

SASH

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With this issue, we begin a reprinting of one of the papers presented last June in Oneonta at the American Soccer History Symposium, the theme of which was the contributions of ethnic soccer to the sport in this country. This paper will be continued in the next two issues. The author, a leading American player of the 1950s and '60s and a frequent participant in SASH activities, is a resident of Washington, D.C.

The Ethnic Legacy in U.S. Soccer by Len Oliver

"I used to walk those gloomy textile neighborhoods in Philadelphia where the ethnics played association football on factory lots every Sunday."

-- Ed Shils, sociologist

Ed Shils, University of Chicago sociologist, was referring to his early years in Philadelphia in the 1930s. We met when I worked for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Shils knew I grew up in Kensington, one of those "gloomy" neighborhoods, and knew I had a passion for soccer. His comment was typical of the late 1970s, when the general public perceived soccer as an immigrant, ethnic, foreign sport. Soccer's 130-year-old history in America, at least until the mid-1970s with the coming of the "Pele Era," indeed was strongly linked with ethnic influences. In some parts of the country, some people still hold that view, thinking of soccer as "that foreign sport."

What has changed dramatically in the last two decades of soccer in the United States is its composition. On any weekend in Washington D.C., Northern Virginia and nearby Montgomery and Prince Georges counties in Maryland, thousands of youngsters and adults, male and female, fill every foot of green field as they play soccer. Some 98 percent of the youngsters are born in the U.S., a phenomenon we see across the country. In our own D.C. Stoddert Soccer League, we've gone from 60 kids in 1979 to over 4,000 today, with the league offering a full range of soccer activities--house and travel teams, license coaching courses, referee training and a tournament. Even in Washington, a highly ethnic area (there are over 100,000 Salvadorans in the metropolitan area), less than five percent of the youngsters are foreign born.

Whatever the current composition of soccer in the U.S., we can still talk about ethnic contributions of the past, the strong ethnic roots in the game, and the continuing ethnic legacy. As long as we remain a multi-cultural society, our soccer will continue to be influenced by people born outside our shores. No other major team sport in the U.S. can boast such a rich pluralistic tradition, one that reflects our country's own diversity.

Let's face it, soccer's roots are overseas. We're latecomers to the sport. We have learned from our predecessors, those who pioneered the game here and kept it alive in dark times, and who continue to influence the game today.

In perhaps the single greatest ethnic contribution to soccer in the U.S., Pele, coaxed out of retirement in 1975 to play for the North American Soccer League's famed New York Cosmos, revolutionized the public and media's perception of soccer. According to Phil Woosnam, former commissioner of the NASL, Pele's arrival "was the biggest factor in establishing the appeal and credibility of the sport....Pele changed the face of soccer in the

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United States...He filled the major stadiums and was responsible for the soccer boom." Pele also helped turn soccer from a working-class sport into a suburban, middle- and upper-middle-class phenomenon.

Ethnic soccer is no longer the single dominant influence on the sport, as it was in the early part of this century. Even so, the ethnic contribution continues today, and that contribution is the focus of this paper.

Immigration Patterns and Ethnic Soccer

Flocking to the Cities

In the opening sentences of his soccer history, *American's Soccer Heritage*, the late Sam Foulds, soccer historian, remarked:

"The result of a soccer game is not the end of the world, and the history of American soccer is not exactly the history of America. However the United States is a nation of immigrants, and soccer was a pastime of many of these people. It was a game that provided diversion, and sometimes unpleasantness, for large numbers of people who had come in search of something different. As is true today, most played without giving much thought to the future or to the past of the game. Soccer provided momentary joy or accomplishment, and playing the game was most important."

This theme of ethnic passion for soccer and enthusiasm in playing or watching it will be interwoven in this paper. We will see that soccer for many ethnic groups was more than a simple leisure-time diversion. For many, it was a ticket to the new world, their reason for coming here, and an avenue to economic opportunity.

My father, Jimmy Oliver, was one of Sam Foulds' immigrants who played soccer. He arrived from Motherwell, Scotland, in September 1923. After clearing Ellis Island, he was on a train to Philadelphia, where he had a boyhood friend. By the first Sunday after his arrival, he had joined the Kensington Blue Bells Soccer Club, a Scottish club with a strong soccer background. The club found him a job, offered social and cultural supports in his new country, and looked after his needs until he was settled. All because of soccer and group cohesiveness.

My father was in one of the last great waves of immigration. Up to the 1900s, most immigrants had come from Northern and Western Europe. After 1900, more came from Southern and Eastern Europe--the Balkans, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Greece. All formed their ethnic clubs and founded soccer teams, especially in our great urban centers. As immigration slowed in the Great Depression and until after World War II, the German, Italian, Scottish and other ethnic clubs continued to welcome those who did make it over, and continued to run their soccer clubs. They became part of urban America's story, contribution to the colorful fabric of America's cities.

Soccer enabled the newcomers to start a new life in the United States. They played soccer with their clubs on weekends, working in factory jobs during the week. They taught their sons the game and added to the growth of our urban neighborhoods.

The Portuguese found their way to the fishing and textile towns of New England, the Italian masons to New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, the German craftsmen and bakers to our large cities. They worked their trades, raised families, and organized and played soccer on weekends.

In the age of industrialization, cities were the controlling factor in the new civilization--the Age of the Metropolis--providing our cultural pattern. So it was no surprise that as the major cities grew, ethnic soccer took root in the neighborhoods of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Boston and Baltimore.

"At the century's end, New York reported half as many Italians as Naples, as many Germans as Hamburg, as many Jews as Warsaw and twice as many Irish as Dublin...Chicago's streets were crowded with Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, Hungarians and Slovenes. And in varying degrees, much the same could be said of other urban centers from Boston to St. Louis." (Foster Rhea Dulles, 1959)

The ethnic groups found urban fields, often grass and dirt lots next to factories. They founded leagues. They attracted large crowds in the days before the extensive use of the automobile, radio and television. They stayed in the cities, particularly along the eastern seaboard and in the midwest, helping to create those foreign enclaves characteristic of all urban centers at the time. Soccer on Sundays was often their only outlet and chance for ethnic pride and expression of their culture.

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Many ethnic groups clung to their old ways, to their cultural traits. For example, I recall the festivals of the German-American clubs in Philadelphia and New York, the Scottish games in Kearny and Metuchen, New Jersey, and the Ukrainian holiday celebrations--all included soccer matches, thus introducing young American players to their cultures.

The United States is indeed unusual in the world, with the capacity to absorb the immigrants while finding ways for the newcomers to continue to identify with their ethnic origins, culture and groups. They became "Americanized" and gradually assimilated, but held onto their soccer clubs, even when soccer was considered a "foreign sport."

Changes in Immigration Patterns

In the 1950s, 68 percent of the immigrants and refugees still came from Europe and Canada. In the 1980s, by contrast, only 13 percent came from these areas. Four-fifths of our newest immigrants, since 1980, have come from Latin-America, the Caribbean and Asia. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 essentially eliminated the pro-European bias in previous U.S. immigration policy. It also led, somewhat unexpectedly, to higher levels of immigration, some 16 million since 1965. The new law emphasized "kinship" and "family reunification"--visas for the relatives already here.

Anyone involved in urban soccer since 1965 will recall the dramatic increase in clubs and players from the Caribbean islands, El Salvador, and later from Korea and other Asian countries. Many Mexicans entering the U.S. every year flood the leagues in the southwest.

The Latins have already added their influence to U.S. soccer. In Washington, D.C., we have Salvadoran leagues, top teams from El Salvador play regularly before large crowds at RFK Stadium, and many players are now joining our coaching ranks. Caribbean players and coaches are active in local leagues, in coaching, and officiating. We also have a Korean league, and more and more Asian youth are coming into our local youth teams.

The U.S. has an incredible capacity to accept and assimilate immigrants. It usually takes a generation or so, and sports like soccer have assisted the process as immigrant parents and players interact with our teams and leagues. In turn, the immigrants are contributing to our style of play, just as they have always done, and to the development of the U.S. player. Immigration has always infused our country with new ambition, ideas and energy. Our soccer today owes a continuing debt to the passion, enthusiasm and skills people have brought with them, wherever they came from or settled. Let's consider some of these contributions.

That consideration will have to wait a bit. The next portion of Len Oliver's paper will appear in the spring issue of the SASH Historical Quarterly.

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Membership notes

Three positions will be up for election in the 1996 SASH election. They are vice president (currently held by Ric Fonseca), secretary (currently held by Jack Huckel) and one of the four director positions (currently held by Walter Bahr). Executive director Al Colone has agreed to serve as a one-man Nominating Committee to conduct the election, which will be held this spring. If you are interested in running for one of the three positions named above, please contact him at the National Soccer Hall of Fame, 11 Ford Ave., Oneonta, N.Y. 13820 or (607) 432-3351 to let him know that you want to be on the ballot. The election will be held by mail.

The last page of this newsletter is a form with which you can renew your SASH membership for 1996. The deadline for renewing your membership is April 1. All 1995 members are being sent this issue of the newsletter, regardless of whether they have yet renewed.

The SASH membership rate for 1996 remains at \$10. Some of you already have paid for 1996. To see whether your membership expires on Dec. 31, 1995 or Dec. 31, 1996, check your entry in the SASH membership directory, which was sent to you with the fall 1995 issue of the newsletter. Payment should be in the form of a check payable to SASH.

Please return the membership form, along your payment, to SASH, c/o Albert Colone, National Soccer Hall of Fame, 11 Ford Ave., Oneonta, N.Y. 13820.