idea of putting a soccer match on the BBC and relaying the news through the wireless system throughout Britain was original, exciting and challenging. The game chosen for the experiment was Arsenal against Sheffield United, two teams in the middle of Division One. There was nothing special about the game, just that it could capture the attention of people outside Highbury Stadium.

That week the *Radio Times* carried a front-page plan of the Highbury pitch, dividing it into eight equal sections. Each section was numbered for easy identification. Low numbers (one to four) indicated a team's own half of the field, high numbers (five to eight) that it had possession in the opposition half. Odd numbers referred to the left side of the team, even numbers meant the right. The sections were called 'squares', but if they were genuine squares, Highbury must have had a different-shaped pitch that day.

Two commentators were used. Mr Wakelam described the play, and, in the background, Mr Lewis called out the square numbers. This informed the audience who had the ball and exactly where play was occurring. They could sit with the *Radio Times* plan in front of them and follow the verbal action.

This experiment, following closely after the broadcasting of the England-Wales rugby international, was considered a success, though there were some criticisms in newspapers, as might perhaps be expected from a rival reporting network. Some said the account was disconnected, delivered too rapidly or that several players were wrongly identified by the commentators. Well, it was early days.

Appropriately, the first two goals scored on the radio, knocked in from squares seven and eight, went to two of the biggest names in soccer at the time – England international Charlie Buchan (Arsenal) and Ireland international Billy Gillespie (Sheffield United). The game finished 1-1.

Soccer broadcasting expanded rapidly. Ten million people, it was estimated, listened to the regular BBC broadcasts of Arsenal director George Allison (commentator) and Derek 'Uncle Mac' McCulloch (square caller), and three months after the Highbury game the FA Cup Final was broadcasted. Soccer was on its way to a new era. Local celebrities would become national heroes. Ordinary supporters, accustomed to reading about their team and chatting to one another, would suddenly discover how a player's name sounded with a BBC accent. Blind people would have their interest in soccer resurrected. And commentators learned the power of information.