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## ***By Them Hard Knocks: The Working Class, Ethnicity and the Tradition of Soccer in Southwestern Pennsylvania***

Southwestern Pennsylvania has long been thought of as a bastion of football. From the game's earliest days in the region, both its caliber and popularity have grown steadily, culminating in the 1970s with the ascension of the Pittsburgh Steelers. But before the rise of the Pittsburgh Steelers, before the region became a cradle of professional football, western Pennsylvania was the cradle of a different sport, of a different kind of football—soccer.

The history of soccer in southwestern Pennsylvania is a long and rich one, but it remains largely unexamined. One reason for this is that the tradition itself now exists only in memory, scrapbooks, and newspapers—the game is not played as it once was. Another reason is that historians of sport have not addressed it. As is true for United States soccer in general, little scholarship has been produced beyond general histories of the game and accounts of its recent growing popularity within America's middle class. A clear gap exists in the historiography. A study of the sport when it was alive and well in one particular region would help narrow that gap.

Through the use of personal interviews and newsprint sources, I examine the once-vibrant tradition of club soccer in the Pittsburgh area. I discuss its popularity and its players, explore what people gained from playing, and unearth just what the sport meant to fans and the region as a whole. I also investigate the decline of club soccer in the Pittsburgh area, determining when, and why, it occurred, as well as looking at the forms of entertainment that replaced it in the lives of those people who kept it vital for so long. Such an undertaking is relevant not only because it describes a now largely-forgotten form of sport, but also for its potential to address such vital themes as ethnicity, identity formation, and Americanization—avenues of inquiry to which the history of club soccer in southwestern Pennsylvania is inexorably tied.

Soccer first became popular in America in the late nineteenth century. Powered by the surges in immigration to the United States, the sport became especially popular in the booming urban centers in which many immigrant families became a part of the country's growing industrial machine. Southwestern Pennsylvania—one of the country's leading areas of industry—was no exception. Tens of thousands of workers flocked from central and southern Europe to the areas surrounding the city of Pittsburgh from the 1880s through the 1920s, settling in such small and close-knit, mining and mill towns as Castle Shannon, Gallatin, and Beadling. These recent immigrants brought the sports of their homelands with them. Five or six days a week were devoted to carving out a living in the mines and mills, but weekends were often reserved for sport. The sport of choice, for many, was soccer.

By all accounts, soccer was a popular weekend spectacle for many residents, particularly those from industrial areas. Competitive matches could be found in virtually every town or village surrounding the city. Hundreds of spectators turned out to watch the local club do battle, oftentimes quite literally, with its rivals. Frequently teams from other cities and states, occasionally other countries, came to Pittsburgh. For these contests, it was not unusual to draw a crowd numbering in the thousands. In fact, these matches were sometimes so popular that they were moved to a larger venue, such as Forbes Field (home of the Pirates) or Greenlee Field (home of the Negro League Crawfords), and an admission fee was charged. Pittsburgh-area teams also traveled to other parts of the country—to Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, New York, St. Louis—and, in some cases, enjoyed the opportunity to travel abroad. This was an exciting opportunity for players and fans from small mining or mill towns.

Some estimate that at its peak, western Pennsylvania was home to perhaps as many as one hundred soccer clubs of various sizes and degrees of organization, scattered around and in the city. Those clubs were apparently enormously successful, as evidenced by the ten national amateur titles won by area teams between 1927 and 1956.

For half a century, working-class club soccer held an important place in southwestern Pennsylvania. That would change. In the decades following World War Two, much like other forms of community sport, soccer underwent a dramatic decline in the overall number of local teams and organizations. By the late 1950s the old clubs had begun to fade. The crowds of hundreds, even thousands, of spectators that once flocked to the fields of Carnegie, Turtle Creek, and Wilkinsburg on weekend afternoons had begun to go elsewhere. Today, of the prominent Pittsburgh clubs that were in existence more than three or four decades ago, only a scant few remain, and these are maintained almost exclusively as youth soccer organizations. One such organization, The Beadling Soccer Club, is celebrating its one-hundredth birthday this year. To this day, its members have not forgotten its working-class club soccer roots. As a picture in the 1993-4 yearbook declares: it is “The New Face of Coal.”