



A Gentleman's Game: Nineteenth-Century Soccer in Omaha

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Bruce Gerhardt, "A Gentleman's Game: Nineteenth-Century Soccer in Omaha," *Nebraska History* 96 (2015): 14-25

Article Summary: Soccer arrived surprisingly early in Nebraska's largest city, with the first public match played in 1880. Even as American collegiate football was gaining popularity, local soccer aficionados (many of whom were immigrants) argued that their sport was "a game of science, skill, and gentlemanliness" destined to become "the national winter game of America."

Cataloging Information:

Names: Edmund John Shakeshaft, Pat Riley

Place Names: Omaha and Sulphur Springs, Nebraska; Council Bluffs, Iowa

Keywords: cricket, rugby, soccer, association football, dribbling [footwork], St. George's Society, Arsenal Gunners

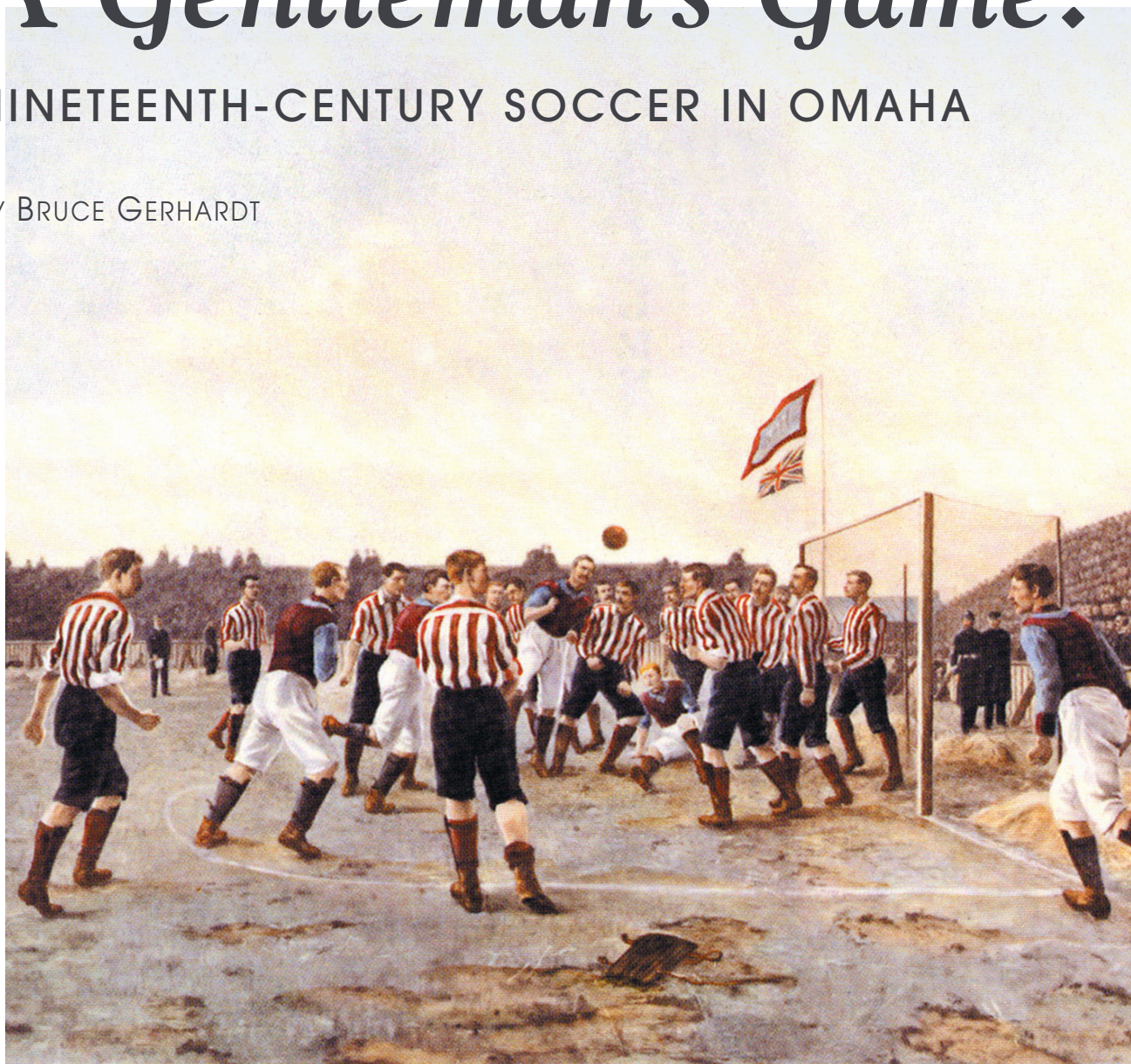
Omaha Area Teams: YMCA, Caledonian, Draper & Wilcox, Hayden Brothers, Rangers, Scottish Thistles, Clan Gordon, Fort Omaha, Second Infantry, Creighton College, Ainsworth, Long Pine, Blair, Papillion, Norden, Burlington & Missouri Railroad

Photographs / Images: *Sunderland v. Aston Villa 1895* (also known as *A Corner Kick*), a painting by Thomas M.M. Hemy; Edmund John Shakeshaft; artist's view of Omaha, 1888; nineteenth-century soccer ball; troops on the Fort Omaha parade ground, latter nineteenth century; illustration from Montague Sherman, *Athletics and Football*, 1887; Omaha in 1897; an early photo of a soccer match

A Gentleman's Game:

NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOCCER IN OMAHA

BY BRUCE GERHARDT



ASSOCIATION FOOT BALL

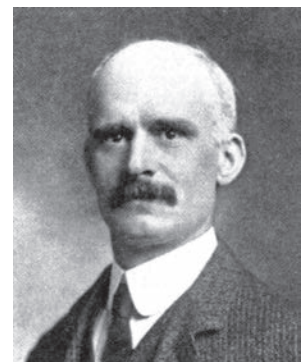
"Is there any association foot ball played here?" asked a stranger the other day. He appeared somewhat surprised when informed there was not any. "Well," said he, "you are missing one of the greatest sports in existence by not playing association foot ball, and right now (the winter) is the best time to play it. Surely Omaha, with all its young people, could raise sufficient interest in the game to support several clubs. I have seen Rugby played here..." *Omaha World-Herald*, January 20, 1895

What Americans call "soccer" is one of several sports that evolved from games played for centuries in Europe, loosely called "football." The history of the sport in England is well known, especially the meeting when "rugby" proponents and "association football" proponents made their famous break from each other.¹ In the United States, history is complicated by our development of "American intercollegiate" or "gridiron" football from a rugby origin at the same time that soccer was being introduced in many cities and colleges. Terminology overlaps in older sources, so that when the term "football" is used in some texts, it is not always simple to understand which exact sport is being played.²

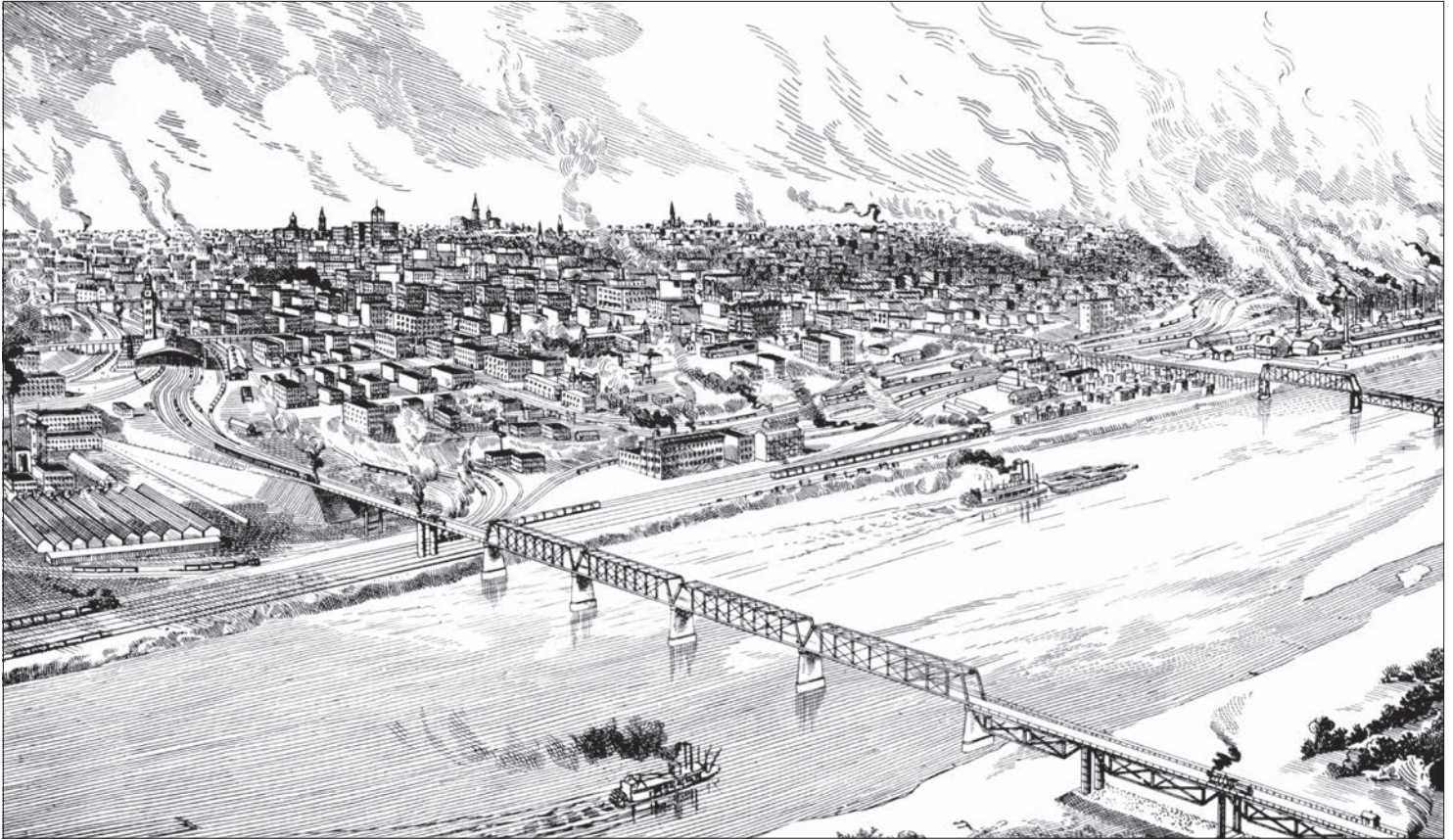
Unearthing the game's history in Omaha is a reflection of American history. Early soccer shares several common American narratives: immigration and foreign traditions being brought to the United States; the growth of commerce and ever larger companies whose employees would socialize and seek entertainment; transportation enabling the spread of people, ideas, and developments; and higher education and the growth of organized sports among students. Omaha's history with soccer seems to be fairly typical of how the sport developed in other cities across America.

When was soccer first played in Omaha? The game seems to have come and gone at various times, resulting in several different references to the "first time" soccer was played there.³ The historical records may be opaque, but what is clear is that soccer was played in Omaha far earlier than most would guess.

Left: *Sunderland v. Aston Villa 1895* (also known as *A Corner Kick*) by Thomas M. M. Hemy. Depicting a match between English teams, this is the earliest known painting of a soccer match. Omaha had its own season of association football that year. Wikimedia Commons



Edmund John Shakeshaft, one of the English-born founding members of the first Omaha soccer club. *Santa Fe Employees Magazine*, Vol. V., No. 1, December 1910



Artist's view of Omaha in 1888, a year after the Sulphur Springs match.
NSHS RG 2341-31

Omaha Soccer—the Original “Gunners”

Arsenal Football Club is one of the most famous soccer clubs in the top flight of English soccer, the Premier League. Arsenal traces its storied history to 1886, when workers from the Woolwich Arsenal Armaments Company formed a soccer team. Ever since, Arsenal has been tagged with the nickname of “Gunners,” and their famous crest features a large cannon on a red background.⁴ Omaha's soccer origins trace six years before Arsenal, when some notable Omaha men, “several of whom have been members of distinguished English clubs,” met at Collins & Petty's gun store to form a “football” club.⁵ The meeting on the evening of September 29, 1880, elected officers and admitted thirty-five members. Edmund John Shakeshaft may have been a typical member: born in 1861 in Lewisham, Kent County, England, he had come to the United States at nineteen years of age from Purley, in Surrey County. He worked in Omaha for the Union Pacific.⁶ The club made Omaha Mayor Champion S. Chase its honorary president, and Joseph D. Iler its president. Thirty-five and soon to be married, Iler was a co-owner of the Willow Springs Distillery and a liquor wholesaler.⁷ The sixty-year-old Chase was not a player, but Iler could have been.⁸ The team's

uniform was to be blue and white jerseys, dark blue pants with blue and white stockings, and red and blue caps.⁹

At another meeting several weeks later Alfred Sorenson, George P. Bemis, and Charles D. Dorman were added to the club.¹⁰ Sorenson was city editor of the *Omaha Bee*; including him was probably a wise move to assure news coverage.¹¹ Bemis was a prominent real estate man and future Omaha mayor. Dorman would later work for the Burlington & Missouri Railway, a company connection that will come up again.¹²

The Omaha football club played its first game on Saturday evening, October 23, 1880. The two teams were short-handed with nine players each, and Captain Stewart's team defeated the team of Captain C. S. Nash. The *Bee* reported that “a large crowd of ladies witnessed the game,” but there was no mention if the ladies were duly impressed or not.¹³ At the next club meeting on November 5 two more officers were added: Benjamin S. DeGroat as vice captain to Stewart, and Charles B. DeGroat as assistant secretary. Mr. Smith of the Burlington & Missouri Railroad and Richard Shakeshaft also joined.¹⁴ The DeGroats owned a hat store at 1314 Farnam Street, but wouldn't be in Omaha much

longer. In March 1881 their store caught fire under mysterious circumstances and insurance money was quickly collected. The DeGroats were later arrested for arson while on the run in St. Louis.¹⁵

The club is not mentioned in the local press after the fall of 1880. Another seven years would pass before the newspapers reported the return of soccer to the Omaha sporting scene.

Cricketers Roll out a Ball at the Sulphur Springs Friendly¹⁶

Sulphur Springs was an area bordering Cut-Off Lake (now called Carter Lake) north of early Omaha. It's best known in Omaha history as the site of Isaac Neff's murder in 1863, and where his killer, Cyrus Tator, became the first person legally hanged in Nebraska.¹⁷ Twenty-five years later, an open field at Sulphur Springs was the site of a less macabre public event: an exhibition soccer match. It was hosted not by soccer clubs, but by cricket clubs from the Burlington & Missouri Railroad and the St. George's Club of Chicago. Kickoff was set for 8 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day, 1887—the first soccer game in Omaha using Association rules in seven years.¹⁸ The game had not been forgotten, as the headline in the *Omaha Daily World* noted it was “[a] Revival of Foot Ball.” But even this second launch would later be lost to the Omaha newspaper, which reported a game in the following decade as the “first in Omaha.”¹⁹

Why would two cricket teams play an exhibition soccer match? It was common for large companies in the latter nineteenth century to have athletic clubs.²⁰ These companies had large numbers of younger immigrants or the children of recent immigrants as workers—as clerks and freight agents, in the case of the Burlington & Missouri Railroad. They organized these clubs for socializing and exercise, and would have been fond of cricket from their ties to England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Cricket was popular in the United States at the time and traces back to the first European settlers. It bears a passing resemblance to baseball, as a “bowler” throws a ball to a batsman, who attempts to hit the ball into the field of play. The fielders attempt to catch or return the ball to the pitch area where the batter is running before the batter can score runs. (Baseball is said to be derived more from the British game called “rounders.”) The St. George's Club was well known in New York, Chicago, and other large cities as one of the earliest cricket clubs, with an English membership. A St. George's Society was organized in Omaha in 1882, and dedicated to the appreciation of English culture and heritage.²¹



Nineteenth-century soccer ball. Author photo

It's hard to say what brought team captains A. T. McPherson of the railroad and E. W. Ayres of St. George's together for the match, but they were undoubtedly enthusiastic about the growth of association football in England and eager to demonstrate the sport to locals, in addition to their game of cricket that was already widely played in Omaha. Perhaps there was also a connection between Mr. Smith and Charles Dorman—members of the Omaha football club seven years earlier and Burlington & Missouri employees—and the Burlington & Missouri cricket team of this event. Indeed, when Charles Dorman retired from the Burlington & Missouri in 1889, A. T. McPherson was one of the guests at a banquet held in his honor by the Apollo Club in the Millard Hotel.²²

A Football Champion Arrives in Omaha

Six years later, the sport had yet to take a firm hold even on the east coast. The *New York Times* reported on November 5, 1893, that an exhibition old-style “dribbling” match was being arranged between a select team from Philadelphia and one from New York. The “dribbling game” is a reference to the time when soccer and rugby split from their common predecessor sport. Rugby allowed carrying the ball, while soccer only allowed the ball to be advanced by footwork, called “dribbling.” The *Times* noted that “while intercollegiate football is now all the rage, the devotees of that other style of play known as dribbling are being kept busy. A missionary spirit has been aroused in the followers of the association rules, and their object is now to spread the knowledge of their scientific pastime.”²³

Troops on the Fort Omaha parade ground, latter nineteenth century. The first soccer match at the fort was played in 1895.
NSHS RG2340-7



It took another eight years after the Sulphur Springs friendly before “association football” is mentioned again in an Omaha newspaper. In January 1895, a column in the *Omaha World-Herald* reported that “Pat” Riley had recently arrived from Canada. Born in Nottingham, England and a champion runner, Riley was used to playing soccer in the winter to keep in shape for summer sports. After immigrating to Toronto he helped organize several soccer clubs, and about thirty clubs were playing by the time he left for Omaha. He was reported to have arranged the first Canadian-American team to cross the ocean to play matches in England. In Omaha he was surprised to learn of the absence of association football, since he saw good rugby being played locally. The article goes on to extol the virtues of the “association game,” with many of the same arguments that soccer fans lob at football today: “Association does not require the strength and bucking power which is essential in Rugby, and one need never be afraid of being hauled around, knocked down, and the weight of six or eight men piled on top of him. Any young man can take part in the game who has ordinary strength, heart and lungs.”²⁴ It wouldn’t be surprising if Pat Riley had written the article himself. He would work for many years as the *Omaha World-Herald*’s local crime reporter.²⁵

Riley’s interest in association football and work at the *World-Herald* may explain the sport’s apparent surge in participation and press coverage in 1895. On the day after the column about Riley, an

article described how the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was putting together a soccer team. Eighteen players came to the first practice, several having obviously played before. “Sticks were driven into the ground at each end of the field, they serving as goal posts, then the men divided up (nine on each side) and soon the ball was being chased around the field and first one goal was attacked and then the other.”²⁶ A pick-up game of soccer a hundred years later wouldn’t sound much different.

YMCA and the Scots Lead the Way

Less than a week later the YMCA was reported to have held several practices, and the first starting eleven was announced: Burdick, Gardiner (one of the original Omaha St. George’s Club members), Jessop, Pitzer, and Reddinger as forwards; Buchanan, Haven, and Van Camp at halfback; Riley and Johnson as fullbacks; and Cook as “goal custodian.” Riley is probably the same Pat Riley, having finally rounded up enough others to play a proper game of soccer. The “2-3-5” formation is thus the first formation known to have been used in Omaha, the classic “pyramid” that today is more usually inverted with the most numerous line being defenders, not forwards.²⁷ The same article mentions that the railway clerks and the high school were each forming teams, so there would soon be three established teams in Omaha. In May 1895 the YMCA opened a new park for athletics at the

corner of Twenty-seventh and Dodge Streets, and an exhibition association football match was arranged as part of the opening ceremonies. By June, Wednesday evenings were set aside at YMCA Park for “the old style run and kick game” as this game, “like basket ball, is a game that six or thirty men can take part in, and so all who come may have a hand, or a foot in it.”²⁸

Omaha’s ethnic organizations were early proponents of the sport. At the Clan Gordon picnic at Fort Calhoun in July, the YMCA team was invited to play as the main feature of the sporting attractions. The Order of Scottish Clans was a natural fit, as the *Omaha Daily Bee* explained that “[t]he association style of foot ball is of Scotch origin, and many of the players on the Scotch side demonstrated the fact that they had been educated up to the game by the manner in which they played.” A review of the quality of play came up with a timeless complaint: “The noticeable feature in Jessop’s play was that he attempted too much grandstand work. He frequently held the ball instead of passing it to other players who had a better chance to score than he.”²⁹ Clan Gordon won nonetheless, 1-0. To the winners went the prize of a box of 100 cigars.³⁰

By September 1895 the sport was being actively promoted to the Omaha public. The Nebraska State Fair was in town (at the time it alternated each year between Omaha and Lincoln), and the attractions committee was lobbied to approve a daily exhibition match. The *World-Herald* noted that “[t]his is the old style of football where all the elements of rough play are eliminated and where players big or little can participate on equal footing and which is so interesting and easy for the casual spectator to understand.” The reference to “old style of football” is probably to distinguish it from the more popular “collegiate” football being played at the time. Notably, Fort Omaha was putting together two teams to compete at the fair, and teams from the YMCA, Clan Gordon, Rangers, Caledonian, and Wilcox & Draper were anticipated. The games did not come to pass, however, because the Omaha players felt the field was too far from the grandstand and that the spectators would not be able to fully appreciate the sport.³¹

The YMCA soccer program took hold, and in September 1895 elected officers to carry the program forward. Edward F. Pickering, a locksmith born in Indiana, was elected captain.³² L. T. Haven was the only officer elected from among the earlier announced YMCA starting eleven. Either the club had grown larger or players had moved to different teams, or perhaps a bit of both. On the fourteenth



Pickering took the YMCA squad to Fort Omaha to play the “first association foot ball match ever played at the fort.”³³ While the result wasn’t reported, a return leg was played at the YMCA grounds a week later. Van Camp and Gardner scored early goals to put the Fort up 2-0, and then “the Fort acted on the defense and kept the Christians at bay, satisfying themselves by leaving the scoring to four forwards.” In today’s soccer terms, the soldiers “parked the bus.”

Supporters Promote the Sport and Throw a Few Jabs

The YMCA quickly branched out across the Missouri River, dispatching Riley and Redfield from the Omaha squad to promote a similar YMCA effort in Council Bluffs, Iowa. One wonders again if Riley wasn’t the author of the *World-Herald*’s report, which sends forth another early volley in the continuing argument between the proponents of rugby/collegiate football on one side, and association football/soccer on the other:

While a large number of the players are favorable to the Rugby game, yet a great many think that association foot ball will be the more popular, owing to the absence of the brutalizing

Illustration from Montague Sherman, *Athletics and Football* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887).



Omaha in 1897, two years after the city's first soccer season. NSHS RG2341-1340

tendencies of the other game. The majority of persons who would not attend a Rugby game on account of the roughness entailed would be immensely interested in association foot ball. While it is not fair to say that the Rugby game is not a decent one, yet it is safe to assert that association foot ball is in every sense of the word a gentleman's game.³⁴

That a concerted effort was being made to promote the sport locally is revealed by two long articles that appeared in the *World-Herald* on September 15 and October 15. The subheadlines of the first article are not subtle in their advocacy: "Description of an Interesting Outdoor Sport for Omaha This Winter"; "An Intriguing Pastime Where Big and Little Can Participate on an Equal Footing"; and "It Is Very Exciting and Easy to Understand—Six Teams in Omaha Ready to Do Battle." The article then educates the reader by describing the positions on the field, starting with the goalkeeper:

The goal keeper occupies a similar position to that of a base ball catcher. He should be a

fearless man, not afraid of a man running into him and should possess great confidence in himself and should be quick as lightning to be able to either kick the ball or punch it accurately. He should especially practice punting out goal shots and corner kicks, and endeavor to play the ball to one side of the goal and not straight forward unless there is a good opportunity for one of his side to get it.³⁵

Youth soccer coaches will be comforted to know that a goalkeeper sending the ball up the middle to be intercepted by a waiting opponent is not a recent problem. The advice for the forward line (five or six players, depending on whether you played with two or three halfbacks) was also timeless: "The men playing on the wings should practice playing fast and shooting hard at goal and work with their heads. Pass every chance they get. All their success depends entirely upon passing the ball to each other. It is almost an impossibility for any one player to work the ball down the field and through the goal when there is any kind of a defense." Youth coaches of today would chorus

“amen.” The article concludes with a listing of the Omaha teams: YMCA, the Caledonians, Clan Gordon, the Rangers, and Fort Omaha, with Draper & Wilcox and Hayden Brothers in the process of forming teams.³⁶ After some shots at the violence and lack of spectator appeal of rugby football, the article concludes by listing the thirty-one laws of association football.

The October article is even more of an editorial, throwing a quick punch in its opening lines: “The beginning of the foot ball season is the signal for a renewal to the opposition of the brutality connected with the game as it is played today. There is pronounced opposition to the game in the colleges of the East, and President Elliott of Harvard forbade the playing of the game, owing to the injuries some of the players received in the Yale match.”³⁷ Soccer and football appeared to be vying for the mantle of the “true” successor sport of the common origin. The rivalry was presented as an either/or decision rather than two distinct sports that could coexist. There is probably no analogous feud between two sports, and it’s hard to understand why this choice has always been presented so.

The article continues, “[Rugby] foot ball has degenerated into a slugging match and its champions cannot long expect such a sport to withstand the popular opposition that is certainly setting in against it. This feeling is so strong that the legislatures of many states have been petitioned to enact a law against the game as it is being played. Such a petition was presented to the last legislature, but it was not clear how such a sport could be affected by legislation.” So the Nebraska Bug-eaters, as they were then sometimes called (now the Cornhuskers), were threatened with an early dissolution from the opponents of American-style football.³⁸ The writer may have overreached, but the same issues regarding risks of serious and long-term injuries are now being revived and the same criticisms leveled at the NFL and even younger levels.

As an alternative, the piece notes that “[a]lready a rival game known as ‘association foot ball’ has come to the front, and while it may be true that this game is too mild to suit the tastes of some of the young physical giants of our day, it is equally true that the ‘association’ game bids fair to grow in popularity with the parents who are compelled to foot the surgeon bill and with others who believe that a manly contest is possible without absolute danger to life and limb.” To prove how accessible the sport was, the writer noted in his closing comments that “a business man can practice in his ordinary clothes and fifteen to twenty minutes, two or three

times a week is said to be sufficient training.” In that at least, some things have changed.³⁹

More Clubs Form and a First Season Develops

The Rangers’ association football debuted on September 28 in a game against the YMCA team, which was reported to still be stinging from a drubbing it took at Fort Omaha the previous week.⁴⁰ By the end of October 1895, another soccer club had formed. The “Scottish Thistles” were led by Alex Rose and Joe Gray, described as “two old-time foot ball enthusiasts,” who wanted to put together a team of “bona fide Scotchmen.”⁴¹ They reported having about thirty players, with the starting eleven also in a 2-3-5 formation. They quickly arranged a match with the YMCA team and played to a scoreless draw. Foster, identified as the new Rangers’ fullback, perhaps in a witty gibe was singled out as having played a great game for the Christians.⁴²

The Thistles were quickly followed by the Hayden Brothers store clerks, who organized a football club a week or two thereafter. “Hayden Bros.’ base ball team has been quietly practicing association foot ball during the past few weeks for the purpose of resolving itself into an association football club.” They played their inaugural match against a depleted Fort Omaha team, which had several sick players absent, and secured a 2-0 win.⁴³ The Haydens soon had elected officers and about twenty members, and were reported to be off to the nearby community of Papillion to “play a scrub game with the Papillion boys, who are anxious to organize a team.”⁴⁴

Papillion wasn’t the only nearby town interested in the new sport. Dr. Baldwin of Elkhorn worked on arranging a Thanksgiving Day game in his town between the Rangers and either Hayden Bros. or the Fort Omaha Second Infantry team. The only thing holding up the organizing of the game was a guarantee for the expenses of both teams—another enduring issue in the sport.⁴⁵

With all the new teams and interest in the sport, efforts were made to formalize a league. A meeting was held in late October at the lecture room of the Y.M.C.A to organize the sport and perfect the game, as “the new sport has taken a firm hold in the city and is destined to become the popular outdoor sport the coming winter and from the recent prospects it will attract large crowds.” Teams attending were Fort Omaha (Second Infantry), Caledonians, Rangers, YMCA, Scotts (Scottish Thistles?), Hayden’s, and Creighton College, and city teams from Ainsworth, Long Pine, Blair, Papillion, and Norden.⁴⁶

Bruce Gerhardt is senior counsel at HDR, Inc. in Omaha. A soccer dad and coach, he is also the author of “Swedish Day: Swedish-Americans and the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition,” Swedish American Genealogist, June 2007.

An early photo of a soccer match. Sports action photography had been impossible with the long exposures required by early photographic film. *The Photo-Miniature* 8(91), July 1908, 290.



As the winter season of 1895 progressed, the articles turned from promotion of the sport and news about clubs being formed, to a more traditional reporting of games. On November 24, the Thistles took the field at Fort Omaha to face the Second Infantry side. The *World-Herald* reported a fair number of spectators, and a positive development in that each side made several scores, while “hitherto there has been very little scoring in matches.” While the match ended in a 2-2 draw, the action was praised:

Cavanaugh led off by taking the ball down and making a splendid try for the Thistles’ goal and the leather was transferred to the soldiers’ goal, where Gray sent it through, eight minutes from the start. The Thistles’ forwards were playing a very tricky game, but Russell was superb at center half and held everything down in excellent style. Gray had a good chance to score, but headed out close to goal. Wilkins made a good run on the right and drew first blood for the soldiers.

Then McNeil made things equal by kicking goal number two for the Thistles. This weakened up the soldiers, who tried hard to capture the Scotchmen’s goal, and they were not long in succeeding, for Cavanagh and Wilkins by some excellent long passing secured another goal, Cavanaugh doing the needful. Thus the game ended in a tie—both sides scoring two goals each.⁴⁷

The Rangers and Fort Omaha played a match a week later. Their scheduled exhibition in Elkhorn was cancelled due to wet conditions and the game moved to Fort Omaha. However, the start time was moved to 1:30 p.m., “to allow any of the players to see the Nebraska – Iowa game.”⁴⁸ It may have taken

more than 100 years, but the Thanksgiving week football tradition of the Iowa Hawkeyes against the Nebraska Cornhuskers has returned.

The last months of 1895 culminated in a short period of development and promotion for Omaha soccer. A November 24 *World-Herald* article surveyed the burgeoning scene, noting that there were seven clubs in the city and that a league was to be organized during the next ten days and that the players intended to put up a cup for competition. The Second Infantry was the team to beat, for they “can lord it over any club in town.” There was even talk of forming a team at the high school after rugby season, and efforts were being made to get the national champion Chicago Thistles to play in Omaha at Christmas. As for local talent, “Omaha has no real good forwards, but has several promising men for defensive work.”

In addition to singling out numerous players at different positions for their development and potential, the writer had a critical eye for some of the play he observed:

The chief thing in Association foot ball is for every man to keep his place irrespective of where the ball is. A great many players are attempting individual work, which is a great mistake. They must learn to pass the ball to their own men, because team work is necessary to win. It requires five men to make a good forward line and six men for a defense. Captain Cavanagh cannot expect to score goals or build a forward line by leaving his position. Nearly every half back kicks the ball indiscriminately instead of feeding it to the forward behind whom he is playing. The object of the half backs is to get the ball from the opposing forwards and give it to his own.

Coaches today are still trying to get players to follow the same advice.

Omaha Looks to St. Louis as a Yardstick

In early November 1895, Omaha was looking to put together a “picked team” to compete in the Association Foot Ball Cup in St. Louis. The plan seems to have fallen through, as Pat Riley submitted a long article on January 26, 1896, about his trip to see a match at the Cup. No mention is made of an Omaha team, but his observations and comments about the game between the St. Louis Cycling Club and St. Teresa teams are revealing—especially from the perspective of how new the sport was to Omaha.

Riley started by noting that St. Louis had two good venues: Sportsman’s Park and South Side

Park. South Side was apparently also a race track, as the game was played on the infield and “no one, excepting the referee and a line man on each side of the ground, was allowed to be near the field on play.” Despite the cold and distance from the field, he reported that more than 2,000 spectators watched the match from the upper grandstand or from the outside fence of the race track. Since the “large number of scientific points of the association game” could not be well seen, he thought “[t]his was the most absurd feature in the management of a game I ever saw.”

He was also critical of the officiating. “Another ridiculous feature of the game was that instead of having an umpire at each goal, they had a man on each of the side lines to decide which team should throw the ball in, which is of trifling importance to the play around goal.” An interesting point, as FIFA law has long required the assistant referees to be along the touchlines (sidelines), with a main function of making offside calls.⁴⁹ Riley held an opposite view. “Umpires at each goal line (end lines) should be appointed whose duties are to determine all offside play, decide goals, corner kicks, goals kicks, and assist the referee in determining all play at goals.”

Riley was none too pleased with the roughness of play as well, and the referees’ unwillingness to address it.

The men lost sight of the science of the game and went right in for indiscriminate kicking of the ball and charging each other with vengeance. The game was only three minutes old when “French rules” were introduced and a couple of fellows deliberately commenced kicking each other. Then these two resorted to Queensbury rules, and others seeing the fun joined in, and finally eight players went to work and pounded each other right and left. Spectators jumped from their seats and joined in the melee, one of whom got his nose spread over his face for his interference. . . . All through the rest of the game the players watched their opportunity to do each other up, which was the cause of several other fistic encounters.

He tempered his criticism at the end, noting that “the players are a very enterprising, enthusiastic lot of fellows, and deserve great credit for their efforts. They are a jolly, liberal crowd, and besides devoting considerable time to the game, they expend a lot of money on it.” Plans for a league among Chicago, St. Louis, and Omaha were said to be in

the works, along with a visit by an English team to those cities.⁵⁰ The *St. Louis Star* reprinted the Riley article, noting he was “perhaps the best posted man on Association foot ball and field athletics in the west.”⁵¹

The fall of 1897 saw only one game reported in the papers, but others surely took place. On Thanksgiving Day, the Rangers took on Creighton College at the grounds of St. Peter’s Catholic Church and School, in a match to benefit the school run by the Sisters of Mercy. Creighton took the match 1-0, with the scoring coming from the Rangers. “In a scrimmage, Parker of the Rangers got tangled up with the points of the compass and sent the ball into his own goal, which he was supposed to be defending.”⁵² Father McNamara took part and played at fullback for Creighton. A close second half shot by Redfield for the Rangers was disallowed in a judgment call by the “umpire.”⁵³

The Scientific Game Takes a Hiatus in Omaha

After this game, association football or soccer does not appear to be mentioned again in the *World-Herald* or *Bee* until 1906. It seems unlikely that no soccer was played during this time, but some of the articles from 1911—when Creighton again started up a college team—suggest that a long time had passed since soccer was played in Omaha. In fact, reporters seem to have been unaware of the earlier teams.

For a couple of years in the last decade of the nineteenth century, soccer gained a foothold in Omaha with energetic advocates. Their optimism for the sport’s future in the United States was well stated by S. H. Roberts in an article for *Outing Magazine* in March 1891: “The interest in the game is increasing every year and ere long the lovers and followers of the sport will see a team in every large city in the East, all joined in one league and run on a solid basis. Then the Association game, which is a game of science, skill, and gentlemanliness, will be known as the national winter game of America.” Thanks to strong ethnic organizations and local businesses with athletic programs, Association football was launched in Omaha as an ideal winter sport and an alternative to the dangerous play of rugby and American intercollegiate football. Why it didn’t persist from the 1895 effort is hard to say, but American soccer has a very old tradition even in a regional city like Omaha. Perhaps some of that tradition and history was useful as the sport was reintroduced and took a permanent place in the Omaha sporting scene in the twentieth century. 🏈

NOTES

¹ See Montague Shearman, *Athletics and Football* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887), 246-370. Association football traces the start of standardized rules to meetings in London in 1863, which created the Football Association and outlawed carrying the ball and kicking the opponent. This standardized the “kicking game.” In 1871 the clubs that played rugby created the Rugby Football Union, and established rules standardizing the “running” or “carrying” game.

² The 1898 *Encyclopædia Britannica* entry for “Football” describes four popular games derived from the historic game called “foot ball”: rugby, Association, Australian, and American intercollegiate. The entry was authored by Walter Camp, a pioneer American intercollegiate football coach and rules expert who in 1880 effectively created the game from its rugby origins by replacing the scrum with an uncontested line of scrimmage to start each play.

³ Throughout this article, “soccer” and “association football” are used interchangeably. The term “soccer” is said to have originated as slang in the English universities as an abbreviation for association football. Rugby was sometimes called “rugger.” The *Omaha World-Herald* in 1907 used the term “socker foot ball,” and in 1911 “soccer football.”

⁴ “History,” The Official Website of Arsenal, www.arsenal.com/history, accessed Feb. 25, 2014.

⁵ James W. Savage, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York: Munsell & Co., 1894), 473; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 15, 1880, 4. The company was later known as the Collins Gun Company.

⁶ *Santa Fe Employees Magazine*, December 1910, 53-54.

⁷ Keith Kay, *Douglas County, Nebraska Marriages, 1854-1881*, 73; “Omaha Foot-Ball Club,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 30, 1880, 1; Arthur C. Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1917), 224.

⁸ Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City*, 328-29.

⁹ “Omaha Foot-Ball Club,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 30, 1880, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, “Foot Ball,” Oct. 14, 1880, 4.

¹¹ “Sorenson, Alfred,” Nebraska State Historical Society, www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/timeline/sorenson_alfred.htm, accessed Feb. 25, 2014.

¹² “Apollo Club Banquet,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 2, 1889, 16.

¹³ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 25, 1880, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 6, 1880, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, “Arrested for Arson,” Apr. 5, 1881, 1.

¹⁶ A “friendly” is a game between soccer teams that is not a league or tournament game, it more in the nature of an exhibition game, but played as a formal game.

¹⁷ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Co., 1882) 1:709-10.

¹⁸ As the *Omaha Daily Bee* (Nov. 22, 1887, 8) reported, “[t]he contest will be played by the association rules, the Rugby being too severe on beginners.”

¹⁹ “A Revival of Foot Ball,” *Omaha Daily World*, Nov. 21, 1887, 1; “First Soccer Game Played in Omaha,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 21, 1911, 8 (describing match between the Omaha Association and Svea Athletic Club).

²⁰ Wilma J. Pesavento, “Sport and Recreation in the Pullman Experiment, 1880-1890,” *Journal of Sport History* 9(2) (Summer 1982): 38-62.

²¹ “St. George’s Day,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 25, 1882, 8.

²² “Apollo Club Banquet.”

²³ “To Revive Association Football – An Old-Style ‘Dribbling’ Match Probable with a Philadelphia Team,” *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1893.

²⁴ “Association Foot Ball,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 20, 1895, 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, “Looking Back at the Old Staff,” May 28, 1916, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, “New Foot Ball,” Jan. 21, 1895, 8.

²⁷ See Jonathan Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Soccer Tactics* (Nation Books, 2013).

²⁸ “The YMCA Athletics – What the Christians Are Doing for Sport This Year,” *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, June 2, 1895, 20.

²⁹ “Association Foot Ball Game: Clan Gordon and YMCA Teams Meet at the Calhoun Picnic,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 21, 1895, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, “Out With Kilts and Plumes – Sons and Daughters of Scotland at their Annual Picnic,” July 21, 1895, 7.

³¹ “Ass’n Foot Ball in St. Louis,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 16, 1896, 20. The Fort Omaha players were from the Second Infantry. Clan Gordon was the Omaha chapter of the Order of Scottish Clans. Wilcox & Draper was a large Omaha retailer which also sponsored baseball and other sporting teams.

³² *Pen and Sunlight Sketches of Omaha and Environs*, (Chicago: Phoenix Publishing Company, 1892), 144.

³³ “Association Foot Ball,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 14, 1895, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, “Foot Ball in Council Bluffs,” Sept. 18, 1895, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, “Association Foot Ball,” Sept. 15, 1895, 10.

³⁶ “Rangers” was a common name for early soccer teams in the United States. It is unclear whether this was simply an adoption of the name of the Scottish soccer club, or a broader sports or fraternal organization of the time. Hayden Brothers was a large Omaha-based department store until 1938.

³⁷ “The Old and the New,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 15, 1895, 4.

³⁸ The nickname “Cornhuskers” would not become common until the end of the century. Nicknames other than the Bug-eaters included the Old Gold Knights, Rattlesnake Boys, and Red Stockings. See Mark Fricke, “Nebraska Football in the 1890’s,” *College Football Historical Society Newsletter*, November 2005, 9-10.

³⁹ Many in soccer today have embraced Malcolm Gladwell’s “10,000 Hour Rule” as described in his book *Outliers*. See, for example, “The 10,000 Hour Rule for Soccer Players,” Soccer Training Info, www.soccer-training-info.com/the_10000_hour_rule.asp. Soccer equipment, camps and clubs for youth are a multimillion dollar enterprise in the United States.

⁴⁰ “Association Foot Ball Today,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Sept. 28, 1895, 2.

⁴¹ The thistle is Scotland’s national emblem and a common name for Scottish soccer teams. See “The Scottish Thistle,” Visit Scotland: Scotland’s National Tourism Organisation, <http://www.visitscotland.com/en-us/about/arts-culture/uniquely-scottish/thistle>

⁴² “Scottish Thistle Club,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 28, 1895, 2; *ibid.*, “Ended in a Draw,” Nov. 3, 1895, 2.

⁴³ “Haydens Win Their First Game – Base Ball Players Develop as an Association Foot Ball Team,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 21, 1895, 2.

⁴⁴ “Hayden’s Foot Ball Team,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 8, 1895, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, “Sports at Elkhorn,” Nov. 22, 1895, 5.

⁴⁶ “Association Foot Ball League,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 21, 1895, 2. Ainsworth, Long Pine, and Norden are in north central Nebraska, while Blair and Papillion are in the Omaha area.

⁴⁷ “The Game at the Fort,” *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 25, 1895, 3.

⁴⁸ "Association Foot Ball," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 28, 1895, 5.

⁴⁹ FIFA Law 6. FIFA also has a provision for "Additional Assistant Referees" who are stationed along the end lines in addition to the assistant referees on the touch lines. Those are rarely used, but were used as an experiment in the 2009-10 UEFA Europa League tournament and the 2011-12 UEFA Champions League. Goal line technologies may also be used to address the problem of goal/no goal decisions. See www.fifa.com/aboutfifa/football-development/technicalsupport/refereeing/laws-of-the-game/

⁵⁰ "Ass'n Foot Ball in St. Louis – The Sport is Very Popular and Draws Big Crowds in the Mound City," *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 29, 1896, 20.

⁵¹ Ibid., "Omaha Leads in All Things," Feb. 19, 1896, 4.

⁵² "Creighton Defeats the Rangers," *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 26, 1897, 2.

⁵³ "Association Foot Ball – The Creightons Won by 1 Goal to 0 in a Close Game," *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 26, 1897, 5.

