

Football at the Front

Iain Adams

‘Men should rest during the day when they know they will be on sentry duty at night. Instead of resting they run about and play football.’ Diary of Douglas Haig, Commanding Officer of First Army, BEF.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were involved in three months of continuous heavy fighting after first going into action against the German army on 21 August 1914. However, with football ubiquitous in the army, the soldiers organised impromptu kickabouts in any spare moments; *The Sporting Life*, 23 November 1914, reporting the game being played “in fields within the sounds of the guns.” By November, the German High Command concluded that the manoeuvring war was not advantageous and constructed defensive lines from the English Channel to the Swiss border, the trench war began.

A duty rhythm evolved of British battalions spending 9 to 21 days split between the front line, support and reserve followed by a short rest in billets. Major James Jack commented in early 1915 that in billets “games, mainly football, in the afternoons keep them fit and cheery, however tired the rascals may be for parades they have always energy enough for football.” By December 1914 the *Athletic News* ran regular features on football behind the lines as the war’s evolving stability allowed organised competitive sport and footballs were increasingly available with over 1100 balls provided by *The Daily Mail* and *The Sporting Life* by Christmas.

THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE, 1914

The manoeuvring war had resulted in shortages of men and ammunition on both sides and, with inclement weather, a major offensive was unlikely before spring. In places the trenches were 30 yards apart and shouted messages were exchanged and the adversaries

realised they had common enemies in lice, rats, flooded trenches, generals and politicians. A 'live and let live' system evolved, some troops requested their artillery not to shell the enemy at meal times as they did not want their meals interrupted in turn. As Christmas approached, similar emotions were raised as the foes were mainly Christian and spontaneous truces resulted.

Some two-thirds of the British line fraternised and on Christmas Day thousands of British and German troops congregated in No Man's Land burying the dead, exchanging souvenirs and conversing, mainly in sign language. Debris littered No Man's Land, including empty food cans, and somebody bored kicked a can ... and somebody kicked it back and kickabouts developed. Other items used as footballs included balaclavas stuffed with straw and, in a Cheshire battalion's case, Lieutenant Brockbank noted "somebody produced a little rubber ball, so of course a football match started." Doubtlessly, footballs had been received as presents and, blowing them up by mouth, they were brought into play. There was no match with stretchers for goals, a proper ball and the padre making incorrect offside decisions, just many spontaneous kickabouts.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANISED FOOTBALL

The Sporting Life reporting that over 200 teams had been established by December 1914 and a number of competitions were being played. In January-February 1915 45 teams competed for the 1st Cavalry Brigade Cup, the trophy provided by their Brigadier-General. In July 1915 Haig famously complained that the men were falling asleep on night sentry duty because they were playing football in their rest periods. By November 1915 it was said that "every section has its team".

Sport was still unofficial and organised by junior officers but, as casualties mounted, it became an important part in developing *esprit de corps*. The Royal Engineers magazine, in January 1915, reported "our new comrades are being told tales of the Army Cup, and having

obtained a football, hunting the leather is the order during the times of relaxation from military duties”.

The revitalising effect of football on men returning from combat was noticed; General Harington rhetorically asked “How many times did one see a Battalion which had come out of the line in the Ypres Salient and elsewhere, battered to pieces and sad at heart at having lost so many officers and men, hold up its head again and recover in a few hours by kicking a football?”

THE FOOTBALL CHARGES

On 25 September 1915, the British launched an attack at Loos, the infantry walking forward in four lines in extended order, one second apart, in silence and in full kit. However, The London Irish Rifles dribbled and passed a football as they advanced having smuggled deflated footballs into the trenches because their officers did not approve. These were hurriedly blown up as zero hour, 06:30, approached but Captain Dale saw the balls and ordered them to be discarded; apparently shooting one. Sergeant Frank Edwards, the football captain, hid his and the London Irish kicked off the southern end of the attack with the goal of capturing the German front and second lines. Edwards’ ball was struck by a bullet or shrapnel and caught on the German barbed wire. The London Irish achieved their objectives and their part of the operation was one of the few successes as the Loos offense collapsed.

Captain Billie Nevill, ‘B’ Company commander, 8th East Surrey’s, was uncertain about how his men would react in their first battle at the Somme on 1st July 1916. Perhaps influenced by the London Irish, Nevill asked permission to use footballs and this was sanctioned “on condition that he and his officers really kept command of their units and didn’t allow it to develop into a rush after the ball.” Nevill had two footballs and as zero hour approached, one was marked ‘The Great European Cup-Tie Final. East Surreys v Bavarians. Kick off at zero’ and on the other ‘No referee’. At 07:27 Nevill went over the parapet; an

observer remembered “I saw an infantryman climb on to the parapet into No Man’s Land, beckoning others to follow. As he did so he kicked off a football; a good kick, the ball rose and travelled well towards the German line.” By 07:50 the battalion were in the German trenches where both footballs were found next day, Nevill was killed.

THE MATURING OF ORGANISED FOOTBALL

In August 1916 General Gough ordered that football grounds should be constructed in each Brigade area and tournaments organised for resting units. The 19th Division held a three stage tournament with as many soldiers as possible playing. The first stage comprised of intra-battalion games and the second stage inter-battalion competition; the third was the cup final where the 7th Loyal North Lancashire’s beat the 9th Cheshire’s 4-0. Thousands of soldiers watched; football, as a spectator event, had become an institutionalised part of life in reserve.

Football’s positive effects were formally recognised in the General Staff *Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action* of 1917. Platoon commanders were ordered to arrange games and competitions for the men and take part themselves because “if he induces his platoon to be determined to produce the best football team in the battalion, he will have done a great deal to make it the best platoon in every way.” In essence football had become compulsory when at rest and the average soldier on the Western Front spent three-fifths of their time behind the lines. By 1918 six full time engravers were kept busy in France supplying trophies and medals for competitive sport; football had become part of the way of life of the British army in the battle zone.