

Soccer: My Last Game

I was surprised to open the envelope in late winter (2000) and find an invitation to play in The Ohio State University Varsity-Alumni Soccer game which would christen the new Jesse Owens Stadium field (The stadium was yet to be built but the field was open for play). After all, the last game I played was in 1956! It seems that all former lettermen were being invited to play in this special game and merely being sixty-four years old did not exclude me. I decide, after speaking to my wife, and my cardiologist, to email Coach Bluem and tell him that he could count on me. He emailed me right back and said that I could “count on playing a few quality minutes.”

I assured him that I would do my best, although I had not played in a soccer game since my graduation. (The truth is that I had only seen one soccer game in my life that I had not played in...a World Cup elimination game in Mexico city with our Mexican son, Enrique...the most frightening sporting experience in my life.) Probably needlessly, I told Coach Bluem that it would be unlikely that I would be the best player in the game. He didn't answer that email!

Some may find my history as a soccer player unusual and maybe interesting. In high school I had been an all league football and basketball player and a good American Legion baseball player.) The school I attended was very small (twenty-three in my graduating class) and although I have always referred to my school as The Academy of Arcadia (using THE as in THE Ohio State University), Most people

who really know me know that the real name of my school was the Arcadia Local Schools...and the "the" was never capitalized! Sports like football, basketball and baseball were out of the question for me at OSU because of my talent level, size and fear of being squashed, but I still wanted to be involved in sports. In the winter of my freshman year I won the 165 pound intramural wrestling championship and decided to try soccer in my physical education class in the spring.

The head coach of the soccer team, Howard "Skip" Knuttgen, (to be a varsity sport for the first time the following fall) taught the class and noticed I could play man-to-man defense because of my basketball experience and was not afraid of contact because of my football experience. Coach Knuttgen's decision to invite me to try out for the varsity team was crystallized when I kicked a wind-blown fifty yard goal (the only goal in my life) from my fullback position over the head of an inexperienced goalie who had wandered too far from his position. I was excited to try a new sport.

The following fall, I reported to the team a week before school was to start. I was in good shape and had practiced kicking the soccer ball, Coach Knuttgen had loaned me, against the barn, when farming duties permitted. Of course I had practiced the wrong technique using my toe rather than my instep....an error I discovered at my first practice! Much to my surprise, I discovered that I was one of the few players to speak English as my primary language! We had players from China, Mexico, other Latin America countries, South America, Scotland and from every corner of Western and

Eastern Europe. We had several players born in the United States and one African American (Dave Harris, now an Aviation Hall of Fame pilot and the first African American to Captain a US commercial airline plane. We also had Paul Hartman, who later became an All-American Lacrosse player and head coach of The OSU Lacrosse team. Both Paul and Dave became close friends and we still communicate via email.) Our best players were from Latvia and Germany, the latter being born in Ohio, but interned for WWII in Berlin, when he took an ill-fated trip to visit his grandmother in 1939.

He spoke with a German accent and was our best player. We were a true melting pot of different races, religions, ethnic backgrounds and life experiences. To add to the mix, Coach Skip was from the Ivy League. The team only had one thing in common...our love of soccer, or "football" as most of my teammates called the game. I guess I should say the other guys had this love of soccer...the total newness of this sport and its history was overwhelming to me, but I found my other sport experiences permitted me to keep up with my teammates in nearly all avenues of the game (except the kicking part in the beginning). I got to play about fifteen minutes in the first game I ever saw and blocked a goal with a header, which really hurt! I was now a soccer player...if not a very good one.

I started the second game I ever saw and every game for all three years. The first year our team was average, the second year good and my senior year...one of the best teams in the mid-west. The real lessons I learned from this experience were more about interpersonal relationships and

cultural similarities and I treasured all of these new lessons. My teammates learned about farming from me and I learned about other lifestyles, The War, religions and cultural similarities and differences from them. I graduated and have never seen any of my teammates again...and only one soccer game (a World Cup elimination game in Mexico). I am really excited to go to this Varsity-Alumni Game!

Preparation

My whole life has been a preparation for this game...so to speak. I have never stopped working out and am two pounds under my playing weight of 178. My wife asked if playing in this game worried me and I said "No." Actually, I worry a little about three things: 1. That the new stent placed in my heart three years ago won't work and that could be a problem; 2. That the ball will come my way during the game and I will attempt to kick it and fall down, embarrassing myself; and, 3. That I will receive the post game award of, "The player Whose Skills Have Diminished Least Since Graduation."

All of these potentially embarrassing and life-threatening problems will need to be addressed. The smaller problems of having my teammates calling me "Pops" or having my grandchildren laugh at me can be overcome. In fact, the main reason I want to play in this game is that all of my grandsons (16, 14, 9 and 7) said it would be "Cool" for me to play in the game and that they would like to go with Ruth and me to Columbus to see the game.

I actually did do one extra thing to get ready for the game. Each morning after working out at the gym, I checked out a soccer ball and kicked it against the wall of a handball court

for ten minutes. I would usually quit after ten minutes, or when a group of college freshmen would gather to watch me make a fool of myself...and inquire why I was kicking a soccer ball. Even they said the idea of me playing in The Game was “cool,” and I suddenly gained new respect around the gym. Sixty-four year old cool soccer guy!

Before the Game

I received twenty-three emails prior to The Game. Most were wishing me luck, but some were downright mean spirited. For example: recommendations of a great cardiologist; checking to see if my hospitalization was up-to-date; questions about my sanity; inquiries about the game being on ESPN; and letters of sympathy for Ruth. The nicest note came from my nephew, John, who remembered that I had invited his brother, Paul, and him to spend a night at OSU and go to a soccer game.

The note was so touching I got a tear in my eye...and then he messed it up by suggesting I use a motorized cart while playing. My final preparation for The Game was to discontinue my rigorous training and take a trip around the Olympic Mountains with Ruth to visit Lewis and Clark’s winter home at the mouth of the Columbia River...our last stop of tracing their route from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean. All preparations for The Game were complete.

Game Day

The game was held on a beautiful spring day at the site of the soon to be constructed Jesse Owens Stadium. The new stadium is designed to accommodate track meets, lacrosse

and soccer games. We met at the Woody Hayes building to change into our soccer clothes. I had taken my shorts and my scarlet and grey tennis shoes. We were given soccer shirts and shin guards. I said hello to some of my new alumni teammates, most of who had graduated in the past four or five years. They looked at me as if I had come to this locker room in error. Actually, they were polite and asked all about me and how I happened to be playing in this game. I was glad to see all of the young guys and hoped that I might be able to get some playing time so I could brag about it later.

We ran out onto the field to the cheers of about thirty family members and friends and started warming up by kicking the ball around. The varsity, which was at the other end of the field, were dressed in state of the art soccer uniforms and all of them even wore soccer shoes...as did about ninety per cent of the alumni team. I have never owned a pair of soccer shoes in my life and wore team issued shoes when I played in the late fifties. The fact that all of the alumni squad had matching shirts made us sort of look like a team. Late comers joined our ranks but it soon became apparent that we would only have enough players to fill out all of the positions....I WOULD BE STARTING!!

The game started, and lucky for me, my fellow fullback (defensive position in front of the goalie) was Coach Bluem, who before becoming the head coach at OSU, was a professional soccer player for the Soccer Bowl Champion (North American Soccer League) Tampa Bay Rowdies. He was still an outstanding player and was able to defend his

position and mine. He was nice to me...stealing a ball and passing it to me to take up field. He played like I use to play basketball with my children when they were young. I would get a rebound and pass it to the youngest, who might not have been involved otherwise. Coach Bluem treated me like his youngest child! As the game wore on, I was able to make a few stops on my own. I stopped one shot with my chest which resulted in a Glory Bruise six inches in diameter... which I got to show off at the gym the following week ("I was playing in a Varsity-Alumni soccer game at The Ohio State University and made a stop at the goal mouth!") Although true, I might have embellished the story a bit!

We were behind 2-0 late in the game when one of the varsity players had a "Hand Ball" (touched the ball with his hand) in the penalty area. We were awarded a penalty kick. A penalty kick is almost a sure point when taken by a professional player, but not so for amateurs. Coach Bluem said I should be the one to take the kick! I had never taken a penalty kick in my life and my heart started to race. I trotted to the other end of the field to take my first penalty kick. I placed the ball on the mark, about 12 yards from the goal.

Only the goalie stood between the goal and me, with all of my teammates and varsity players standing in a semicircle behind me. I tried to think where to aim the ball and remembered my practice sessions in the handball courts. I still was able to kick a ball that would stay on the ground or rise up to 4-5 feet above the ground. I stared at the right side of the goal, believing the goalie would think I was going to hit it the left side. I approached the ball and kicked it about four

feet high on right side of the goal, where I had been looking. The ploy only partially worked. The goalie lunged to his left and blocked the ball with his left hand...knocking the ball back onto the field, and still in play. One of my teammates rushed in and kicked it again, right into the outstretched hands of the goalie. My only chance to ever score a goal in a "real" soccer game had been lost. I had waited well over forty years for this opportunity and it was not to be! At least I had given it my best! The game ended. We lost. I had played the entire game, and other than my Glory Bruise, would live to tell this tale.

Coach Bluem invited both teams to the sideline to have soft drinks and pizza. Coach Bluem had each of us recount the years we played and what we were now doing in our lives. It was interesting that unlike in my playing years, all of the current players were born as US citizens. It was lots of fun. During the game, my son, Jeff, 42, was taking action pictures of me playing. One varsity player said to me, "It was really nice that your brother was here to take pictures on you." I said, "That wasn't my brother, he's my son." He looked startled and said, "You really are old." I think he wished he hadn't said that, but everyone laughed...as did I. I guess I was pretty old to be playing in a full length soccer game and felt pretty full of myself for being able to do so.

Postscript

As I took off my clothes to shower, I realized I had played the entire game with my glasses on...a real No-No in soccer circles. No one had mentioned it to me and in my excitement I had never thought about it. I even headed 4-5 balls while

playing without giving any thought to what might have happened had I been struck in the face. Well, I lucked out and wasn't injured. My wife said I might have suffered more severe injuries by not wearing my glasses and running into someone!!! She was more compassionate when I married her in 1957!!

The year following our inaugural soccer game at Jesse Owens' Stadium site, the state of the art stadium was completed. It is a beautiful stadium, one that a 1950's era player could have only dreamed about. Several years later, Paul Hartman (former OSU soccer player, All-American lacrosse player and former Ohio State lacrosse coach) and I organized a banquet for all former OSU soccer and lacrosse players to honor OSU's Charter varsity soccer and lacrosse coach, Howard "Skip" Knuttgen.

Over one hundred and twenty former players and guests were in attendance. We presented Coach Knuttgen (who still emails me nearly every day), a Varsity O Blanket inscribed with the years he headed the soccer and lacrosse programs. After OSU, Skip was a professor at Harvard. He now retired from Harvard, but is still active as a member of the International Olympic Committee). One of the events of the weekend was to attend a lacrosse game between OSU and Johns Hopkins in the new Jesse Owens Stadium. We were able to renew many friendships over the weekend. Although many of us played together for our college years, I had never seen any of my teammates since I had graduated. It was a delightful weekend.

And the years roll on. I continue to keep my record nearly intact...never having seen a soccer game in which I didn't play (except that Mexico City game). This doesn't mean I don't like soccer, it just means I like other sports more....and didn't grow up having any friends who played or knew anything about the game.

Playing for The Ohio State University and Coach Knuttgen was a wonderful experience...one I will always treasure. Coach Knuttgen was everything a coach needed to be.

About the Author

Between the last two soccer games he played (1956 and 2000), the author: married his childhood sweetheart, Ruth; reared four children (Jeff, Jay, Jon and Jill); got his PhD from The Ohio State University; retired as a Captain after thirty-two years in the US Naval Reserves; and, retired after 43.5 years as a teacher, professor and college administrator, with his last position being the Director of Basic Medical Sciences at the Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. He and Ruth live in Twin Lakes, (Kent) Ohio and they garden, golf and travel with their four grandsons. Glenn gives 30-40 business convention speeches each year. The remainder of his free time he devotes to thinking about soccer.

Final Note: This story was written in 2000 and then re-edited and posted on my web site in 2010.