

# SASH

## HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

---

Newsletter of the Society for American Soccer History.      Number Four.      Fall 1994.

---

*What begins below is the final installment of Len Oliver's paper on Philadelphia soccer in the middle of this century, which was originally presented as part of the first American Soccer History Symposium in Oneonta, N.Y. in 1992. In the first two installments, he discussed street soccer, youth soccer and club soccer as he saw them as a player. Here, he discusses the school side of the sport and draws some conclusions about soccer as an urban phenomenon.*

### **AMERICAN SOCCER DIDN'T START WITH PELE: PHILADELPHIA SOCCER IN THE '40s AND '50s**

by Len Oliver  
Washington, D.C.

#### **High School and College Soccer: Products of the Clubs**

Just as today, high school soccer in Philadelphia in the '40s and early '50s reflected club soccer. All the public schools and many of the private schools had soccer teams, but the schools in the neighborhoods with ethnic strongholds dominated the high school scene. At Northeast H.S., for example, where most of the Lighthouse products went, including Walter Bahr and other pros of the day, we ran the school's unbeaten string to 96 games, with 63 straight shutouts--a run that lasted over 10 years. City titles, All-Scholastic representatives, All-Star games--all came to the street-smart youngsters who came out of the Lighthouse Boys Club. The annual All-Star match with New York's high school stars would draw 3,000 spectators, with the teams playing for the Oldtimers' "Old Shoe" Award. No girls played club soccer, and no high schools had girls' teams. We would have to wait 30 years for the high schools to adopt girls' soccer, when in a different age, more and more club players and their parents demanded equality with boys' soccer, spurred by Title IX.

Soccer was a sport dominated by the club structure. You cannot develop a player in high school, you can only further talents already developed and raise a player's awareness of the game. This fact was often lost on the media, so accustomed to focusing on high school and college games while ignoring where the real soccer is played. The same holds true today. Our high school games would draw 500 fans, and over 5,000 came out for the city title games, usually pitting Northeast against Girard College, a school for orphans known for its soccer talents.

Philadelphia liked its soccer, and the college game reflected the strength of Philadelphia youth soccer. All the local colleges fielded strong teams--Temple, University of Pennsylvania, LaSalle and Drexel leading the way. Many of the Lighthouse-Northeast H.S. contingent received full scholarships to Temple, one of approximately 90 varsity programs around the country in the early '50s. The strongest teams, like Temple, the University of San Francisco and Penn State University were fed by the influence of urban youngsters, while in the Ivy League, New England's prep schools provided the talent. No women's varsity soccer programs existed.

## SASH Historical Quarterly

On New Year's Day in 1950, the nation witnessed the First College Soccer Bowl, bringing perennial powers Penn State and USF to St. Louis for a game that ended in a 2-2 tie. The schools were declared co-champions. Cross-sectional rivalry had become a reality, giving a great boost to college soccer.

College soccer history was made in 1951 when our Temple Owls met USF in the second Soccer Bowl in San Francisco's Kezar Stadium before 10,000 fans--the largest crowd to see a college soccer game in the U.S. The game attracted outstanding media coverage, accounting for the attendance. We flew cross-country on a 24-hour flight. Coach Pete Leanness asked me to captain the team from my center half position, an honor for a freshman. We defeated USF, 2-0, with Ed Tatoian scoring both goals, and Temple was named national champions. No more Soccer Bowls were held until the late '50s when the NCAA began its formal playoff system.

The kids from the streets of Kensington and the fields of Lighthouse transferred their skills and competitiveness to college soccer, with Temple losing only three games in the four years I played. Some of the local teams, such as Drexel and Penn, were very strong, bolstered by the ethnic neighborhood players, but Temple dominated Philadelphia college soccer. We were again declared national champions in 1953, after an undefeated season.

During my freshman year at Temple, we played the traditional 2-3-5, but moved in subsequent years to the W-M. We essentially put ourselves on the field, ran the practices, and rarely played less than the full 90 minutes.

Each year, we watched as new varsity teams sprang up across the country, so by 1955, when I graduated from Temple University, there were 125 college soccer programs in 31 states. One year later, there were 171 college teams, with another 100 playing club soccer. The college game was on its way, fueled by American-born youngsters.

The early '50s were also a time of experimentation in college soccer. Up to this time, college soccer had followed FIFA's Laws. In 1951, the colleges introduced the "kick-in" to replace the throw-in, a change benefitting the inferior teams. They essentially received a free kick instead of the normal throw-in, thereby taking a restart tactic out of the college game.

Other experiments, short-lived, included an arc 18 yards out instead of the penalty area. Free substitution was the norm, allowing less skilled but fit "runners" to come in off the bench and affect the game. Colleges also played 22-minute quarters, and referees employed the two-man system, enabling older referees--and there were many--to remain in the game a few years longer. One, my neighbor and dear friend, Jimmy Walder, refereed high school and college games well into his 80s.

The college referees came basically from the amateur ranks, all former players, who tolerated no abuse, but who let the players play and work out their differences on the field--where it belongs. In one memorable hard-fought game between traditional rivals Temple and Penn State for the National Championship in 1953, play became so heated that one Temple player broke his leg and several others were carried off. The referees, Walder and Harry Rogers, both from Philadelphia, called time and brought both teams to midfield. "You're getting our first warning--all of you," said Walder sternly, "Next time you're gone." Players settled down, just as intense, but fair, and the teams belted it out in a 2-0 Temple victory without any more trouble. It was the only time in my career that all 22 players had received what amounted to a "yellow card" in today's language.

When we left Temple, we finally split up the "Lighthouse connection," some of us going into the Armed Forces, some to the pros, some back to the amateur leagues, and some coaching. Almost all of us stayed in the game into our 30s, often competing with and occasionally against each other.

### The Pro Game in the Early '50s

As a young player in the '40s, we often watched the Philadelphia Americans and the Philadelphia Nationals. Eventually we trained with the pros as we moved up the soccer ladder. By the time we signed with the pros in the mid-'50s, Bahr, Bennie McLaughlin, Jack Hynes, and our heroes from our junior days were well-established stars. For Americans, Bahr and McLaughlin had no equals. We learned from both--Bahr with his end-to-end hustle, his ball control, his long accurate passes, his 40-yard throws, his take-charge leadership and his powerful shots on goal. The smaller McLaughlin inspired us with his finesse, dribbling opponents one-one-one throughout

## SASH Historical Quarterly

the game, lithe, snaking through defenses, setting up other attackers with deadly through passes, a little guy taking on the biggest defenders, bouncing up from bruising tackles, and also possessing a devastating shot.

I joined the Philadelphia Uhrik Truckers, named after owner Tony Uhrik, Philadelphia trucking magnate, in 1955. The Truckers had taken the old Philadelphia Americans' franchise, and won back-to-back ASL titles in 1955 and 1956. Jimmy Mills, the ageless Haverford University coach who recently passed away at 96, coached the Uhriks. I'll always remember Jimmy's Scottish accent booming out, "Give it a bit more ginger, lads."

The American Soccer League was semi-pro, the only recognized professional league in the U.S. at the time. Players were also paid in the old German-American Soccer League (GASL) in New York "under the table," but the "pros" were in the ASL.

The "modern ASL," formed in 1933 with exclusive rights from the then-USFA to operate professional soccer on the Eastern seaboard, by mid-1950 was on reasonably solid footing. The ASL had initiated its foreign tours in 1946, earning money from the games. Dominated by New York and Philadelphia teams, the ASL represented, with the GASL the peak of soccer in the U.S. at the time. Ethnic teams like the New York Hakoah, the Brooklyn Hispano, the Newark Portuguese, the Newark Ukrainians and the Ludlow Lusitano competed alongside American-grown talent from the Philadelphia and Baltimore areas. In the mid-'50s, there was nowhere else to go to play top-level soccer in the U.S.--at least on the East Coast.

The ASL contributed to the growth of U.S. soccer by keeping the pro game alive until the upsurge in pro teams in the late '60s, bringing foreign teams to play the ASL All-Stars and each other, and providing players for the U.S. national team. The ASL attracted hundreds of coaches, referees, administrators and spectators who later would become the basis for the growth of pro soccer.

The Philadelphia pro teams often attracted several thousand spectators in this soccer-hungry town, whereas away games were often played before sparse crowds with little media attention in dusty ovals. For example, the Brooklyn Hispano played on a cinder field that served as a parking lot during the week, with the tire tracks often making the path of the ball unpredictable. Metropolitan Oval in New York's Queens was often our destination after a three-hour drive, where we played rain or shine before several hundred standing and often hostile spectators. Being on the touch line, the fans could yell at both opposing players and officials indiscriminately. After these games, we often had to exit in a circle, fists at the ready, as fans tried to get at us, forgoing the single shower to jump in our cars for the long ride home. The referees disappeared equally as fast.

Whatever criticisms have been leveled at the ASL, thousands of youngsters had heroes to emulate and exciting soccer to watch. We could shoot for a pro spot after college, as some of us did, to continue our playing. We could watch world-class foreign teams, marvelling at their skills and speed. It was the best soccer around for the period, and American-born players more than held their own. The ASL also kept pro soccer alive until the mid-'60s arrival of the new professional leagues--the United Soccer Association (1967), the National Professional Soccer League (1967), and then the North American Soccer League (1968).

### In Retrospect

Soccer in the '40s and '50s was basically a big-city sport, particularly in the ethnic enclaves, in direct contrast to the growth of the soccer phenomenon after Pele arrived in the mid-'70s. This later growth period, triggered by the North American Soccer League's success, the play of Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and Georgio Chinaglia, among others, had its greatest success in America's suburbs. By this time, many of the ethnic groups had abandoned the cities. Their kids, along with other suburban kids whose parents had never seen a game of soccer, became the basis for our recent soccer explosion of the last 20 years.

The sole exception is the young Hispanic or Caribbean player living in the inner city, often without a youth team, soccer shoes or good soccer balls. These kids are on the urban, inner-city playgrounds going 1 vs. 1 like their counterparts from Kensington half-a-century ago. What they need is a Lighthouse Boys Club, teams to play on, and organized soccer when they are ready so they can make their mark on the game and enjoy it.

The future of soccer in America's white, suburban areas and small towns, a recent phenomenon, seems assured. The game has attracted millions of youngsters and their parents to soccer. It can only grow. But the

## **SASH Historical Quarterly**

future of soccer in America is also in America's cities, with predominantly black youths untouched by soccer and Hispanic kids seeking outlets for their talents. Their future in the sport is more problematic.

Ironically, our nation's inner cities, just as they were when we were playing on the streets of Kensington, are once again against America's future in soccer. We played because we saw something in the game we liked. As urban, low-income kids, we mastered a skill, we worked together on teams, we travelled to other cities, and we grew with the sport. We left the neighborhoods, primarily because of the exposure from soccer to a larger world, but the neighborhood never left us. If we can instill this same spirit in today's urban youth, our future as a soccer-playing nation holds great promise.

### **Membership Notes**

Three positions will be up for election in next year's SASH election. They are president (currently held by Roger Allaway), treasurer (currently held by John Biggs) and one of the four director positions (currently held by Shawn Ladda). In accordance with the by-laws, a Nominating Committee has been named by the president and the executive board to serve as a neutral body to conduct the election, which will be held next spring. If you are interested in running for one of the three positions named above, please contact one of the members of the Nominating Committee to let them know of your interest. The election will be held by mail, probably in the spring. The members of the Nominating Committee are Mike Burnham, 496 Morris, Providence, R.I. 02906. Phone: (401) 331-3182 and Will Lunn, 11 Ford Ave., Oneonta, N.Y. 13820. Phone: (607) 432-3351.

\*\*\*

The last page of this newsletter is a form with which you can renew your SASH membership for 1995. The deadline for renewing your membership is April 1. You will receive the winter 1995 issue of the newsletter, due out in January, regardless of whether you have yet renewed by that time.

As voted by the membership at the June meeting in Oneonta, the SASH membership rate for 1995 remains at \$10. There are several of you who joined SASH after the June meeting and were offered the chance to join for \$5 for the remainder of 1994 or \$15 for the remainder of 1994 and all of 1995. Five of you choose the \$15 option and need not return this form. You already are members for 1995. Those five are Geoff Coombes, John Eiler, Herb Heilpern, Joseph Sousa and Anna Steffen.

There is an envelope enclosed with this newsletter that you can use to return the membership form and your payment to SASH at the National Soccer Hall of Fame in Oneonta, N.Y.

A copy of the SASH questionnaire will be included with the winter issue of the newsletter, in case you haven't filled one out and would like to, or want to update an earlier one.