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## Ethnics, Violence, and Truth: Soccer's American Past

### Abstract

This article discusses research done on the reports of soccer matches in the American media and whether or not those reports are biased according to ethnic stereotypes. It concludes that there may be some truth to the image of the soccer match as a violent event, despite the author's first thoughts on the issue.

# Ethnics, Violence, and Truth: Soccer's American Past

By Lindsay Hawley

In contemporary society, soccer is often characterized as a sport that is “too violent,” “too foreign,” and quite simply “un-American,” whose supporters are unintelligent violent hooligans. As a member of the soccer-supporting minority of this nation, I consistently combated this criticism with the argument that these unfavorable labels imposed upon soccer and its devotees were nothing more than fictitious constructs of elitist Americans disparaging the sport to assert their own superiority. Armed with these preconceptions, I aimed to uncover support for my claims through examining the history of soccer in early twentieth-century America. Yet the research process involved in transferring my theory from the theoretical to the practical not only robbed me of my multicultural hypothesis, but also negated my previous beliefs regarding historical truth.

Initially, the documents I encountered provided convincing evidence for my hypothesis. Browsing the publications intended for the intellectual audiences of the 1920s and 1930s, one might erroneously assume that soccer simply did not exist in America during this period. These periodicals portrayed soccer as a novel yet certainly foreign phenomenon, a sport fervently supported by the rest of the world yet lacking popularity in the United States. A 1934 *Literary Digest* issue claimed that “soccer has never taken hold in America as it has in the British Isles,”<sup>1</sup> thus indicating an American distaste for the world's game. In the same year, *Rotarian* published a multi-page feature dedicated to the sport, complete with diagrams of positions and descriptions of game play.<sup>2</sup> Clearly the author believed that the average American possessed no previous knowledge of soccer and presumably had never witnessed a match firsthand. To me, this portrayal of soccer's absence in the States proved a subtle way of distinguishing the nation from the external world. By rejecting the game, America established its own sports culture as a unique deviation from the norm of global society.

In actuality, this claim of American periodicals that soccer was absent in the United States at this time proves false. The sport did in fact exist in the nation, and with a substantial history. Forms of soccer appeared in the country in the early nineteenth century, and major universities such as Yale and Princeton adopted the sport as their principal leisure activity.<sup>3</sup> The American Soccer League was established in 1921, meaning that at the time of the publication of these periodicals, the United States housed its own professional soccer organization.<sup>4</sup> Hence, their depiction of soccer as non-existent proves inaccurate, and rather indicates the authors' conscious choice to deliberately slight soccer.

The rationalization of these American journalists for this marginalizing of soccer demonstrated their elitist perception of their own athletic culture. British historian Stephen Wagg believes the sport never prospered in the States for “philosophically it was considered un-American<sup>5</sup>.” The documents I encountered support Wagg's statement. According to the American periodicals of this period that I examined, the popularity of rugby football dampened enthusiasm for soccer, for Americans viewed rugby as more reflective of their supposed

superior intellect. The *Literary Digest* contended that soccer "does not lend itself to the extremes of organization and strategy that characterize our football."<sup>6</sup> A *Playground* article simplified the issue in list form; under the heading "soccer" the descriptors "simple," "lacks organization" and "prior skill unnecessary," in contrast to "rugby" under which fell "complex," "high organization" and "training required."<sup>7</sup> In actuality, no logical means exist to measure the strategic supremacy of one sport over another. Author Enzo Domini asserts the necessity of a high level of intelligence to master soccer. He maintains that a soccer player must "think on his feet" and develop "endurance, both of body and mind,"<sup>8</sup> and I am inclined to agree with him. Naturally he and I assume this position due to our biases as avid soccer aficionados, and this demonstrates the subjectivity involved in characterizing sport. As Domini and I select the description that enhances our own positions, so did these periodicals employ the portrayal of soccer that best served their agenda of asserting the intellectual superiority of American sport.

Having obtained evidence for my hypothesis through elitist literature, I turned to publications intended for the general public, seeking information regarding the ASL to fortify my thesis. Perusing various newspapers published in New York during the 1920s and 1930s, I encountered numerous articles documenting ASL games that validated my multicultural assumptions. The most striking characteristic of the league, revealed through even a preliminary scan of headlines, was its distinction of teams along ethnic lines. Sifting through the sports section one views the match reports of competitions between the "Philadelphia Germans," the "Brooklyn Hispanos," the "Kearny Scots," and several other sides carrying culturally inspired labels.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, these teams not only battled each other, but also contested with the patriotically titled squads of the "New York Nationals"<sup>10</sup> and the "New York Americans."<sup>11</sup> Working under the knowledge that wealthy bankers looking to achieve profit initiated earlier efforts to form a professional league in the year 1913, I naturally assumed that these same elitist businessmen dominated the formation procedures of the ASL and therefore controlled the selection of squad designations. The inclusion of sides with the titles "Americans" and "Nationals" presented an important contrast to ethnically labeled teams. The fact that logically a player could not participate on both sides figuratively implied that a "Hispano" simply could not be an "American." Influenced by my preconceived notion that ethnics suffered at the hands of prejudiced Americans, I viewed the entire team designation process as a procedure dominated by elitists intent on denigrating soccer as a means to encourage segregation and discourage ethnic assimilation.

I delved deeper into the articles to further rationalize my multicultural beliefs. Preliminary readings of the material, preformed under the shadow of my bias, substantiated my belief that journalists unjustly focused on violence as a means to construct a derogatory ethnic image. In the event of confrontation and violence in competitions among ethnics and "Americans," the malicious acts were generally attributed to individual players on the ethnic side. The coverage of a 1927 contest between a visiting team from Uruguay and a side com-

prised of eleven American players from New Jersey embodied the typical representation of soccer matches in this period. The *New York Times* play-by-play analysis of the match, in which physical play led to large-scale crowd riots, assigned responsibility for the game's brutality solely to the actions of Uruguayan players.<sup>12</sup> A follow-up account of the event in the *New York Herald Tribune* described the impact of the match on spectator mentality. It reported that at the next Uruguay contest against a different opponent "10,000 fans came hopeful of seeing rude, rough play."<sup>13</sup> In order for readers to associate the violence in these matches so completely with the Uruguayan side, match reports must have created the impression that these ethnics initiated the brutal conflicts. Columnists also promoted the image of the violent foreigner. As *New York Herald Tribune* writer Charles E. Parker mused, "we thought soccer blithe and gay, till 't was played Uruguay's way."<sup>14</sup>

This style of reporting similarly occurred in accounts of inter-league play. The summary of a particularly brutal 1937 match-up of the New York Americans and the Brooklyn Hispanos blatantly charged the latter with instigating all acts of violence. It stated that "thrice New York American players were felled" and claimed that one American player only retaliated "when his own brother was floored."<sup>15</sup> To even more explicitly slander ethnics, many reporters utilized the violent acts of players as justifications for broader stereotyping of their corresponding ethnicities. The *Times* article covering the Uruguay match attempted to establish irrationality and quick-tempered violence as inherent characteristics of this cultural group, claiming that when the contest became exceptionally heated, "time out was called while the Latin spirit vented itself,"<sup>16</sup> By contrast, when altercations arose in matches not contested by ethnic sides, violence was depicted as a natural on-field occurrence unrepresentative of the greater culture encompassing the players. When players participated in numerous scuffles in a match between the Chicago Bricklayers and the New York Nationals in 1928, neither side was portrayed as the initiators of the violence, and no mention was made of the brutality resulting from either a Chicago or National "spirit."<sup>17</sup> These documents proved to me that journalists knowingly constructed hyperbolized accounts of ethnic violence in an attempt to impose upon them a completely falsified cultural identity of ferocity and incivility. They promoted the idea that conflicts in ethnic competitions stemmed from their alleged natural penchant for violence. This implied their inferiority to Americans, whose match violence supposedly merely resulted from the accidental physical contact of individual players and was not a manifestation of any intrinsically brutal societal nature.

Journalists also promoted the image of the vicious ethnic through depictions of their fans. These documents contain abundant reports of crowd violence at soccer contests, yet only in competitions involving ethnic teams. The *Times* coverage of the aforementioned Uruguay match described how "half of the 2,000 spectators in the stands...rushed out on the field,"<sup>18</sup> and the report of a subsequent match against an Italian side detailed "a near-riot between players and fans."<sup>19</sup> Accounts of fan aggression proliferated not only in the summaries of international matches, but in the rundowns of inter-league ethnic play as

well. The play-by-play of a contest between a New Jersey side and the Brooklyn Hispanos turned into little more than a detailed narrative of an altercation where "half the spectators were in the *melée*."<sup>20</sup> Faced with this evidence, I could not deny the existence of fan violence in soccer at this time. Yet I did contest the tendency of journalists to link the violence entirely to the ethnic enthusiasts. When brutality in the stands arose at a Celtics of Brooklyn versus New York Americans competition in 1938, the aggressive acts were attributed solely to ethnic spectators. Allegedly the violence commenced when "a group of Brooklyn [Celtic] rioters stormed the field...bent on letting the official 'have it'."<sup>21</sup> Columnists linked fan belligerence to ethnics as well; *New York Times* writer John Kieran declared it "distinctly un-American" and claimed "the American idea of the rights and privileges of a spectator is radically different."<sup>22</sup> Initially, reviewing this material infuriated me. Seeing no way to concretely prove that ethnic fans in particular initiated this mayhem, I believed that attributing violence to only this group was a conscious attempt of journalists to create a violent immigrant identity and establish cultural boundaries between ethnics and Americans. Journalists made the former appear violent and unruly, the latter peaceful and sophisticated. Through my own multicultural bias, I viewed these characterizations as inaccurate stereotypes created to assert American superiority. At this point, I could have ended my research and written a paper advocating my original thesis.

Yet a "problem" arose during my personal research process. Throughout my search, I had sporadically encountered documents that refuted my multicultural arguments. First I encountered opposition to my theory that team identifications were solely elitist American creations. Although true that businessmen controlled initial attempts at establishing professional leagues, it appears that the failure of these efforts to result in profit left them disillusioned with the idea. According to historian Len Oliver, "immigrants were in most of the leading positions in the early professional leagues like the first American Soccer League."<sup>23</sup> As its founders, they played a dominant role in establishing team labels, hence perhaps these identifiers reveal a conscious choice of ethnics not to assimilate rather than a malicious American promotion of segregation. Secondary sources support this notion of immigrants asserting their distinct identity through both soccer and this manner of team designation. Oliver contended that the sport was "the only outlet and chance for ethnic pride and expression of culture."<sup>24</sup> In his doctoral thesis on the subject, Daniel C. Ciccarelli stated that soccer during this time "was played mainly by immigrants who seemed to 'rejoice' in giving their leagues and teams foreign titles and names."<sup>25</sup> Each of these sources demonstrates not bigoted Americans impeding ethnic assimilation, but rather immigrants themselves resisting integration through soccer.

Primary sources also revealed a possible immigrant desire to utilize soccer as a means of rejecting assimilation and establishing ethnic solidarity. Oliver cited the example of his own father who joined a Scottish club that "found him a job, offered social and cultural supports in his new country...all because of

soccer and group cohesiveness."<sup>26</sup> An independent newspaper published by Irish immigrants in America advocated maintaining a strong bond with both one's culture and homeland, proudly declaring itself at the bottom of every other page "United in Support of Ireland's Claim to Complete Independence."<sup>27</sup> Rather than actively pursuing integration into American society, these ethnics sought to remain forever connected to their Irish identity and achieved this partly through the aid of soccer. One article related the intention of the Gaelic Athletic Body of New York to sponsor tours of Irish soccer teams to the States as a means of maintaining a strong relationship with their countrymen.<sup>28</sup> Sports historian Peter C. McIntosh theorized that sport "tends to identify the individual with some group" and that more importantly "the individual welcomes this identity."<sup>29</sup> Evidence validates this statement for ethnics during this period. Perhaps these immigrants partially encouraged their own separation, rather than simply being helpless victims of an ideologically motivated and bigoted American populace.

Disproving this portion of my thesis forced me to question the validity of the remainder of my argument. Although my multicultural mentality had led me to see the violent portrayal of these ethnics as a purely mythological construct, documentary evidence now forces me to admit these seemingly invalid depictions may have some basis in fact. Once again I refer to the Uruguay match of 1927. Originally I admonished the *New York Times* for attributing sole responsibility for the altercations to the Uruguayans, believing this an unfair representation motivated by prejudice. Yet the *New York World's* play-by-play of the contest mirrored that of the *Times*, citing identical players as sources of the violence.<sup>30</sup> In light of this, I concede that if both papers provided such identical descriptions, it is likely their accounts are close to the reality. Statements from Uruguayan Consul General José Richling further support this theory. He blamed the conflict on Uruguayan players who believed the referee was "working against them" and therefore decided "we will not let him get away with it."<sup>31</sup> As a Uruguayan citizen, this man had no reason to make these players appear foolish or inferior; hence perhaps they truly were the initiators of the game's brutality. This specific example of inter-match conflict forced me to evaluate the possibility of truth in the accounts of ethnic players' soccer violence.

My further research affirmed that ethnics generally viewed soccer as of significantly higher importance than Americans. This indicates that perhaps they truly were more inclined to act as instigators of fanatical conduct, not due to an inherent volatile ethnic nature, rather simply due to their passion and enthusiasm for the sport. As Walt Bahr, a retired professional soccer player, stated "the ethnic groups brought us a different level of soccer...and fierce passion for the game."<sup>32</sup> One article cited Patrick J. Lenihan, the secretary of the New York Gaelic Athletic Body, as saying that the sport "was a kind of religion with the Irish."<sup>33</sup> As an Irishman, Lenihan provides insight into immigrants' sentimental attachment to soccer as a fundamental part of their culture. Contrary to America, in the homelands of these migrants soccer played a role in international politics, thereby heightening its importance in the ethnic viewpoint. A blurb in a 1937 *Topic of the Times* column reported, "Mussolini has just expelled an

Austrian soccer team because of an earlier affray in Vienna.”<sup>34</sup> The sport clearly held an elevated position of significance in the ethnic mentality.

The conduct of fans in ethnic matches provides perhaps the most telling insight into this passion they held for soccer and the unfortunate tendency of this enthusiasm to result in violent behavior. Initially I discounted the connection of ethnics to crowd violence and the depiction of this phenomenon as “un-American” as simply constructs of a discriminatory United States mentality. Yet both ideas received considerable support from my extended research. Within the ASL itself, match reports revealed the tendency of fan versus player riots to erupt in games involving ethnic teams and by contrast the absence of such occurrences in non-ethnic contests. The aforementioned Bricklayers versus Nationals competition, for example, resulted in several scuffles between individual players, yet the fans remained in their seats.<sup>35</sup> The rampant epidemic of fan aggression in the soccer matches of other countries at the time validates the argument that crowd violence was an existing cultural phenomenon in foreign nations. Reports of soccer related violence in other countries abounded in American periodicals; Kieran himself supported his arguments with an account of an incident in Argentina resulting in a fire in the stands set by spectators.<sup>36</sup> Scholars in nations outside of the States accept fan antagonism as a widely acknowledged international issue absent from American society. According to British historian Alan Roadburg, “soccer in Britain lends itself to crowd violence whereas soccer in North America does not,” possibly because the British fan is more likely to view soccer “as a product of his heritage and culture.”<sup>37</sup> All of these sources indicate that the association of ethnics with fan violence was not the result of deliberate slander on the part of journalists, but rather the logical product of existing circumstances.

The documents I encountered indicate that American journalists may have merely revealed, rather than entirely created, an ethnic tendency towards violence in soccer matches. Drawing this conclusion proves difficult, for claiming that any certain group is more prone to fan or player violence appears racist and therefore inherently wrong to me. As a result of my own multicultural ideology, I view this conclusion as morally incorrect. This makes it extremely difficult for me to accept. Additionally, accepting these findings rejects the ideological arguments I have fervently employed to refute belittling of the sport throughout my life. This conclusion establishes my initial thesis as invalid and leaves me defenseless against soccer’s critics. My hesitancy towards accepting my findings proves the difficulty involved in discarding preconceived beliefs, even when they are refuted by documentary evidence.

On a grander scale, the practical methodology resulting in this deduction forces me to question my beliefs regarding historical truth. Had I written my paper after only my first round of research, I might have emerged from this assignment with an ideologically driven argument and my preconceived beliefs intact. The fact that I can support both my original thesis and my opposing final conclusion with documentary evidence seemingly validates the postmodernist belief that numerous interpretations of sources and past events are possible,



none of which can be concretely refuted. Yet this is an illusion. To write a paper arguing my first thesis I would have been consciously suppressing opposing documents and therefore deliberately prohibiting truth. Traditionalists believe that certain interpretations, through the historian's use of objectivity, can be proven invalid. They believe the key to achieving objectivity lies in the ability of the historian to "bracket ones own perceptions" and "enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspective of rival thinkers."<sup>38</sup> By continuing to research, I followed the traditionalist method and subsequently disproved my original thesis with solid material evidence. My ability to utilize documents to disprove an unfounded interpretation subsequently verified the position of the traditionalists. This experience with practical methodology affirmed not my previous belief that "the illusion of objective, disinterested history has vanished"<sup>39</sup> nor my hypothetical prediction of the "impending dissolution of the existing discipline of history."<sup>40</sup> Rather, I allowed myself to think akin to my "enemies" who criticize soccer to divest myself of my multicultural tendencies. Simultaneously, I entered "sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspective"<sup>41</sup> of the traditionalists, to end my research with an account of early American soccer contradictory to my original hypothesis, yet in my belief more representative of objectivity and truth.

## Notes

1 "Sport Shots," *The Literary Digest*, 19 May 1934, 44.

2 F. N. S. Creek, "Football on its Native Heath," *Rotarian*, November 1934, 19-21, 43.

3 Kyle Rote, Kyle Rote, Jr.'s *Complete Book of Soccer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 29-32.

4 Len Oliver, "The Ethnic Legacy in American Soccer," *SASH Historical Quarterly* (1996) : 7.

5 Wagg, Stephen and Waldstein, David. "Football in U.S. and Canadian Society." In *Giving the Game Away: Football, Politics, and Culture on Five Continents*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London: Leichestor University Press, 1995), 78.

"The Sun Never Sets on Soccer," *The Literary Digest*, 16 December 1933, 42.

7 "Soccer versus Rugby Football," *Playground*, October 1925, 468.

8 Enzo Domini, *The Book of Soccer* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972), 12.

9 *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 March 1937, 17. Hereafter *Tribune*

10 *New York Times*, 16 April 1928, 29. Hereafter *Times*

11 *Tribune*, 3 April 1938, sec. 3, 1.

12 *Times*, 28 March 1927, 16.

13 *New York World*, 8 April, 1927, sec. 2, 1. Hereafter *World*

14 Charles E. Parker, "Speaking of Sport", *World*, 8 April 1927, sec. 2, 4.

15 *Tribune*, 15 March 1937, 23.

16 *Times*, 28 March 1927, 16.

17 *Times*, 16 April 1928, 29.

18 *Ibid*.

19 *Times*, 28 March 1927, 16.

20 *Ibid*, 20.

21 *Times*, 28 March 1938, 11.

22 John Kieran, "Sports of the Times," *Times*, 29 March 1927, 21.

23 Oliver, "Ethnic Legacy" : 7.

24 *Ibid* : 3.

25 Daniel Ciccarelli, "A Review of the Historical and Sociological Perspectives Involved in the Acceptance of Soccer as a Professional Sport in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1983), 40.

26 Oliver, "Ethnic Legacy" : 2.

- 27 *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, 27 January 1937, 2.
- 28 *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, 16 January 1937, 91.
- 29 Peter C. McIntosh, "Sport, Politics, and Internationalism," in *Sport in the Socio-cultural Process*, ed. M. Marie Hart (Debuque : WM. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1972), 487.
- 30 *World*, 28 March 1927, 8.
- 31 *Times*, 21 April 1927, 31.
- 32 Oliver, "Ethnic Legacy" : 5.
- 33 *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, 16 January 1937, 91.
- 34 *Times*, 13 July 1937, 18.
- 35 *Times*, 16 April 1928, 29.
- 36 Kieran, "Sports of the Times," 21.
- 37 Alan Roadburg, "Factors Precipitating Fan Violence: A Comparison of Professional Soccer in Britain and North America," *The British Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 7 (January 1980) :265, 269.
- 38 Richard J Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York : W. W. Norton, 1999), 219.
- 39 Lindsay Hawley, "Modern History: A Postmodernist Conquest (2003), 5.
- 40 Lindsay Hawley, "The Myth of Historical Truth" (2003), 5.
- 41 Evans, *In Defense of History*, 219.

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