

THE SOCCERBALL WORLD BOWL

The United States of America never embraced football, preferring instead to concentrate on its 'home-grown' sports of American Football, Baseball, Basketball and Ice Hockey. Yet in truth none of these sports were, as Bruce Springsteen might put it, "born in the U.S.A." All were imported from or were variants of, games taken to America by British colonists. The similarities between American Football and Rugby Union are obvious and striking, Ice Hockey was a game suited for the cold climate of the northern US and Canada, developed from a mix of centuries-old European and Native American games. Even Basketball, that most 'American' of sports, was developed by James Naismith, a Canadian of Scottish ancestry. Baseball was the earliest team sport to gain mass popularity in the USA but this too was no 'American' game. Apart from the resemblance to the children's game of Rounders, the Baseball Ground in Derby served as the home of Derby County FC for over a century, a sure sign that Baseball as a sport was a trans-Atlantic one.

Baseball had a rival for American affections in the 1850s - Cricket. Surprising as it seems now, Cricket was for a long time the most popular sport in the USA. But when you consider the ethnic make-up of the Thirteen Colonies which formed the USA at independence it's less surprising than at first sight. English colonists brought English games and pastimes. Right up until the Civil War, Cricket was as popular as Baseball with both sports being accorded roughly equal space in the press. Baseball is not as complex a sport to understand as Cricket nor does it take as long to play and it was probably that comparative ease of familiarity with the rules and playing time which led to it accelerating away from its old rival in the post-Civil War era as a huge influx of immigrants from Europe found Baseball less demanding. Yet Cricket still prospered in some parts of America. The Longwood Cricket Club, established as late as 1877, later metamorphosed into the home of professional Tennis in the USA.

Football, as we know it, has only seventeen laws and is easily understood across the globe. Even in the second half of the 19th century as different associations pushed different rules and rugby and soccer went their separate ways, it was a comparatively simple game to play and understand. There was no intrinsic reason why the USA should not have embraced it as most of the rest of the world did. Especially if, as in England, it was taken up by schools. All it really needed was a couple of nudges in the right direction and football today might indeed be a whole new ball game.....

In actual fact an American League of Professional Football (ALPF) was established in 1894, just six years after the Football League in England and one year after Scotland (league established 1890) accepted professionalism. Teams from Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC took part. The league didn't last a full season. It was badly marketed, games were played in midweek when fans were unable to attend in numbers (though the Baltimore Orioles drew around 8,000, similar to the top clubs in the UK at that time) and a scandal over the importation of British professionals sparked off a Federal government investigation which killed it off. Yet it could have been so very different. For a start, had football achieved or even split supremacy with gridiron in schools and colleges as happened with Association and Rugby rules in Britain, the basis would have been laid for a similar path to success as a spectator sport as happened in the UK in the 1880s. Nor would the essentially Eastern seaboard regional nature of the ALPF been necessarily a drawback. The very first league in the world - in England in 1888 - consisted purely of teams from Lancashire and the Midlands. No journey between venues was greater than 110 miles. Great swathes of what would later become football's heartlands were omitted from that first league. In Scotland it was considered a revolutionary act to admit Heart of Midlothian to the first league in 1890. Yet the Edinburgh team were only 45 miles away from the league's base in Glasgow and never further than 60 miles from their furthest fixture. Yet the Americans managed to organise a structure which ran from the Maryland - Virginia border to New England, stretching almost 400 miles from Washington DC to Boston, Massachusetts.

Playing matches on a Saturday afternoon, as in the UK, would have attracted greater crowds and with that would have come bigger financial interests and rewards. A Federal government which

paid more than lip service to the concept of free trade would have welcomed, rather than shunned British professionals. And the same professionals, hampered by moves to restrict wages at home would have flocked to the USA in great numbers - as indeed they did in the 1920s when another (by then too late) attempt was made to establish football in the States.

One area where the USA would not have imitated the British was in rules. It took a long time before the rules as laid out by the FA in 1863 became accepted across the UK, let alone the rest of Europe and later South America. Three points for a win, points for goals and a readiness to use substitutes could all have been implemented in the comparatively free and easy days before the establishment of FIFA in 1904 and the World Cup in 1930. Given that matches against non-American sides would have been few and far between in the late 19th century two different styles of what would remain essentially the same game may have developed, awaiting a final showdown to see which would emerge as the global game. And just as British military, naval and imperial power passed across the Atlantic during the first part of the 20th century it is easy to envisage the same happening with football.

The British game was insular, refusing to have much if anything to do with the emerging FIFA at the start of the 20th century. The offside game was played so well that goals were at a premium until the rule was changed in the mid-1920s. It's impossible to imagine the Americans waiting that long to change a rule which was strangling the game. There would have been modification, perhaps even abolition of offside. More points would have been awarded for a win and for goals scored. Perhaps the abolition of points for a 0-0 draw or even a draw of any description with penalty shoot-outs being introduced decades earlier than they were in Europe.

Maybe the problem of goalless games would have been addressed by reducing the numbers in the team to ten a side or increasing the length and width of the goals. Substitutions would have become frequent, with specialist players coming on for free kicks, penalties and corners. Ultimately this version would have become the one we know today. We know from the experiences of rule changes that WERE introduced that the game today bears little resemblance to that of a century or more ago. There were no penalty kicks until 1891. Until 1912 the goalkeeper could handle the ball anywhere in his own half. The offside rule has been tampered with many times in the past century. Goalkeepers, once the legitimate target of physical violence by marauding forwards are now a protected species. And even in the past two decades the abolition of the backpass has improved the game immensely. Tackles from behind and lunging in two-footed now bring automatic sanction where once they were tolerated, even encouraged.

In short, football has never been a static sport with rules written in tablets of stone. It has always been prepared to adapt to maintain its position as the world's favourite sport and there is no reason to think this would have been any different under an American hegemony. And American it would have become. The movies would have seen to that. The early part of the 20th century saw American dominance established in film and particularly so in the UK where a commonality of language prevented the growth of an effective native industry, unlike France and Germany. British cinema-goers would have been treated to films showing the US version of soccer - big crowds at covered, seated stadia, with usherettes moving through the stands selling beers and ice creams. A flowing, exciting game with goals galore keeping the spectators cheering. Then they would have gone to their own miserable, uncovered, rainy grounds, shivering together with a hot Bovril and mutton pie to keep them warm as another dull 0-0 draw lasted a seemingly interminable 90 minutes. Having seen the alternative, club owners in Britain would have had no option but to adopt the American razzmatazz.

Meanwhile the Americans would have turned the proverbial game of two halves into one of four quarters to allow for advertising on the big growth industry as far as home entertainment was concerned between the wars - radio. Once sound came in to the movies, high-quality match film flown across the Atlantic would have shown the British and other European countries what they were missing. The maximum wage in England would have ensured that any player offered an

American contract would have been unable to refuse. If the Hitchcocks and Cary Grants couldn't resist Hollywood, why would Stanley Matthews or 'Dixie' Dean?

There would be more stoppages in the game of course. Match umpires would be provided with a stopwatch to ensure that the crowd got their 80 - not 90 - minutes worth. After each quarter of twenty minutes there would be a time-out of five minutes for team talks and tactical changes. Any injury which brought the game to a halt would have been the opportunity for the match sponsor - a beer, tobacco, motor car or shaving company for this would still be essentially a male spectator sport - the chance to pitch their wares. A pitchside official - perhaps designated as referee - would give the match umpire the signal to start again when the advert was over. Much like modern American Football these games would last far longer than the scheduled eighty minutes though supporters would be guaranteed their money's worth. There would be no time-wasting, no 'running down the clock' and the up to a third of playing time lost when the ball was out of play would no longer be a feature of the game.

It wouldn't necessarily be better than what we have now. Nor would it necessarily be worse. But it would be different. It would simply be what generations had become accustomed to. The US - and by extension Latin American - style of football would have become dominant during the First World War when Europe was tearing itself apart. The Americans only entered the conflict in 1917 and South American countries played a nominal role if at all.

In the 1920s it was South American countries, successful in Olympic football, that were the principal motor for the establishment of the World Cup. This was the era of unbridled capitalism in the USA - the idea that what was good for business was good for America - and it's easy to envisage the first World Cup taking place, not in Uruguay in 1930 but in the USA in 1922 as sponsors fell over themselves to get their names associated with the global phenomenon that was football. The second World Cup may even have been held in England as a nod to the game's 'founding fathers' before returning across the Atlantic to Uruguay in 1930.

The USA would have won the first competition, thus enshrining football's status as America's premier sport even more firmly with the public. Perhaps England, with home advantage, might have won the second before enduring forty years of hurt before Wembley staged the tournament again.

The Second World War would have further cemented American dominance - both north and south of the Isthmus of Panama - as that hemisphere once more lay largely untouched by global conflict. But it would have been the immediate post-war era which saw the game's greatest changes as it prepared to enter the modern world.

One of the downsides of US dominance would have been its unofficial but very real segregation in sport. Despite the feats of athletes like Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics, team sports remained strictly delineated along racial lines. In 1947 Jackie Robinson became the first black player in major league baseball in almost seventy years. The same would have happened in football. The role of black servicemen during a war which was fought to prevent theories of racial supremacy from dominating the world, coupled with the growing Civil Rights movement, would have brought an ever-increasing number of black players - and spectators. In the UK where no colour bar applied, there had always been some black players - Andrew Watson played for Scotland in the 1870s for instance - but it wasn't until the late 1960s and 1970s that the number of black players really began to increase. If the same had been happening in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s then it's easy to see Britain and other European countries fielding black players in substantial numbers much earlier than actually happened. There would have been role models across the Atlantic for black youngsters to follow.

Earlier than that the democratic countries of pre-war Europe would have offered an outlet for talented black American players, restricted by segregation to black-only leagues in the US. The

cultural Atlantic flow in the inter-war era wasn't just in one direction. Just as big European stars headed for Hollywood so too did black Americans who refused to be ghettoised head in the opposite direction. It was Britain - and in particular Wales - where Paul Robeson found lasting fame and Josephine Baker was awarded both the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Legion d'honneur* for her work for the French Resistance in the Second World War. Black footballers, unable to play against white opponents in their own country, would have found chances in those European countries untouched by the advance of Fascism in the 1930s. But it would still have taken until after the war for black players - other than standout superstars - to make significant progress in the game.

The development of jet travel in the 1950s would have led to a fully-fledged transcontinental US league, superseding the regional set-ups in existence since the 19th century. In turn this would give impetus to the idea of establishing a similar set-up in Europe and South America. The success of the World Cup would have seen a similar trans-American tournament established much earlier than the European Championship. And with the Americans to the fore they would not have made the mistake of establishing this competition in the same year as the Olympic Games. Instead it would have been played in the year following the Olympics and before the World Cup. Television audiences would have been huge, especially in the USA where TV was established long before Europe.

That would have left one year in the four-year cycle free and the obvious candidate to fill the void would have been a World club competition. Initially this would have been restricted to teams from the stronger footballing nations - North America, South America and Europe - but would in time have grown into a 32-club competition similar to the World Cup. Kick-off times and venues would of course have been determined largely by sponsors. Sponsorship itself would have been vital for revenue with logos appearing on shirts as early as the 1920s in the USA and the 1950s elsewhere. The franchise system would have been inevitable. Names would remain, much as they do in US sports, but teams would be transplanted from city to city according to where the club owners thought success lay. Inevitably the same would have happened in Europe. If the Manchester Red Devils went through a fallow period then the Leeds Devils might emerge. By and large though the great footballing cities of Europe would still have big clubs though its doubtful if anything like the Barcelona model of common ownership could have withstood the commercial pressures of the day. All the associated paraphernalia of US sport - pre-match entertainment, cheerleaders etc - would have arrived in Europe decades ago. That mass importation of American culture which now sees 'prom' dresses sold in British clothing shops would be nothing new.

A World club championship would in turn have led to calls for continental competitions too. As happened in actuality, the shorter distances involved means these would have been run on an annual basis, though the points accumulated over a four year period would have determined which clubs played in World club championship.

The arrival of commercial supersonic flight in the 1970s would have swept aside the final barrier to a regular World league which would have quickly replaced both the World Cup and the World club championship as the most popular form of the sport, especially once satellite television took off in the 1980s and 1990s. The two great markets still untapped today - China and India - would have been won over long ago. An elite league of twelve clubs - three from the USA, one from Mexico, two from South America, three from Europe and one each from Africa, Asia and Australasia - would slug it out for the global crown. There would be a regular season of home and away fixtures, each available on pay-per-view via cable, satellite and live streaming, comprising of 22 fixtures. During this part of the season there would be no more than one match per day, to allow for the biggest available audience. Admission to the stadium itself would be free in order to generate a packed house for the billions watching.

Teams would meet for the third time in the season at venues across the USA (games 23-33) and in a much bigger version of the English Premiership's aborted '39th step' the fourth and final round of matches (games 34-44) would take place in one country - in a nod to the by now forgotten World club championship. Countries across the globe would vie for the right to stage this grand finale in much the same way as they contest the right to hold the World Cup, Olympic Games and European Championships today. There would be no relegation from this super-elite. The only changes would come about as a consequence of financial failure and even then a replacement would be like for like. If an American club folded then another American one would take their place and so on. Below this level there would be continental, national and regional leagues with changes in divisions taking place through play-offs though perhaps not on an annual basis. Clubs could be given two or three seasons to establish themselves at a higher level before facing the threat of relegation.

Within the World League itself it wouldn't be enough for the team finishing top to be declared champions. The top four would go through to the grand finals while the bottom eight fought it out for the right to join them. The fifth placed team would play the bottom side, six would meet eleven, seven clash with ten and eight with nine - all in a dramatic eighty-minute shoot-out plus extra time and penalties if necessary. Once down to the last eight the same rules as are applied at the World Cup and the Champions League designed to ensure clubs from the same countries/continents don't face each other too early would be in place with seedings adjusted accordingly. Eventually there would be two sides left to slug it out for the annual Soccerball World Bowl. One match, ostensibly lasting eighty minutes, but which would be the biggest single evening's entertainment on the planet with the schedules cleared in every country in the world for six hours or more of programming and punditry, both pre and post-match.

It would be a world away from the game we know today and for that we should maybe give thanks that the ALPF flopped in 1894 and the USA never took the game up seriously.