

# Soccer as a Microcosm of British Society

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In medieval Britain various kinds of football existed for centuries among the common people as a violent folk-game which presented constant problems of control to those in authority. This form did not survive the restricted life of the mushrooming cities born of the Industrial Revolution which brought about the first attempts at codification and regulation during the 19th century within the rising public schools and the “older” universities. The Football Association was formed in 1863 (“Soccer” is believed to be an abbreviation of the word “Association”); a Challenge Cup competition began in 1871; and the Football League was formed in 1888. Soccer clubs proliferated, so that by 1905 there were no fewer than 10,000 member clubs, 272 of which entered for the F.A. Cup competition. Their origins were diverse and reflected societal changes. Some were formed by Old Boys of public schools, or by schoolmasters; many, by the employees of large industrial concerns; others evolved from church social clubs and ‘poor work’ agencies. The advent of mass leisure led to the south-dominated, amateur, and middle or upper-class structure being superseded by the working class clubs of the industrial Midlands and North, and the game was professionalized. Most analysts have represented this process as the *return* of the traditional “people’s game” to the lower classes, after a brief middle-class and “do good” intervention of great significance; i.e., medieval mob football became Soccer.

Although the sport contributed to recruitment and the national effort, it was considered unpatriotic for having continued during the first few months of World War I. Nevertheless, it continued to grow in the 1920s—an estimated crowd of 250,000 people overflowed at the first Cup Final held in Wembley Stadium in 1923—and 1930s, when radio brought Soccer into every home. Interest was also stimulated by betting on Football League results through pools coupons. By this time the British had taken the game all over the world, and a World Cup competition began in Uruguay in 1930. However, Britain was not represented, and British Soccer was described as possessing an “unfortunate insularity”. By the mid-1950s several losses to foreign teams at club and national level jolted British complacency and led to much soul-searching and a re-evaluation of coaching and tactics until pride was restored when England won the World Cup in 1966, and Glasgow Celtic F.C. of Scotland became the first British club to win the European Cup in 1967. English club Manchester United won this trophy in 1968, and since then British Soccer has fared well in European competition.

Football has been reflected in British arts and literature since early times, and some football phrases have become part of general English usage. Much of British humour and song has centered around Soccer. It has also provided a social focus for the rivalry which has naturally existed between the separate countries which make up the United Kingdom, as well as between different classes, and different regions of the same country. And all of

the Soccer clubs throughout Britain have provided their legendary heroes over the years, figures who have become household names within the culture, such as Danny Blanchflower, Dennis Law, (Sir) Stanley Mathews, Billy Meredith, or Len Shackleton. Since the late 1950s many outstanding British players have played for European clubs for higher salaries; now in the 1970s many outstanding foreign players are playing in Britain. Modern Soccer has particularly shown the effects of television and increased commercial sponsorship, and has been characterized by the appearance of very highly-paid Soccer "Superstars", such as George Best and Kevin Keegan. On the amateur scene there has been considerable growth in women's soccer participation in Britain since the 1960s. The problems of hooliganism and violence on and off the field (by players and spectators alike) have deep roots in the society; yet its modern form has caused great concern in Britain in recent years, and continues to do so.

"Why, you silly goose, didn't you know?" says Denny Machin, hero of Arnold Bennett's novel *The Curd*, to his young bride, "Football has to do with everything!" In Britain today, the significance of Soccer in society makes the novelist's words ring true.

[NOTE: *The above is a summary of a 15-minute commentary which accompanied the showing of 65 slides. )*