

# THE MAKING OF

# KICK OFF

RIVAL FOOTBALL GAMES APPEARED TO MEET THEIR MATCH WHEN KICK OFF WAS RELEASED IN 1989 BUT THEN DEVELOPER DINO DINI WENT ONE BETTER WITH A BLISTERING SEQUEL THAT HIT THE BACK OF THE NET FOR SCORES OF FANS

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES



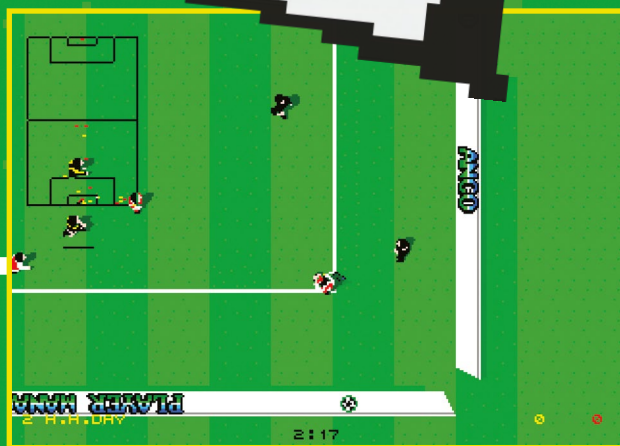
## IN THE KNOW

- » **PUBLISHER:**  
ANCO SOFTWARE
- » **DEVELOPER:**  
ANCO SOFTWARE
- » **RELEASED:**  
1990
- » **PLATFORM:**  
ATARI ST,  
VARIOUS
- » **GENRE:**  
SPORTS

**W**hether or not you enjoyed playing *Kick Off*, there was no denying it was one helluva speedy game. So here are some fast facts. *Kick Off* came out in 1989. It offered a bird's-eye view of the action (like *Tehkan World Cup* and *MicroProse Soccer* before it). It took practice to master. The ball wouldn't stick to the players' feet. And the ping-pong passing nature of the action proved compelling.

If there were shortcomings (and there were), some were addressed by the data disk, *Kick Off: Extra Time*. It added extras like new team formations, extra referees, a shot power meter, control over goal kicks and a useful feature called After Touch. *Kick Off's* developer and publisher Anco then released *Premier Manager*. This took *Kick Off's* match engine and blended it with a soccer management sim – the first time that management and playing elements had been combined.

*Premier Manager* hit shop shelves in 1990 but, despite having worked on three



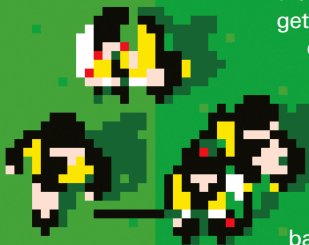
» [Amiga] The overview of the pitch comes in handy when defending against corners!

releases separated by mere months, Anco wanted more. A decision was made to build upon *Kick Off* and *Kick Off: Extra Time* by producing a sequel called – what else? – *Kick Off 2*. In doing so, the series' prime creator Dino Dini also sought to develop something of a footballing ecosystem. "I wanted players of *Kick Off 2* to have a reason to buy *Player Manager* as well," he says.

The most obvious motivation was the ability for gamers to import their own tactics and teams from *Player Manager* and go



"IN A MOMENT, YOU SUDDENLY SCORE THIS FANTASTIC GOAL"  
DINO DINI



head-to-head with other like-minded souls. "It meant gamers would come at *Kick Off 2* from different angles – playing and managing," Dino says. "I had this vision that people would work at getting the best team they could to complement their own skill in *Kick Off 2* and that they would take their team to a friend's house and have a good old bash at it."

Since Dino had a base to work from (*Kick Off* and *Extra Time*), development of *Kick Off 2* was very straightforward. The experience of creating the data disk and *Player Manager* gave Dino a good idea of what he wanted in the sequel and *After Touch* was a priority. It gave players the ability to chip and bend the ball immediately after it had been kicked and the feature soon became an integral part of *Kick Off 2*'s DNA.

"One of the things that annoyed me about the design of *Kick Off* was the inability to aim shots other than picking one of the eight main directions," Dino says. "I was thinking about how I could get more precision or more choice for the player when shooting the ball so I decided to cheat a little. Normally, in real life, you can't control the ball after it has been kicked but it's also very difficult to do it the other way around – it's hard to pre-bend a ball



» [Amiga] Get the timing wrong and you will give away many fouls.

or have some other way in which the timing affects the ball direction because you really want the ball to be kicked."

The best way, Dino surmised, was to allow a swerve to be controlled after the ball was kicked. Once the ball was released by the player, the computer would spend the next 15 frames of animation playing out the direction it would travel depending on which way forward the joystick had immediately been pushed. "The result was something that looked like a swerve," Dino says. "By directing the ball with the swerve, it meant players had more than eight directions in which they could shoot and it worked really well."

**A**fter *Touch* was widely praised but it wasn't the only way Dino got the most out of joysticks boasting only eight-way control and a fire button. Pulling back on the stick when the ball was on the ground, for example, would result in a chip. By reversing the direction when the ball was



# THE NEXT LEG

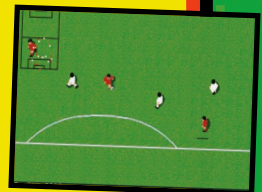
HOW THE SERIES WENT INTO EXTRA TIME

■ Dino Dini worked on the first two games in the *Kick Off* series as well as a bunch of expansion and data disks which required the main game to play. There were supposed to be 25 of these in total, ensuring the franchise would continue for some time but while that didn't happen, some of them nevertheless made their mark.

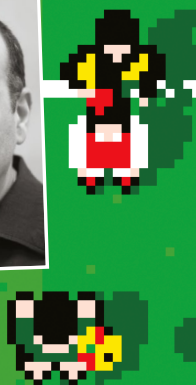
*Kick Off 2: The Final Whistle*, for example, gave Amiga owners three extra pitches – icy, muddy and bumpy. The expansion disk also added a referee and a couple of assistants, stronger *After Touch*, another couple of kits and some lovely little flourishes such as having an injured player being tended to.

There was more control over corners and some trick moves along with an offside rule, while players could even play in goal. Yet for Dino, *Kick Off 2* was as far as he would go. He decided against sticking around at Anco Software so Steve Screech created *Kick Off 3* while Dino went on to develop *Goal!* for Virgin Games in 1993. It was great fun and allowed for some big-scoring games despite some harsh refereeing.

Since then, *Kick Off* has been, er, kicking around in one guise or another over the years, including *Kick Off 96*, *Kick Off 97* and *Kick Off 98*, the poorly received *Kick Off 2002* and largely forgotten *Kick Off Revival* in 2015 which attempted to bring the name back on the PlayStation 4.



» Dino Dini is best known for kicking off the *Kick Off* series.



» [Amiga] Great moments in each match can be replayed and saved. Ah, memories!



## DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

**KICK OFF**  
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS  
YEAR: 1989

**PLAYER MANAGER (PICTURED)**  
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, AMIGA, DOS  
YEAR: 1990

**GOAL!**  
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS  
YEAR: 1993

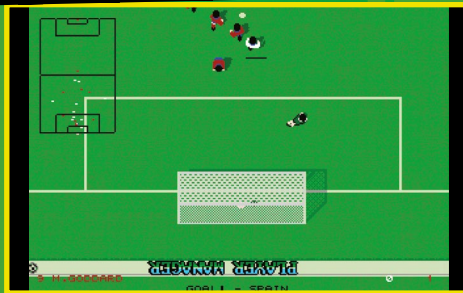


# CONVERSION CAPERS



## ATARI ST

Once dubbed “the best football game ever to grace the ST” by *CVG* magazine, *Kick Off 2* was also praised for its fast pace and slick passing. Although all the pitches in the Atari ST version looked the same, running the game on an expanded machine did at least add extra sound effects.



## AMIGA

Different-looking pitches aside, there was little to distinguish this version from the Atari ST. Although the game dropped its pace in comparison to the original, it impressed with *After Touch*, an action replay and a timely World Cup tournament, building upon the original’s *Extra Time* expansion pack.



## ZX SPECTRUM

Ported by Enigma Variations, the Speccy port was far from being top-flight material even though it sought to include features found in its 16-bit cousins. Aside from horrendous colour clash and poor controls, toggling the options didn’t always have much effect on matches.

“THE ORACLE CRACK WAS CREATED BEFORE I COULD PATCH THE GAME”  
DINO DINI



► in the air, the joystick could also be used to perform an overhead kick. “The publisher asked me if I could put in an overhead kick and I said, ‘Actually, yes I can,’” Dino says. “I said players reversed the stick while the ball was up in the air, we could add a scissor kick animation. And that’s how the feature got added.”

As in the first game, gamers could stop the ball by pressing the fire button before it reached their footballer’s feet, thereby giving them control but it wasn’t always obvious. “If players had the manual, they would know this but it always frustrated me because one of the criticisms often levelled at *Kick Off* was that you couldn’t control the ball,” Dino laments. “Once you stopped the ball, you could then push the stick in a certain direction, let go and it would perform a pass. When I initially had criticism saying it wasn’t possible to control the ball, I was scratching my head wondering why they were saying that!”

THE CUP					
NAME	C	Q.F.	S.F.	FINALS	WINNER
ITALY	C	A			
SWEDEN	C	A			
ENGLAND	C	B			
SPAIN	C	B			
SCOTLAND	C	C			
GERMANY	C	C			
FRANCE	C	D			
HOLLAND	C	D			

CONTINUE SAVE LOAD QUIT

» [Amiga] As well as a league, it was also possible to take part in a cup.



Piracy was a big factor for this, he says. People simply wouldn’t read the instructions because they didn’t have them! “More people probably played the game using a pirated copy than the actual original and that’s human nature,” Dino continues. “But it’s painful as a game developer especially when the reliance on pirated versions of the game meant your intent was lost. I’d get a wave of criticism from people who didn’t understand the design who would have done it if they had the instructions to hand. People sharing the game weren’t bothering to copy them.”

**P**iracy caused other issues, Dino adds, pointing to one of the most popular cracks created by a group called Oracle. “There was a bug in *Kick Off 2* that I fixed in version 1.3 or 1.4, I forget which now, and it was due to a tiny piece of code that had been in *Player Manager*,” he explains. “It’s purpose was to make the AI players capable of better controlling the ball near the goal so that their scoring performance would increase and it was added because I was having trouble balancing the game. I felt it was the best solution to getting the job done.”

The *Premier Manager* code, he explains, meant it was more difficult for AI players to

lose the ball when they were in the penalty area. “But those few lines of assembler code were left in *Kick Off 2* and I didn’t realise it,” he recalls. “When enabled, it meant the ball changed in the penalty area and it was more difficult to let go of it – something totally against my intention which is why I found the bug and fixed it.”

“But the Oracle crack was created before I could patch the game and, since the vast majority of people were playing pirated copies... well, you can see how this blows up! Even 20 years later, people debate whether or not the penalty box dribble, as it became known, is the purest version. It has caused a lot of controversy in the *Kick Off* community over the years.”

In many respects, *Kick Off 2* was refining what had come before. Even so, the combination of tweaks made to the game to produce a named sequel ultimately made it feel fresh. It was a more polished offering, making it easier to select formations, pitches and wind strength, for instance. There was also an option to play two three-minute halves as opposed to just five, ten and twenty minutes. Fast play for a fast-paced game!

“Five minutes seemed like the best option for most players, although three



WILL THESE VERSIONS HAVE YOU DRIBBLING?



C64

■ *Kick Off 2* fared better on the Commodore 64, producing a fast sequel far that greatly improved on the original game. Even so, the pitch overview was far too small to be of any real use and the AI of your team's players was not as sharp as it ought to have been.



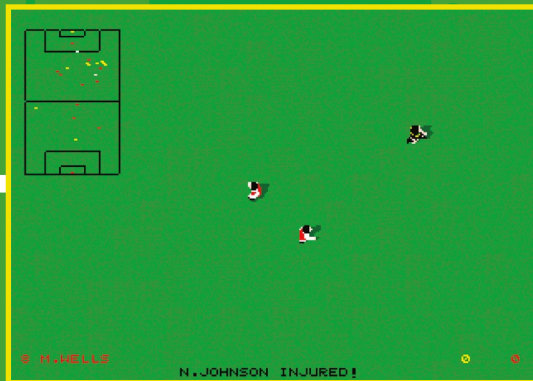
AMSTRAD CPC

■ Lacking a pitch overview as on the Spectrum version, this port was at least pleasant on the eye (if not on the ears). The on-screen display felt as if it was in the way but, overall, it was a vast improvement on the original *Kick Off* port for the CPC and certainly has its fans.



SNES

■ Called *World League Soccer* (or *Pro Soccer* in Japan), this port not only looked and sounded terrible, it also played every bit as poorly. With woeful collision detection, a dismal control method and nothing to warrant a rematch, it was a poor member of the team.



» [Amiga] Injured players would need to go off and be replaced by a substitute.





# TOP THE LEAGUE

GOALS DON'T COME FREELY IN KICK OFF 2

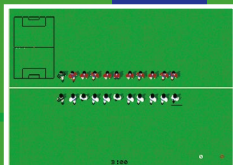
## ATTACK, ATTACK, ATTACK

■ OK, easier said than done – getting hold of the ball isn't always that simple. But if you are in possession, heading for the centre of the goal and using After Touch after unleashing a shot can often beat the goalie if you get the timing right.



## LIFE'S A PITCH

■ If you want an easy time of it, then opt for a normal pitch rather than one of the less favourable surfaces. The soggy pitch, for example, will force you to run and chase the ball more while the plastic pitch can make play feel a bit too nippy.



## CORNER TACTICS

■ Hold the fire button to get some power behind the shot but aim away from the goalkeeper so that he doesn't end up intercepting it. If you can get it to a player within the box, all the better, particularly if you can use After Touch to whack the ball into the net.



## THE LONG BALL

■ The simplest way of getting the ball into the opponent's half is to whack it up there. Sure, playing the long ball game is never pretty but you're more likely to lose possession if you're trying to pass your way up the pitch. Do that after some more practice.



## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

■ Which brings us to the practice mode which slows the game down a bit and frees you of the opposition. Take the time to learn how to dribble – running, turning, going left, right and so on. If you're a newcomer to the game, start here.



## DON'T SLIDE IN!

■ If you slide tackle – especially in the box – you're inevitably going to end up giving away a penalty and they're really hard to defend against. It's better to dribble balls away from the opponent and chip it while heading for goal yourself.



» [Amiga] Before each game, you could see a round-up of your chosen options..

“MORE PEOPLE PROBABLY PLAYED THE GAME USING A PIRATED COPY THAN THE ACTUAL ORIGINAL”  
**DINO DINI**

» [Amiga] The setpieces could be impressive, especially for free kicks.







» [Amiga] There were a few ways to play *Kick Off 2* and you could also import data from *Player Manager*.

*Kick Off*. As a result, I decided to make the goalkeepers tougher but there was always a worry that I might have actually ended up diminishing the fun of the game." The tougher goalkeepers were indeed noticeable and made it hard for players to score yet, on the positive side, it ensured the game was more of a challenge.

Throughout development, Dino continued to wrestle with the best way of striking a balance between the attributes of the player and the attributes of the gamer. "It always raised an interesting question: who was playing the game? Was it the gamer or was it the named player on the pitch?" he says.

"I'd addressed the use of attributes in *Premier Manager* and refined it further in *Kick Off 2*, ending up with a 50-50 situation so that one did not completely overwhelm the other. This meant there was a strategic element to the game."

**I**t also went some way towards working out whether or not the skill of the gamer was more important than the skill of the footballer in the game.

"I'm not an expert on recent football titles, but the focus seems to have moved towards the attributes of the player rather than the attributes of the gamer," Dino says.

As well as working on the fundamentals of the gameplay, attention was also paid to the graphics and overall presentation. This time around it was possible for gamers



» [Amiga] As well as being able to see your team, you could also check out the formation.

to design the kits. Aside from different colours, gamers could choose between plain tops and those with patterns such as stripes and hoops. In the absence of a licence (which meant gamers couldn't make use of real team or player names), this was a welcome move.

"By reproducing the different kits for each of the teams as much as possible given the available technology and then interpreting the abilities of real-life players and mimicking them inside the game using the attribute system of *Player Manager*, I was able to create a very natural extension to the original game," says Dino. It was also possible to edit the team names in the game, just as it was in *Kick Off*, with the game looking to give the game a sense of occasion and allow it greater realism. Indeed, Dino was also keen for gamers to capture the big moments.

"Most of the time in football, not a lot really happens, but then, in a moment, you suddenly score this fantastic goal," Dino explains. "When you're watching a team you support, there's a certain magic to those moments but if they're not captured, they're lost forever." Cue, action replays and the ability to save goals. "The action replay allowed gamers to review a goal they had scored and relive it but I wanted people to save them as well," he says.

Adding to this sense of occasion and realism was the ability to play in a World Cup, an addition created to coincide with Italia '90. Many gamers would simply

engage in two-player head-to-heads as random matches rather than compete in the game's cups and leagues, however. Intriguingly, people could also make use of an adapter so that two gamers could join together on one team.

At the same time, Dino was hoping that gamers would gel with the AI as much as they did with each other. "It's not possible for the AI to read the minds of gamers and always know which player they want to pass to," he explains. "But as long as the AI makes an effort and tries to go in the right direction, the gamer starts to learn its behaviour and adapt their play to it. This is a philosophy of design: instead of trying to make the thing perfect for the gamer, you reach a certain point and plasticity bridges the gap. When the two things are joined, you have a beautiful thing."

As with the debut *Kick Off*, there were some data disks for the sequel along with expansion packs. Of those, *Return To Europe*, *Giants Of Europe* and *Winning Tactics* were less comprehensive than *The Final Whistle* which added player stats, penalties, throw-ins, new kits and pitches, and the offside rule. But they ensured *Kick Off 2* remained fresh for fans.

On that score, there was no doubt *Kick Off 2* was a winner. Although other football games have fans who are just as passionate, the fact it's still played to this day (and features on The A500 Mini, attracting even more fans) says much about the successful implementation of the beautiful game! That it topped the charts upon release is also something Dino is rightfully proud of. "I'd get a magazine and say, 'Oh look, I'm number one,'" he says. "And I felt, damn it, I know what I'm on this earth to do!" ★