

# Careless Hands

## Introduction

Wisconsin in October can be a sight to behold, bathed in dazzling autumn colour under crisp, azure-blue skies. This, though, was one of its less memorable afternoons: grey and raw, barren and bleak. All the same, it was a remarkable enough day for me. For the first time in 22 years I was returning to the familiar plot of land behind the big football stadium, the bumpy pitch where I had spent many an afternoon keeping goal for the college soccer team.

It wasn't something to look back on too fondly. We were one of the worst teams in the midwest, and I was only ever a reserve. Once or twice we won, but usually we lost. Sometimes we got slaughtered. I can't remember many of the scorelines, but I won't easily forget the 14 goals we conceded to a university from central Illinois. I got to play for much of the second half – to the intense relief of our besieged first choice – and for the last few minutes my opposite number was a young man with only one leg.

Trouncings were only to be expected. The other defeats may have been less emphatic, but they didn't disguise our inexperience. Most of us hadn't played soccer for very long, and only a few had been coached to any standard. I'd joined from a high school that didn't even have a team, and all I knew about goalkeeping had come from books and TV. Like the rest of the squad, though, I was spared from too much embarrassment by rank anonymity. Soccer was hardly a campus attraction. When the weather was fair, passers-by might linger, more out of curiosity than interest. But once the temperature began its descent toward winter, when November skies masked the sun and the north winds started whipping across the exposed field, we were virtually on our own.

The wind was just as biting 22 years on. But a lot of other things had changed. Certainly the players had. They could shoot with either foot now, and flick on an in-swinging corner, and bring the ball under control with a single deft touch. Some of us had been able to do those things, but not many could do them all, and very few would have been given a run-out in this team. Far from being one of the worst in the midwest, it had become one of the best. It had also been granted many of the accoutrements of American sports events: pre-match music, player

introductions, standing for the national anthem. Ball-boys chased down errant shots, substitutions were announced over the public address, a huge electric scoreboard counted down the time. Twenty-odd years ago, we just got changed and went out to play. Sometimes we needed the referee to remind us what the score was.

What struck me more, though, was what hadn't changed. The team still played on the same patch of grass behind the football stadium and, for all its prowess and promotion, still attracted only a scattering of fans. Perhaps there were a few more than there used to be, but most of the aluminium on the portable stand along the touchline was bare, and many of those in attendance seemed more interested in talking to each other than in encouraging their team.

An entire generation of soccer had passed since I'd last come this way. I was one of the millions who had been introduced to the sport by the North American Soccer League. Pelé arrived in New York when I was 13, and I don't remember seeing a soccer ball until he did. Was there even a place in town to buy one? I'd never heard of a penalty kick, the World Cup – or for that matter the NASL, whose nearest team the season before was 400 miles away.

How quickly it all changed. By the time I entered college, the shops were selling all manner of balls and boots and shin guards and even **I ♥ SOCCER** T-shirts. I'd been to my first professional match, in Chicago – 21,000 to watch the Cosmos – and seen my first FA Cup final on US television. My home town had spawned two teams, and I played for one of them.

All of this had happened before any of these players were born. For them, soccer was a familiar activity, not some exotic arrival or the 'phenomenon' it had been in my youth. Events such as the World Cup were not the obscure, esoteric affairs of decades earlier. The United States had hosted the competition three times – twice for women and once for men – and, to considerable fanfare, it had even won one of them. Yet soccer's impact on the average Wisconsinite, like the average American, was still terribly limited. For many the game was still the same 'pussy sport' it had been when I was a teenager. This, after all, was a part of the country that adored the Green Bay Packers and other he-men in suits of armour, where autumn weekends were spent in the stadium or in front of the TV listening to how one player or another 'really loves to hit people'.

In 1987 I emigrated to Britain, worn down by repeated attempts at justifying an 'unnatural' and/or 'un-American' activity. Defending a sport which prohibited the use of the hands and produced very little scoring

was as close to ‘discussing’ soccer as I had usually come, while sitting among thousands of impassioned, knowledgeable supporters had been an impossibility in a country whose teams and leagues appeared and disappeared without anyone taking much notice. As I wallowed in my new life as a fan in Britain, I began to think that the US did not deserve soccer, that it might be best for everyone if the Yanks stuck to their own hand-friendly, high-scoring games and left the rest of the world alone.

Since then some attitudes have changed, including my own. But many have not. In spite of its staggering popularity as a recreational activity, in spite of the country’s international success, and in spite of the stubborn perseverance of MLS, soccer in the United States remains a minority sport. Consequently, as with other minority sports, its history is deemed to be of little significance, or is even dismissed out of hand. We still hear claims that Pelé’s time with the Cosmos represents the ‘true birth’ of the American game – a spurious assertion, but hardly surprising in an age when colour television has eroded the significance of eras preserved only in grainy black-and-white. Yet it is a great pity that names such as Thomas Cahill, Archie Stark and Billy Gonsalves – or, for that matter, John Harkes and Kasey Keller – count for so little in such a sports-happy country. Even today the most obsessive fan, the sports anorak who has committed to memory the hallowed numbers of Pete Rose’s 4,256 base hits and Dan Marino’s 420 touchdown passes, struggles to name 11 American soccer players of any repute. Historians have not treated the game with much sympathy, either. Even the most comprehensive accounts of the birth and growth of the country’s sporting pursuits make virtually no reference to soccer. It’s almost as if it didn’t exist.

Admittedly, for much of the 20th century the game in the US was almost unremitting in its anonymity, moribund even after the famous 1950 World Cup victory over England, by which time even the most sympathetic newspapers saw little reason to treat soccer with any more reverence than the municipal dog show. Only when professional sport discovered the power of television did it receive any sort of resuscitation, but sadly it was left largely in the hands of the wrong people: those whose love of money eclipsed whatever interest they had in the game. One by one, they disappeared.

There are far too many people who think American soccer didn’t amount to anything before Brazil’s most famous No 10 turned up in New York, or who might agree with the assertion made by one *New York Times* correspondent in 1994 that ‘the history of the World Cup in the United States begins and ends with a game in the Brazilian mining town of

Belo Horizonte on June 29, 1950'. In truth these are merely convenient signposts, events any fan of the game easily recognises. The rest takes a little more unravelling.

Though not as steeped in legend as baseball or college gridiron, or the football of other lands, soccer has existed in America for much longer than many give it credit for. The United States joined FIFA not in 1994 or 1975, but 1913. The National Challenge Cup, which, warts and all, produced the country's first official national champion in 1914, survives to this day as the US Open Cup. One need only examine the early 20th-century sports pages of newspapers the size of the *Boston Globe* or *Chicago Tribune* – replete with photos, match reports and line-ups – to realise that soccer once mattered. The country's first serious professional venture, the original American Soccer League, came to fruition before its gridiron equivalent, playing to thousands of devoted fans who often defied the most miserable of conditions. For a time the ASL, which lured dozens of top professionals from Europe and was a significant factor in America's success at the first World Cup, threatened to secure a permanent place on the country's sporting landscape. Its hopes, though, rapidly disappeared through a toxic combination of factors: many economic, some self-inflicted and a few propagated by the media.

By the time Pelé arrived, the roots had been forgotten. In 1980 the veteran sportswriter Zander Hollander edited an ambitious 544-page book titled *The American Encyclopedia of Soccer* which, for all its meticulous record-keeping of the college game and the NASL, failed in the rather more significant task of chronicling what most regard as the country's first professional league. The 'encyclopedia' mentions that 'several old-timers interviewed in 1978 recalled a "soccer war of 1931" and an "old American Soccer League" in the 1920s', but goes no further. Reference to the National Challenge Cup is limited to a single paragraph. America's dismal World Cup qualification efforts of the Fifties and Sixties are entirely ignored.

One can't really blame Hollander for some of his omissions. The historian Colin Jose, in a preface to his book on the ASL published in 1998, recalls:

Back in 1969 I received from the American Soccer League of that time a list of the winners of the ASL championship. The list began with the winners of the 1933-34 season, the Kearny Irish-Americans. At the time I thought nothing about it, but imagine my surprise when, many years later, in searching

through microfilm of the *New York Times* of 1925 for details of the United States versus Canada international of that year, I found details of the American Soccer League. How could this be, I wondered, when according to the American Soccer League, the league began operating in 1933?

American soccer has been careless with its fragile history. Even official statistics for the country's first coast-to-coast professional leagues of 1967 have disappeared, while the US's early international record seems to have been worked out largely after the fact. In a 1994 book, Jose noted:

In 1972 I wrote to Mr Kurt Lamm, then Secretary of the United States Soccer Federation, asking for a list of all the internationals played by the United States down through the years. Mr Lamm replied that, to the best of his knowledge, no such list existed.

If all this seems rather peculiar for a game with such universal appeal, then the plight of British sports with North American roots is worth bearing in mind. Ice hockey has a longer history there than its marginalised status would suggest, and basketball is still treated largely as a curiosity by the press. Both face the same struggles that have plagued American soccer: under-investment, a shortage of suitable venues and overwhelming media indifference.

I have never believed something needs to be achingly popular for it to be interesting, and to a soccer fan born in the wrong country at nearly the wrong time, few things are more fascinating than the peculiar roller-coaster the game in America has ridden across the decades. As far as I can tell, its story has never really been told – not from start to finish, and certainly not in the context of American sport in general – and that's something I hope to have achieved here. It has not been my intention to chronicle every famous player, team or match, or to use history for some sort of evangelical purpose. All I have set out to do is to tell the story as I understand it, from what I have read and heard, as well as what I have witnessed first-hand, occasionally in packed stadiums but much more often on windswept college fields and other modest arenas where the heart of American soccer kept beating – faintly, but persistently.