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The following article is the second installment of a paper that was presented at the American Soccer History Symposium last June in Oneonta. The author is a SASH member, a former Temple University and American Soccer League player and a current resident of Washington, D.C.

The Ethnic Legacy in U.S. Soccer

by Len Oliver

Ethnic Contributions to U.S. Soccer

Even though the ethnic influence on U.S. soccer has been the greatest in our urban areas, by the 1960s the older ethnic groups had moved from the cities to the suburbs, especially in the eastern and midwest regions. They took their soccer clubs and leagues with them in a quest for less expensive land for their fields and clubs, and escape from our growing urban ills.

We can describe in generalized terms ethnic contributions to the pluralism of America's urban and neighborhood life, but our focus is on how the ethnic groups helped to create a soccer culture in our country, how they kept the game alive, and how they laid the essential base for our soccer explosion over the last two decades.

Soccer's Language

The immigrants taught us how to talk about soccer, the nuances, the terminology, and soccer history, lore, and colorful characters. They did this on and off the field, in meetings of soccer associations, in their newspapers and reporting on games, and in the oldtimers' stories. Even today, our soccer reporting lacks the verve of the overseas press and the various ethnic journals in the U.S. We are getting better, through our many soccer publications and local press (more sports reporters have played soccer than ever before), but we still have the American penchant of looking for statistics and reports on goals while ignoring the essence of the sport.

I recall an Italian reporter's description of a 1982 World Cup game as "lung-consuming, heartbreaking, with a great inner strength and...a few geo-political quarrels." Players are described as "slippery as Rossi," "elegant and ironmade like Scirea," or "unyielding like Zoff." At the same time, in contrast, Newsweek was reporting on the huge number of journalists, the English hooligans, the four Brazilian samba bands, and the low number of goals scored.

As I said in an article, "When we learn to talk about soccer in this loving, poetic, dramatic fashion, professional soccer will come alive here." The ethnic soccer people taught us to look for style and flair in the game itself, rather than dry statistics and events extraneous to the game. They taught us the subtleties of the game, the buildups and the quick counters, the 1 vs. 1 matchups, and the movements off the ball rather than focusing on goals or scoring opportunities while missing soccer's artistry, style, and pathos.

Soccer Organizers

The immigrants of the early part of this century wanted to continue their sport in their new country, to play it and to watch it as they had done at home. Where there was no soccer club, they started one. Where there was no league, they founded one. Thus, the Germans founded the old German-American League in New York in the 1920s. Immigrants were in most of the leading positions in the early professional leagues like the first American

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Soccer League (1921) and its successor ASL in 1933, or the National Soccer League in Chicago (1910) and the Greater Los Angeles Soccer League founded in the early 1920s. Phil Woosnam, a Welshman, was the first commissioner of the North American Soccer League (NASL). Gene Chyzowych, a Ukrainian, almost singlehandedly kept the ASL alive in the late 1960s, advocating the use of American players: "St. Louis used all American boys. Delaware too....We cannot continue playing with Ukrainians, Italians and Portuguese; we have to open doors for Americans....The league should exist for the American kids." Major League Soccer (MLS), due to open in the spring of 1996, faces the same question today.

The advent of the NASL in the late 1960s helped to establish the credibility of soccer with the American public, and to redirect us away from the strong ethnic identification of the past. Much of the NASL's talent came from overseas, but teams represented cities, not ethnic clubs or ethnic groups (e.g., the Philadelphia Ukrainians, Brooklyn Hispano or San Francisco Scots).

"Americanizing" the game meant divorcing names from this strong ethnic identification to Americanized nicknames (Baltimore Bays, Rochester Lancers, Washington Darts, or Philadelphia Atoms). This principle of Americanizing soccer from the top for the public and media took hold, even as the ethnic legacy continued on the playing field in the NASL.

Pele's arrival in 1975 with the New York Cosmos sparked national interest, community-by-community. His presence focused media and public attention on the NASL as a legitimate professional sport. Clive Toye, an Englishman, brought Pele to the U.S., while Woosnam continued to head the NASL. In a comic footnote on the Pele era, our 1983 delegation to FIFA to present our World Cup bid for 1986 consisted of Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and Henry Kissinger--all foreign-born while representing the U.S.'s soccer interests.

The Ethnic Club: A Home for Soccer

The immigrants founded soccer clubs in urban America. These clubs, continuing the pattern from abroad, included reserve teams, junior teams, and youth leagues. In my playing career, I have played with Scottish, Portuguese, Russian, German and Italian clubs--all focused on their soccer teams but also having broader cultural pursuits.

Consider the list of champions from any of the ASL seasons into the 1960s and you'll find the Kearny Scots, New York Hakoah, New York Inter and Philadelphia Ukrainians, among others. Ponta Delgada of Fall River, German-Americans of Philadelphia, Schwaben of Chicago--all dominated the Amateur Cup ranks at one time.

The immigrants created a "home for soccer" thorough their fields and clubhouses, be it at Eintracht Oval in Queens, New York or Balboa Park in San Francisco. They combined soccer and social life, they stuck together, they had group solidarity. As Manny Schellscheidt, famed Seton Hall coach, told me about coming over: "I wouldn't be here without soccer--they helped me come over and get a temporary permit. They got me the Green Card, a place to stay, and a job."

According to Walt Bahr, former professional and soccer legend, the ethnic clubs boosted soccer during some critical times:

"After World War II, ten of thousands of Ukrainians fled war-torn Europe to come to America. They had outstanding clubs in New York, Philadelphia, Newark and Toronto, and raised our soccer to new heights. After the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, we found Hungarian soccer clubs with top players taking the league and national titles. Every time there is an upheaval in the world, the soccer-playing immigrants come over and our soccer has benefitted."

The ethnic club structure was the forerunner of the thousands of community-based local soccer clubs which have sprung up since the Pele era. In most other U.S. team sports, teams tend to be organized by town or city recreation departments, Police Athletic Leagues, or other community organizations. In soccer, we find youth soccer clubs in every community, not driven by ethnicized senior teams as in times past, but as self-standing house league and travel teams supported by parents as volunteer organizers, coaches, managers and league officials. These parents continue both the club structure and spirit of volunteerism for soccer brought by the ethnic groups in a different era.

Ethnic Passion for Soccer

When I asked a coaching colleague recently about the ethnic contribution to U.S. soccer, he quickly said "their passion for the sport and for making a soccer game an event." Bahr echoed this point: "The ethnic groups brought us a different level of soccer, along with their enthusiasm, loyalty and fierce passion for the game."

Anyone watching a match between two ethnic-oriented teams in the period when I played felt the passion on the sidelines and on the field. Italians against the Germans, Greeks against the Turks--some of the old hostilities flared. Only recently have we as Americans come to realize the intensity soccer generates, from the spectators to the coaches to the players. These passions reached new heights as we witnessed how other cultures and nationalities celebrated their teams during the 1994 World Cup, with our own brand of hysteria reaching its peak in the U.S.'s 2-1 victory over Colombia. We had a further taste of soccer's intensity during the summer of 1995 with the U.S. successes in the U.S. Cup, the Copa America in Uruguay and the Parmalat Cup at the Meadowlands in New Jersey. Painted faces, musical instruments (mostly loud, ear-rattling horns), flags, and dances through the aisles marked these games--and we're still learning.

With more games on television, especially the European and South American championships, we can sense the passion and fervor in the stands and on the field. That passion, already caught by the young American players, their parents, and their fans, is slowly infiltrating the media consciousness. We're not there yet. Most sports reporters and TV broadcasters, not having played the sport, still continue to look for the wrong things in soccer--the passion and poetry of soccer, fondly embraced by ethnic groups, hasn't yet sunk in.

The Ethnic Influence on Skills and Styles of Play

The immigrant players showed us how the game can be played, the high level of skills and tactics involved, the love for the ball, the speed of the game, and how far we still have to go to be a true soccer nation. Even England-born Ted Koppel, ABC broadcaster and soccer player at Syracuse University in the late 1950s, talked about skill levels in a post-World Cup 1994 interview:

"I played both left wing and inside left. I guess they would have described me as more of a finesse player than a hard-nosed player. And because I had learned to play in England, I had...what today would be considered as slightly above average skills as a dribbler and passer. I had far more ball control than the Americans. Those were the days when most American kids playing soccer thought all they had to do was kick the ball as far down as they could and run like hell." (*Sidekicks International*, 1995).

I would venture that most ethnic players of the period had the same view as Koppel. My own early experience with organized soccer came at the Lighthouse Boys Club in Philadelphia, where grizzled veterans from England and Scotland taught the English or Scottish game. We watched the pros and emulated their moves, just as a generation later kids would emulate the skills of a Pele, a Beckenbauer, a Bogicevic or a Chinaglia. As Schellscheidt told me, "Ed Kelly [Boston College coach] observed that when he played in the streets, all his heroes were there with him."

The immigrants encouraged us to play on our own, to be comfortable with the ball, many times just joining the kids in tapping the ball around in the streets. Today, few kids venture to a field on their own without parent or coaching supervision. We're organized, and soccer often is only one of many activities our over-organized kids get into. Ethnic players learned soccer on their own and even today you can see small groups of Hispanic, Caribbean or African boys and men just knocking the ball about on fields in our metropolitan area.

Ed Borg, former soccer official, recalled the learning experience he enjoyed by playing on different ethnic teams:

"I played with a Maltese team in the English style, three men back and long balls. When I went to the German-American League, I found tighter marking and more systematic play. On my Spanish teams, we had many more touches on the ball. So different teams, different styles--we learned from each."

Bahr, with extensive overseas playing experience, thought the foreign players at the top levels "better than us in all aspects of the game. We never had the intense soccer environment you find overseas. If we can play against good competition, our game will get better. We'll raise our level." We need look no farther for proof of Bahr's

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point than the dramatic development of the U.S.'s overseas players--Keller, Lalas, Wynalda, Caligiuri, Sorber, Balboa and others who have grown immensely from playing on foreign teams in high-level competition.

Schellscheidt added to this view: "Traditional soccer countries have a 150-year-old soccer environment. Kids could play on their own, and they grow up as better players than the kids led by their parents. They become creative, defining their own vision of the game, and using their imagination."

A distinct U.S. style in soccer continues to emerge. As kids, we played the style our fathers and foreign-born coaches taught us, usually a combination of the long ball; tough, hard tackling, and occasional glimpses of finesse and dribbling skills. Our game and our thinking were slower than today's game, played at high speed in both use of skills and tactics.

Since a soccer style represents individual personalities as well as cultural traits, our multi-cultural nation will continue to be influenced in soccer by ethnic styles until our own distinct style emerges. As Los Angeles Salsa coach Octavio Zambrano put it in commenting on his club's style:

"We are definitely a combination of Latin and European. We are only a reflection of what our society is.... We combine Latin kids from the city who are very adept technically and a tremendous amount of skill with Anglo-Americans and Afro-Americans who provide a different dimension. They are more explosive, more direct. This type of combination is a true example of what the American style is, or should be." (*Soccer America*, April 5, 1995).

The soccer public's sense of differing styles grew with the World Cup in 1994 as we witnessed teams and personalities up close, from the Irish two-touch, shot-on-goal approach to the possession game of the Italians and the Brazilians, from the all-out attacking style of the Dutch to the cautious, but highly-effective quick counters of the Romanians. These teams and players taught our kids and our coaches new tactics, new skills, new moves, and above all the art of exquisite ball control. We had a new range of models to draw upon.

Can we encourage a distinct American style? Do we incorporate the style of an ethnic group such as the Hispanics? Or do we continue to assimilate and learn from the best of what the ethnic groups have to offer while developing a distinct American way of playing? Steve Sampson, U.S. national men's team coach, offered us a glimpse of an emerging style with his attacking, direct play in recent tournaments. Sampson has instituted tight marking and maintaining shape in defense, backs and midfielders constantly overlapping and moving into attack, forwards unafraid to take opponents on, and speed combined with greater vision and tactical awareness of the next move. It's coming!

Ethnic Groups Kept the Game Alive

Ethnic groups and clubs kept soccer in the U.S. alive during some dark periods and helped to lay the groundwork for the soccer revolution sparked by Pele's arrival in 1975. Pele may have served as the flashpoint for the soccer revolution, but the ethnic groups provided the bulk of skilled soccer players and organizers, along with spectators, up to the Pele era.

Sure, we had strong American youth teams in the 1940s and 1950s (Philadelphia Lighthouse, St. Louis Kutis), Americanized professional teams (Philadelphia Nationals, Philadelphia Americans), public and private school programs dominated by American-born youth, and growing numbers of college teams with American players. But without the ethnic leagues and clubs, without the continual influx of the immigrant players and coaches, our sport would not have had the foundation on which the Pele phenomenon and the NASL could build. It might even have died.

Without the ethnic influence, the quality of our soccer would have been considerably lessened. Would we be playing soccer with the quality and speed we find in the American game? We don't know. What we do know is that the immigrants brought their game, planted it firmly in our sports psyche alongside our indigenous sports, and laid the basis for soccer's growth for generations to come.

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Membership notes

The annual SASH membership meeting will be held in Oneonta, N.Y. on Thursday, June 13. As in the past, the meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at Morris Hall on the SUNY-Oneonta campus.

The SASH meeting will be the first of a series of events at the National Soccer Hall of Fame's annual Hall of Fame Week. The fourth American Soccer History Symposium (see below), jointly conducted by SASH and the Hall of Fame, will be held on Friday, June 14, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

The Hall of Fame will hold a reception, site as yet undecided, on the evening of Friday, June 14. Events on Saturday, June 15, will be the Hall of Fame induction ceremonies, to be held during the day in downtown Oneonta along with other soccer-related activities, and the Hall of Fame Banquet, to be held that evening, site as yet undecided. On Sunday, June 16, the Hall of Fame will hold its annual Hall of Fame Game, teams still to be announced, at Hartwick College's soccer field.

This year's symposium will be devoted to the college game. All of the speakers will be SASH members. They will be:

Len Oliver and Mickey Cochran on the pre-NCAA era, as the sport grew in the 1940s and '50s.

Jack Huckel on the early years of the NCAA tournament.

Shawn Ladda on the growth of the women's game to the point of now being an Olympic medal sport.

Mark Salisbury on the change of the NCAA final four to a single-site "big event" in recent years, and the effects of that change on the sport.