

ADAM THORNTON

GERRARD'S

BLUEPRINT

The Tactical Philosophy Behind
Rangers 55th Title Triumph



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Part 1

Tactical Philosophy

Tactical Influences

‘If you look at the deliberations we had around managers, there are a lot of boxes that one tries to tick and no one ticks all of the boxes,’ then Rangers chairman Dave King told *The Herald*.

‘When Mark [Allen, Rangers’ director of football] first said to me about Steven Gerrard as a potential manager, my first thought was clearly that he hadn’t managed before.

‘But that is the only box that he didn’t tick. Every other box he did tick.

‘Competitive ability, a winner, knows what it takes to win – so he was ticking all the boxes other than experience.’

When King announced the appointment of Gerrard to the media on 4 May 2018, he famously remarked above that the only skill that Gerrard didn’t have was the experience as a manager. After his short period in charge of Liverpool’s under-18 and under-19 teams, Rangers fans had no idea how a Gerrard team would line up or how he wanted his side to play football.

While the Rangers job was Gerrard’s first foray into first-team management, there had been some opportunities to dip his toe in the water before his time coaching at Liverpool’s academy. In November 2016, while still in the last days of his hugely successful playing career, he had tentative discussions to take over as manager at Milton Keynes Dons but elected not to on that occasion. There was a minimal frame of reference, but the experience can come in many ways, as Gerrard outlined when speaking to the Rangers Coaches Convention following the conclusion of his third season in charge in May 2021.

Speaking to the Rangers website, Gerrard was asked if there was a specific point in his career where he realised that coaching or management was where he saw his career going when he decided to hang up his boots, Gerrard said, 'It was more towards the back end of my career, but when you get the responsibility of being a captain, you're already doing little bits and bobs of being a manager anyway. Talking to people one to one, trying to help them whether that's on the pitch tactically or off the pitch where you're showing them support. It's your type of character that leads you in that direction anyway. In terms of coaching badges and qualifications, it was probably towards my late 20s, early 30s where I thought this might be something that interests me further down the line.'

Clearly, Gerrard felt that his role as captain helped prepare him for the job in certain ways. Still, ultimately his ability to translate his ideas on to the coaching pitch and have players buy into his philosophy would be critical to any potential success. It was abundantly clear from the very early months of Gerrard's time at Ibrox just how much influence the 'Liverpool DNA' has had on his and his coaching staff's view on football. Having been in the Liverpool system for almost 30 years as a boy, man and captain, this will come as no surprise to anyone. But knowing these principles is one thing; implementing them is quite another.

During his brief time in charge of Liverpool's under-18s, he learned and adapted quickly and visualised how he saw himself as a coach and manager. Gerrard told the Rangers website of his philosophy, 'It wouldn't make sense [to him] if you decided to go with a philosophy that you started fresh when you finished your career. Mine was built from the DNA of Liverpool and being around top internationals. I learned a lot of principles and values, and I was lucky enough to lead at under-18 and under-19 level. That was an opportunity for me to try different formations, different systems, different ways of playing, but I was always wanting to stick to that DNA which

was always to be a possession-based team in terms of owning the ball.'

Within Gerrard's 'own the pitch, own the ball' philosophy, he identified certain principles that he felt should symbolise any team he coached in the future. These included always playing one-touch football, moving the ball quickly and playing with tempo and intensity. Another critical theme woven through is how aggressive Gerrard wants his teams to be when out of possession but embedded within a tight structure. If you implement a high pressing structure, you must ensure the whole team remains aligned when the press is initiated. To do this, the team must stay compact and tight and move around the pitch in units to ensure maximum coverage should the pressure fail and the opposition exploit an opportunity to attack.

Gerrard went on to say, 'The biggest learning curve for me with my philosophy is not to be set on one thing because you need to be adaptable within your philosophy to certain challenges and contrasting games but if I stay true to my values and the DNA I've built in Liverpool, I believed that would work at Rangers too.'

King's comments about Gerrard's lack of first-hand managerial experience were, of course, correct in the literal sense. Still, as outlined, he did have over 16 years' experience of top-level football while being exposed to elite-level tactical formations, ideas and structures during his time as the midfield lynchpin for Liverpool and England. Indeed, Gerrard's first 12 years as a professional at Liverpool were spent entirely under the tutelage of two of the greatest tactical minds of the last 25 years in Gérard Houllier and Rafa Benítez.

'I have tapped into them all, Rafa, Brendan [Rodgers], Gérard Houllier, Roy Hodgson, all of them,' he told the *Liverpool Echo*. 'What would Rafa have said to us in that situation? What would Brendan have said in and out of possession? So, you try and take things from them all.'

Gerrard was a guest on ex-Liverpool team-mate Jamie Carragher's *The Greatest Game* podcast in early 2020, where he provided some more meat on the bone in terms of the influences that have shaped his style.

'In terms of tactics, I always try to go to Rafa for the base out of possession and what we learned. [To be] compact, the block, no lines sliding, quick at moving the ball and, depending on who you are playing, do you go back to a low block or a medium block? It's not that Rafa was negative but I want to have a little bit more than that because if I have dreams and aims of coaching at the top and at big clubs like Rangers, you have to have an exciting team and play in a certain way where you go for teams out of possession and, when you get it, have exciting players. Otherwise I'm just not sure the fans will have you for that long.'

Another key facet of Gerrard's style is Rangers' approach to pressing and counter-pressing in a concerted, well-disciplined manner. There are definite shades of Jürgen Klopp's gegenpressing style in the way they aggressively hunt in packs to try to win the ball back quickly after losing it.

A few months after being appointed as manager, Gerrard revealed he was 'like a sponge' under Klopp at Liverpool and while there are many tactical similarities between both teams, there is also a mental aspect which Gerrard seems to value more than others. Famed for wearing his heart on his sleeve as a player, this carried on into his early years at Rangers with his emotional side bared to the world on more than one occasion, for better or worse.

'In terms of management, I've tried to be a sponge and steal things from all the managers I've played for,' he told *The Scotsman*. 'I've tapped into loads of that education in this Rangers journey, especially in Europe and the top games, we have played domestically.

'I've stolen stuff from Brendan Rodgers and Sven-Göran Eriksson in terms of the style and how it looks, playing through the lines and building from the back.

‘It’s important to be yourself when you are in these roles and do it your way. But I’ve worked with top managers and coaches, so I’d be a fool not to try and steal and use their expertise for my benefit.

‘It’s important for me not to nail myself to one philosophy and make a liar out of myself.

‘Because I think it all depends on what your job is, where you are working, what league you are in. So, for example, this is my first job here at Rangers. If my philosophy was a low block, hard to play against, we soak it up and play on the counter-attack – that doesn’t work in every game.’

Shortly after Rangers secured the Scottish Premiership title in 2021, Gerrard spoke to the *Mirror* of Klopp’s influence in their brief time together at Liverpool.

‘One thing I learned from Jürgen is to try and detach yourself, and be more balanced around the results,’ he said.

‘He is a master of it. I am not. I am trying to get better at it. I was an emotional player, and I wore my heart on my sleeve. I feel results and want to be as authentic and real as I can.

‘But as a manager you have to be more balanced.’

Gerrard and his staff did a lot of work on the training pitch with the supporters in mind. They were aware of the traditions of clubs like Rangers, and there were constant references to the supporters’ demands and how the team should play needs to align to that. Rangers have to have a specific philosophy that aligns with the fans’ expectations. They will not accept a team that primarily play defensive, hard-to-beat football and try to break on the counter. The team must always play attacking and aggressive football fused with grit, hard work and determination. These are the traditions Rangers is built on, and the coaching staff were able to tap into their experience at Liverpool to embed these principles in the squad from an early stage.

As outlined, this was a collaborative team effort; therefore, when we speak about the tactical influences that have shaped

this Rangers team, we must also talk about the coaches who have shaped Michael Beale's philosophy.

Like Gerrard, first-team coach Beale has been heavily influenced by clubs he has worked for and coaches he has worked with during his 20-year career.

Having grown up in 1990s London, Beale's fascination with football is similar to most of the same age, dominated by the Premier League and Serie A. Such was the exposure to the Italian game via the excellent *Football Italia* on Channel 4, there are many of us with long-lasting *calcio* obsessions.

Given Beale's love for English football and his keen eye on the foreign game, it is no surprise that Sir Bobby Robson was one of the biggest influences on him as a young coach. He describes Sir Bobby as a 'trailblazer for English coaches' due to his time coaching clubs such as Barcelona, Sporting Lisbon, Porto and PSV, as well as the England national team. Beale also held a long-term desire to coach abroad one day, which would be realised with his brief spell as assistant manager at São Paulo.

Another name frequently features when Beale discusses his influences: Johan Cruyff, or the man he calls 'the most important person in the history of football'. On his website, Beale describes his playing style as being one he revered and how much he valued Cruyff's thoughts on how football should be played at a more cerebral level during his time at Ajax and Barcelona.

Two more massive names in European football come up time and time again when Beale talks about his footballing philosophy, and both are coaches he worked with during his time at Chelsea's academy. Firstly, Carlo Ancelotti has played and coached at the highest level for 40 years in numerous major European leagues, winning domestic titles and three Champions Leagues. This adaptability to new surroundings, allied to his incredible man-management skills, is key to his longevity as a manager. Indeed, the 4-3-2-1 system that Rangers have used throughout Gerrard and Beale's time at the club shares more

than a few similarities with the Champions League-winning AC Milan teams of the early to mid-2000s, managed by none other than Ancelotti.

Secondly, José Mourinho is admired as a manager who was outstanding on the training pitch. In an article on his website, Beale details how stunned he was at the attention to detail throughout sessions and how the coaches worked seamlessly together to provide players with an elite training environment and platform to succeed on the pitch. He references Mourinho as key in his understanding of what was required to one day reach that level as a coach himself.

In over two decades of coaching in professional football clubs to date, Beale spent 12 years in development roles at Chelsea and Liverpool's academies. As such, he is influenced by developing young players and places a tremendous amount of focus on that despite moving fully into first-team environments thereafter at São Paulo first and now at Rangers.

One key theme running through any interview with Beale is his belief in how important the players and environment are to a team's success. His opinion is that players win you games, and formations and tactics are always secondary to that.