

Playing for Uncle Sam

The Brits' Story of the North
American Soccer League

David Tossell



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Introduction

The BBC's Kenneth Wolstenholme may have declared famously that it was 'all over' as Geoff Hurst slammed the ball into the West Germans' net for the third time, but for the North American Soccer League the emphatic underlining of England's World Cup triumph was just the start.

When Bobby Moore led the red-shirted English heroes into the Wembley sunshine on that memorable July afternoon in 1966, eight million viewers were tuning in on their televisions in the United States. Considering that they had either forgone their weekend lie-in if they were on the west coast or were fitting the game around their brunch arrangements on the eastern side of the country, NBC's audience for the events being played out several thousand miles away was considered an outstanding success. And it offered final, indisputable confirmation of what several influential and wealthy American folks had been suspecting for a while: that their country was ready to embrace the world game of football. The nation's long wait for a top-tier professional 'soccer' league was about to come to an end.

The appearance of Alf Ramsey's men on American screens could not have been better timed. The '60s were a boom time for sport in the US, the pervading mood one of expansion and experiment. Improved communication and travel had opened up geographical areas until recently unexplored by the professional leagues, while increased and enhanced television coverage was giving sport more exposure than ever before. The American public had more disposable income and were keen to find ways of spending it. Sport offered a popular option and a welcome diversion

from years of civil unrest, a debilitating war in Vietnam and a series of shocking assassinations of major political figures.

In American football, the gridiron version, the established National Football League (NFL) had faced a challenge from the newly formed American Football League, forcing a merger that brought about the advent of the Super Bowl and pushed the league to heights of popularity no other US sport could match. Not that the others were struggling. The decade saw every major sports league increase by at least six teams as burgeoning cities lobbied for franchises. Into such a climate of pioneering came professional soccer, beginning a saga that, over the course of almost two decades, would mix high drama with comedy, sporting excellence with moments of pure farce.

This book does not set out to be the definitive history of the NASL (a thorough examination of the reasons behind the league's collapse could fill a volume on its own). Rather, it is the tale – much of it anecdotal – of the British players, coaches and administrators who were part of the league. And, whatever the headline during the NASL's roller-coaster existence, the Brits were never far from the heart of the story.

From the moment America opened its sporting borders to soccer, those from the British Isles were at the front of the check-in line. Some, like George Best and Rodney Marsh, would make the journey because they felt English football had nothing left to offer them. Others went to prove a point, like World Cup goalkeeper Gordon Banks, who demonstrated that it was possible to keep the best forwards in the world at bay with only one eye. But it was not just the big-name internationals that crossed the Atlantic to join up with their peers, Pelé, Beckenbauer and Cruyff. A whole legion of First Division players and lower-league journeymen extended their careers or forged new ones in the NASL. Men like Peter Beardsley, Peter Withe and Alan Brazil used it as a finishing school for great things back home, while some, like Alan

Willey and Paul Child, virtually unknown in their homeland, stayed on to perform feats that rank alongside those of any of the NASL's most recognisable names.

Across the water they went, the celebrity and the unknown, the young and the old, the richly talented and the poorly appreciated. An 18-year procession of players lured by the opportunity to play in the land of Uncle Sam. This is their story.

1. ☆ An Uncivil War

As the bright, crisp sunshine of spring gave way to the hazy days of the summer of 1966, it was a good time to be a sporting underdog in America. Many of the nation's headlines were being created by those who had previously been written off, counted out or simply ignored. The battle to crown the champions of the ice hockey world saw the Montreal Canadiens come from two games down to overturn the Detroit Red Wings in the final series of the Stanley Cup. Golfer Billy Casper was turning around an even greater deficit, making up seven shots on the final nine holes of the US Open in San Francisco before beating the great Arnold Palmer in a play-off. In tennis, 22-year-old Billie Jean King overcame former champion Maria Bueno at Wimbledon to win an overdue first Grand Slam singles title, three years after qualifying for her first final. Meanwhile, baseball underdogs everywhere toasted the descent of the mighty New York Yankees towards last place in the American League. Even the United States Soccer Football Association (USSFA), perhaps the biggest sporting no-hoper of all, was about to have its day.

Dramatic events on the greens of California and the courts of south-west London had done little to quicken the sedate pace of activity in the New York offices of the USSFA. As Americans cheered Casper and King, the organisation's part-time employees went quietly about their business, which consisted mainly of administering the national team's hapless attempts to qualify for the World Cup finals and overseeing semi-professional competitions like the American Soccer League, whose clubs paid the USSFA a meagre

yearly fee of \$25. The prospect of a World Cup in which the United States was once again merely a distant spectator was not much more than an interesting distraction. That was, however, until letters began dropping into the USSFA's mailbox from men with money to spend and the inclination to lavish it on an idea they felt could not miss: a new professional soccer league.

Without having done a great deal to invite such attention, the USSFA suddenly had at its fingertips a scheme apparently so certain of success that three consortiums were fighting to win approval to put it into practice. Potential investors included major corporations like Madison Square Garden and the RKO General Corporation, while interested individuals included Lamar Hunt, the owner of American football's Kansas City Chiefs, Jack Kent Cooke of the Washington Redskins and several others with controlling interests in major sports franchises. Professional soccer, so the theory went, would help to feed the public's insatiable sporting appetite and enable the stadium and team owners to turn days when their buildings had previously stood empty into profitable trading opportunities.

Rubbing their hands with considerable glee at this sudden surge of interest in what was still regarded largely as the 'foreign sport', the USSFA sprang into action. In conjunction with the Canadian Soccer Football Association (CSFA), its first response to the requests for permission to set up an officially sanctioned league was to demand from each consortium a franchise fee of \$25,000 for every proposed team, plus a cut of gate receipts and television revenue. When disapproval was voiced at the level of the fee, USSFA committee member Jack Flamhaft commented, 'It makes me laugh. Here come millionaires who own some billionaire businesses in other fields. Did *they* want a franchise for \$25?'

While the world watched the events in England in July 1966, representatives of the three competing groups

travelled to San Francisco to plead their case to the USSFA's annual convention. In the end, the choice was simple. The group led by Jack Kent Cooke, the only one to accept the USSFA terms, was given official recognition and prepared to begin play in 1968 as the North American Soccer League. But the two rivals, their conviction about the sport hardened by America's interest in Geoff Hurst and his pals, decided not to go quietly. Joining forces to call themselves the National Professional Soccer League (NPSL), they announced that ten teams, with or without permission from the authorities, would begin play in the spring of 1967, thereby beating their rivals onto the field by a full year. The NPSL added that it was now prepared to accept the USSFA's terms and produced a cheque for \$250,000. By now, though, it was too late to find a place under the wing of the USSFA, which had given Cooke's NASL group the exclusive rights to operate a professional league in North America.

The NPSL, dubbed the 'outlaws' to the NASL's 'in-laws', pushed on with its plans, buoyed by a television contract with CBS, yet facing a potential recruiting problem. The lack of local talent meant that the bulk of the players would have to come from outside the United States. However, any player signing with the renegade outfit faced the threat of being placed on a FIFA blacklist. One bizarre rumour even began to circulate that any player going to play in America was liable to be drafted into the army and sent to fight in Vietnam.

One of the first players signed by the NPSL was a 31-year-old English forward, Ron Newman, whose 12 seasons in the Football League had taken him finally to Gillingham, where he was waiting for news of a possible coaching post in South Africa. 'I knew my career was coming towards the end and I had itchy feet,' he recalls. 'Before my legs gave out I wanted to go to an exotic place. While I was playing for Gillingham and waiting for things to develop in South Africa I started reading about an old friend of mine, Phil Woosnam,

who was going to coach a team in Atlanta. I knew Phil from when I moved from Portsmouth to Leyton Orient. I moved into his old house after he had gone to West Ham and I kept getting his bloody post! Phil contacted me and asked me to go with him instead of going to South Africa.

‘The way I heard it was that there was another league that had been given authenticity and we were classified as an outlaw league, so I called the players’ union in England and asked if there was a problem. Their reply was, “If you have permission from Gillingham and are not breaking your contract there is no problem.”’

Newman was to find out that he had been given false information when the NPSL’s lawyers asked him to volunteer to be a test case at the end of the season. ‘There were law suits going on like crazy and I was asked if I would write to the Football Association to be reinstated. That letter became a major tool in the legislation. The FA wrote back and said I was quite welcome to come back – as soon as I had sat out a one-year suspension! I thought that was bullshit. It was diabolical. The idea had been to see if I was going to be punished for playing in the NPSL, so the answer from the FA was the one the league’s lawyers wanted.’

While the NPSL had set about stocking its teams with men like Newman, the NASL, stung by its rival’s determination to launch first, decided to act. The league’s name was changed to the United Soccer Association, allowing it to revel in a patriotic acronym and avoid confusion with its similarly titled rival. Then plans were announced to kick off in 1967 after all. Unable to sign players of sufficient calibre at the eleventh hour, the USA opted for the novel solution of simply contracting 12 teams from around the world to spend the summer playing in the United States in a different guise.

As the winter of 1966 approached, Kenneth Wolstenholme, England forward Jimmy Greaves, ex-Nottingham Forest striker Roy Dwight and London businessman Jim Graham were called in to help with the recruitment of teams from

the British Isles. With plenty of money to spend on the USA's behalf, their Christmas shopping list consisted of three teams from England, three from Scotland and one from each side of the Irish border. So it was that Wolverhampton Wanderers traded the Black Country for California to become the Los Angeles Wolves, while Stoke City left the Potteries to become the Cleveland Stokers and Sunderland were re-invented as the Vancouver Royal Canadians. From Scotland, Aberdeen journeyed to America's capital city to become the Washington Whips, Dundee United were to play as the Dallas Tornado and Hibernian prepared for life as Toronto City. After Linfield turned down their invitation because of the possibility of having to play games on a Sunday, Glentoran accepted the chance to represent Northern Ireland and play the role of the Detroit Cougars. The Republic's Shamrock Rovers inevitably went to the Irish-dominated city of Boston to play as the Boston Rovers.

The process of allocating the teams to cities was based largely on ethnic demographics, although most of the pairings stretched that point rather thinly and some franchises were undoubtedly left feeling that they had been short-changed for the \$250,000 each was paying to its imported club. Some of the better sides targeted by the USA had been unavailable, such as Pelé's Santos in Brazil, leaving the field to be filled by Uruguay's Cerro (New York Skyliners), Brazil's Bangu (Houston Stars), Den Haag of Holland (San Francisco Golden Gate Gales) and Italian side Cagliari (Chicago Mustangs).

Instead of a couple of weeks on the beach with their families, what lay ahead for the players was a 12-game schedule that would last almost two months and take in most corners of North America. In modern times, such a proposal would cause uproar among leg-weary and well-travelled players, not to mention their agents and medical advisers. But Aberdeen goalkeeper Bobby Clark, in the early

stages of a career that would bring him 13 Scotland caps, recalls the tour as the opportunity of a lifetime.

‘Players weren’t spoiled back in those days,’ he says. ‘We were a lot happier about things like that. We were a young side, looking to get better, and this was an opportunity to play against good teams like Wolves, Sunderland and Cagliari, who were champions of Italy a couple of years later. We were about to play in Europe so it was a chance for us to experience playing against different types of teams.

‘And America was an exciting, far-away place, somewhere we had never had the chance to play before. To go there and live in the Washington Hilton for a couple of months, to play in an indoor stadium like the Houston Astrodome, to be flying to every game, to go to Disneyland and see Andy Williams in concert – it was all so different to anything we had known before. Personally, it was fantastic as well. I was looking to establish myself in the team and I had just finished a physical education course. I was allowed to get off school three weeks early as long as I came back and did a month’s unpaid teaching.’

The welcome extended to the teams when they arrived in the US lived up to the travellers’ hopes. Glentoran’s players were led to the airport terminal across a red carpet by the St Andrews Pipe Band of Detroit. While such receptions were designed to make their guests feel at home, it was going to take more than modified kits, with gridiron-style numbers on shirt-fronts, to make the players think of themselves as Cougars or Stokers. ‘We knew we were representing Washington and in public we talked about the Whips,’ says Clark. ‘But we still thought of ourselves as Aberdeen playing against Dundee or Hibernian.’

And the Americans’ lack of knowledge about the sport was still very evident. Clark adds, ‘People would see our Washington Whips bags with the WW logo and the words “soccer team” and not even know what that was. They’d

ask us, “What’s a *saucer* team?” I think it went over their heads when we told them we were playing in the Cup!’

Newman experienced similar bewilderment among the people of Georgia. ‘As soon as we got to Atlanta they wanted us to go into a parade through town. We rushed to get into our uniforms, got on the parade float and a horse and cart started pulling us down the road. People were looking at us as though we were circus freaks. Nobody there had even seen a soccer ball. I thought, “This is ridiculous.” I jumped off the float, got a ball and started to interact with the people along the route, flicking and heading the ball backwards and forwards to the kids. A couple of the other lads saw what I was doing and followed suit. We became the hit of the parade.’

One of Newman’s teammates was former Northern Ireland winger Peter McParland, who recalls, ‘The first thing the locals taught us was how to eat a hamburger properly. The follow-up was that we got invited to all these barbecue evenings and all these ladies would come up and say they played soccer at school. It seemed to be only ladies playing over there.’

The NPSL’s persuasive arguments to potential recruits about future FIFA recognition put it in a position to launch a month before the rival league’s imported teams arrived in the US. Woosnam, who in his joint role of coach and general manager was responsible for signing up players for the Chiefs, says, ‘Maybe we were all put on a blacklist. But I believed we were doing it right, whereas the other league was just bringing in teams and therefore not doing anything of any value to the community. I thought our league would be in the stronger position with FIFA. Not one player we tried to sign turned us down.’

McParland adds, ‘They told us that it was always on the cards that FIFA would recognise the league in the long run and that we would not be on a blacklist. I was coming towards the end of my career anyway, so I didn’t feel I was

taking a gamble. And it was not a bunch of cowboys who were backing the league.'

Doubts remained, however, about the quality of the players whose services had been secured. The ten NPSL teams were stocked mostly by signings from Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe, the dominant nations being West Germany and Yugoslavia. Only eight genuine American players would get on the field during the season.

The British contingent was small and included few recognisable names. Several of them had already been in North America, playing semi-professionally in Canada, and most of the better-known Football League exports found themselves at Atlanta under Woosnam, the former Wales forward. Capped 17 times by his country, Woosnam had played more than 100 League games for each of West Ham, Leyton Orient and Aston Villa and his influence was obvious in the composition of the Chiefs squad. Goalkeeper Vic Rouse was a fellow Wales international, earning one cap while playing 238 league games for Crystal Palace. Brian Hughes had racked up more than 200 games for West Ham and ex-Aston Villa wing-half Vic Crowe had played 16 times for the Welsh side. Winger Ray Bloomfield boasted a handful of games for Villa, while the biggest name on the roster was McParland, another Villa veteran. Scorer of 98 goals in 293 League games, he was one of Northern Ireland's most celebrated players, having earned 34 caps after being spotted in the League of Ireland at Dundalk. His finest hour had been the 1958 World Cup, when he scored five goals as his country reached the quarter-finals. A year earlier he had scored both Villa goals in the FA Cup final victory against Manchester United, although he was more widely remembered for the challenge on Ray Wood that left the United goalkeeper hobbling on the wing.

A fast, direct goal-scoring winger, McParland also won the Second Division title and League Cup with Villa before moving on to Wolverhampton and Plymouth. Woosnam

recalls, 'He had been playing for Worcester when I played with him in a kick-around game in some kind of summer celebration and I thought, "Peter can still play." He was only 32 when he came out to America and he did exceptionally well. He had a wobbly knee and we had to leave him out for certain games, but he had two great years.'

Elsewhere, the New York Generals' line-up included George Kirby, who had scored 188 goals in a seven-club Football League career, and Roy Hartle, who played 446 League games for Bolton. In goal was former Wolves and Aston Villa man Geoff Sidebottom, whose renowned bravery would eventually force his retirement in 1971 after suffering a third concussion in two seasons with Brighton. Coaching the team was Freddie Goodwin, the former Manchester United and Leeds wing-half, who would soon become manager of a Birmingham City team that won promotion to Division One and reached the semi-finals of the FA Cup.

The Oakland Clippers fielded former Brentford and Chelsea centre-half Melvyn Scott and ex-Brentford and Millwall winger Barry Rowan, while the Philadelphia Spartans included Liverpool-born wing-half John Best, whose six games for Tranmere were the extent of his Football League experience. Alongside him in defence was Peter Short, another Liverpoolian, who would score both the Spartans' goals in their opening-game victory over Toronto. Best and Short were destined to join the group of players who would carve out long and successful careers in the US. While Best would go on to serve as a coach and general manager, Short would end his playing career ten years and seven teams later and then undertake three stints as an NASL head coach. (In February 1984, Short was shot dead in Los Angeles at the age of 39 after discovering two teenagers breaking into his car.)

Playing the majority of the games in goal for the Toronto Falcons was former Scotland international Bill Brown, the last line of defence in the Spurs team that completed the

Football League and FA Cup Double in 1961. After losing his place in the side following Pat Jennings's arrival from Watford, he had spent one season at Northampton before trying his luck in America.

The most recognisable figure among the British ex-pats was former Manchester United forward and 'Busby Babe' Dennis Viollet, now 33 years old. A survivor of the Munich air crash, which had taken the lives of eight of his youthful and talented teammates, Viollet totalled 159 goals in 259 League games for Manchester United, including a club record 32 in a single season. It was a mystery that he was rewarded with only two England caps, and it was his love of socialising that was thought to be behind United's surprise decision to sell him to Stoke City in 1961.



The new era of professional football in the United States kicked off on 16 April 1967, the day after Scotland's 3-2 victory over England at Wembley had them proclaiming themselves champions of the world. In the NPSL's season opener, Woosnam's Chiefs met Viollet's Bays in front of a modest crowd of 8,434 in Baltimore. It was hardly the kind of game to have the fans battering at the doors of the ticket office for future presentations. A dour defensive battle was won 1-0 by the home side - exactly the kind of game the NPSL had hoped to guard against by adopting a scoring system that had the purists cringing. Teams would receive six points for a win, three for a draw and a bonus point for every goal scored, up to a maximum of three per game.

CBS approached its weekly live broadcasts of NPSL action with the slogan 'Just For Kicks!' But, sitting alongside respected American commentator Jack Whitaker, Tottenham and Northern Ireland legend Danny Blanchflower was in no mood to patronise the viewers. As a man who had captained Spurs to the Double and won 56 international caps, he had

his credibility to protect and told it like it was – which meant week after week of often-brutal criticism of the games. It did not help matters when referee Peter Rhodes admitted that 11 of the 21 free-kicks he awarded in the televised Toronto-Pittsburgh match were to allow CBS to work in commercial breaks. At one point he even appeared to push down a player who was trying to get up because the ad break had not finished. Television ratings and crowds slumped as the season progressed, producing a final average attendance of 4,879 per game.

But, for all its faults and in-fighting, at least soccer was back on the US scene. While Hurst's hat-trick had sewn the final seeds of what would eventually become the NASL, it was, strictly speaking, only a rebirth of the sport on the professional level in America. The first guys to be paid for kicking a round ball in the United States had picked up their pay cheques more than three-quarters of a century earlier.

Largely a game played by upper-class college types as the second half of the nineteenth century came around, soccer had established itself at elite colleges like Yale, Columbia and Cornell, only for those establishments to follow Harvard's lead in switching to rugby, which developed into America's own helmeted version of football. But the working-class communities, their populations increased by the influx of large numbers of immigrant workers, ensured that soccer continued and regional leagues developed across the country.

The involvement of corporate sponsors meant that some players were being paid to play on a semi-professional basis and, buoyed by America's participation in the 1904 Olympics, the NASL operated from 1906 to 1921, the first professional league to achieve any longevity in North America.

The American Soccer League arrived on the scene in 1921, built around the richer clubs from the existing semi-professional circuit, and regularly achieved crowds of

10,000. The ASL even provided a taste of things to come in the NASL by signing several British players. Scotland international Tommy Muirhead arrived from Rangers as player-manager of the Boston Wonder Workers and then secured the services of national teammate Alex McNab from Morton, who was paid \$25 a week and given a job at the Wonder Works factory.

By the end of the 1920s, however, the ASL had fallen out with the USSFA over the scheduling of fixtures and was suspended by the governing body, thereby becoming an unauthorised competition. As clubs jumped from one league to another and the stock market crash took away financial backing, the first coming of professional soccer in the US was on borrowed time. Before long, the sport was back to a structure of regional amateur competitions. Even the famous 1950 victory of the USA team over England in the World Cup finals in Brazil failed to bring any significant change. Although the International Soccer League, a competition between visiting foreign teams, began in 1960 and continued for six seasons, it did so in a low-key manner that gained little attention inside or beyond the North American borders.

The 1966 World Cup, however, had apparently changed all that, yet soccer's summer of '67 failed to make the anticipated impact. Anyone heading to San Francisco, for example, did so with flowers in their hair, a Gales soccer game coming a poor second to hanging out in the Haight-Ashbury district listening to The Beatles. The trend was repeated around the country.

For those who cared enough to notice, the NPSL's Western Division was dominated by the Oakland Clippers, who won 19 of 32 games and finished 29 points ahead of the St Louis Stars. The Eastern Division featured a much closer race, with Baltimore and Philadelphia finishing with identical records of 14 wins and 9 draws and the Bays qualifying for the two-legged final by virtue of their bonus points. George

Kirby proved to be the most prolific scorer among the British contingent, netting 14 goals for New York and adding two assists, the name given to key contributions in setting up a goal.

Baltimore, with former Derby County and Torquay United goalkeeper Terry Adlington between the sticks, had kept ten clean sheets during the season and did so again in the first leg of the final as Viollet's individual effort produced the only goal in front of 16,619 fans in Baltimore. Coached by former Ipswich Town inside-forward Doug Millward, the Bays were overpowered in the second leg as Oakland's Yugoslav midfielder Dragan Djukic scored a hat-trick in a 4-1 win.



The USA, with its traditional points-scoring and 'teams-in-disguise' format, was a little more successful than its rival at the gate. On 1 May, the day after Muhammad Ali had been stripped of his world heavyweight title for resisting the US military's call to go and fight in Vietnam, almost 35,000 saw Wolves draw against the Brazilian Houston Stars in the opening game. The season would produce an overall average attendance of 7,890, with Houston the biggest draw at 19,802 per game and the Boston Rovers trailing in last with an average of 4,171, proving that it needed more than an Irish team to bring out the crowds. Boston's home game against San Francisco attracted only 853 paying customers to the Manning Bowl in Lynn, Massachusetts, but even that beat the 648 who turned out in a Detroit thunderstorm for the all-Irish battle between the Cougars, from Glentoran, and the visiting Rovers.

Northern Irish champions Glentoran, despite enjoying only moderate success with three wins and six draws, were one of the more colourful teams on the circuit. In their first game, at Boston, player-manager John Colrain was accused of having punched a linesman after he ruled out a goal for

offside late in the 1-1 draw. It was the second Detroit goal the linesman had disallowed. Colrain, a former Celtic and Ipswich forward, claimed he had merely shaken his fist and inadvertently made contact with the flag, but he was suspended indefinitely by the USA. Glentoran argued there had been no official investigation and took their case to FIFA, yet Colrain was still banned for the next two games.

There was a controversial finish in the rematch, with Boston bitterly protesting the penalty award that gave Detroit victory, but that was nothing compared with the chaos when Brazilian side Bangu (Houston) visited the University Stadium of Detroit. The Brazilians held a 2-0 lead with 17 minutes left in a bad-tempered game and eventually the contest degenerated into a free-for-all, with some of the Bangu players even grabbing corner flags to use as weapons. The referee abandoned the game and the USA, apportioning blame equally between the two teams, allowed the result to stand. The same evening saw the match between Cagliari (Chicago) and Uruguayan team Cerro (New York) called off with three minutes remaining at Yankee Stadium after a disputed foul led to both sets of players exchanging punches. Even members of the 10,000 crowd invaded the pitch to participate as the referee and his linesmen fled the scene. There was more fighting in Glentoran's meeting with Stoke, which saw the Irish forward Danny Trainor and Stoke defender Tony Allen dismissed six minutes from time.

Meanwhile, four wins in their first six games meant the Los Angeles Wolves were always on course to take the USA's Western Division title. Their angular Northern Ireland centre-forward Derek Dougan scored in three successive victories and Ernie Hunt finished as the team's top scorer with four goals. The defence never conceded more than one goal until the division title was just about wrapped up. Near the foot of the division, Sunderland won only three games as the Vancouver Royal Canadians, while Dundee United

had only three victories in the colours of the Dallas Tornado. 'We took it seriously enough,' says Sunderland striker John O'Hare. 'We just weren't a very good side at that time. It was not through lack of commitment.'

In the Eastern Division, the Cleveland Stokers remained unbeaten in their first seven games before winning only one of their final five matches to finish second in the table. Peter Dobing's seven goals made him the leading scorer among the British teams, while Hibernian's Peter Cormack was on target five times for third-placed Toronto City. Winners of the division were Aberdeen, the Washington Whips, for whom Jim Storrie top-scored with five goals.

'We had a group of very good young players at that time,' recalls goalkeeper Bobby Clark. 'Martin Buchan was on his way to becoming a world-class defender and was later transferred to Manchester United. Jimmy Smith, who went on to Newcastle, was a terrier in midfield, and at the back Francis Munro had a great summer. One of the reasons Wolves signed him was because they saw how well he played against them in America.'

Fans back in Scotland followed their team's exploits closely. 'I did a daily report for the *Daily Record* and somebody else did one for the *Press and Journal*,' Clark explains. 'People were very excited about hearing where we were playing. It was pretty big news at the time for a team like Aberdeen to be over there playing at places like the Astrodome.'

In other British cities, interest in their team's overseas exploits was less evident. 'Hardly anyone from Sunderland knew we were even out there,' says O'Hare. 'We didn't have any press travelling with us and I don't remember any coverage.'

Having won their divisions with identical records, the Wolves and the Whips tossed a coin to see who would host the one-off final, with the Los Angeles Coliseum emerging as the venue. The final brought together teams who had been

involved in some of the tournament's many controversial incidents. During their meeting in Washington, Wolves player David Burnside had aimed a throw-in at Aberdeen's Munro, hitting the Scottish defender on the head. Munro retaliated by throwing punches and it was Wolves chairman John Ireland, fearful of a public relations disaster, who risked copping a few blows himself by stepping in, pipe still in his mouth, to halt the duel. The teams' first meeting had ended in a 1-1 draw, but when the Washington management complained that Wolves manager Ronnie Allen had used three outfield substitutes, instead of two plus a goalkeeper, a replay was ordered. The additional game, won 3-0 by the Whips, was slotted into the schedule four days before the sides met again in the final.

Six months after more than 61,000 sat in the Coliseum to watch the Green Bay Packers beat the Kansas City Chiefs in gridiron's first Super Bowl, a crowd of 17,824 gathered to witness the USA's inaugural championship game. It turned out to be a remarkable match. After 63 minutes the teams were locked at 1-1, goals by midfielders Peter Knowles, for Wolves, and Jimmy Smith cancelling each other out. But suddenly the game exploded with four goals in the space of less than four minutes. Clark recalls, 'There were penalties saved and scored, good goals and bad goals. It was a bizarre situation in a way. It was like a basketball game with all that scoring. But it was one of those games you desperately wanted to win.'

Twice Wolves hit back to level through Burnside after Munro and Jim Storrie edged their team ahead. According to Munro, 'Neither side had seemed desperate to make it much more than an exhibition match for the benefit of the locals. Then the burst of goals wiped away the "take it easy" atmosphere. The stadium was in turmoil.' There was no doubt about how seriously the teams were taking it when Smith was sent off after 80 minutes following a clash with Wolves winger David Wagstaffe, after which Burnside edged

Wolves into a 4-3 lead. But with only seconds remaining, Munro equalised for ten-man Washington to take the game into extra-time.

Wolves scored first in extra-time through Dougan and could have wrapped up victory had Terry Wharton not been denied from the penalty spot by Clark. Once again, it was left to Munro to save the day for Washington, converting a last-gasp penalty to complete his hat-trick and set up a period of sudden-death play in which the first team to score would win. After a total of 126 minutes, Wolves defender Bobby Thomson crossed from the left and Aberdeen defender Ally Shewan deflected the ball off his shins past Clark.

The Los Angeles Wolves had taken the USA's first final 6-5. But by the time the champions were boarding their plane back to England, soccer's accountants were confirming that there had been no real winners in the first year of the sport's American revival.

2. ☆ Staying Alive

The return of professional soccer to the United States had clearly not gone according to plan. Some of the teams in the NPSL and USA had returned losses of \$500,000. The problem was the age-old one when it came to soccer in the United States. Quite simply, most Americans understood little and cared even less about the sport being served up by the two organisations. Watching the 1966 World Cup on television had been one thing; the audience had bought into the global significance of the event. But that did not mean they would rush out and buy season tickets for their 'local' team. Furthermore, the clubs had no real connection to the community. John O'Hare, part of the Sunderland team that represented Vancouver in 1967, says, 'We didn't do much to market the team to the Canadians. We should have done more. It was really just the British ex-pats who came to see us.'

The teams had no history, few American heroes and, as was clear to those who did understand their football, a poor-quality version of the game was being offered. The ethnic groups who had been expected to turn out to watch the sport of their homeland knew a sub-standard product when they saw one.

The US soccer community could see that on the field there was a clear choice to be made between the fast-track route of bringing in greater quality and quantity of foreign players or taking the more conservative path of growing slowly by developing American players and encouraging greater participation in the sport. The first concern for the team owners, however, was how many of them would still be

competing in 1968. The consensus was that the problems of the previous season had been caused by the competition between the two organisations spreading the sport's fan base too thinly. In December 1967, the leagues took the sensible step of merger and adopted the name originally favoured by the USA.

The North American Soccer League was born, although it had not been a painless labour. Talks about the proposed merger threatened to become long and drawn out, until an \$ 18-million law suit filed by the NPSL against those established football authorities who had tried to isolate them hastened matters to their conclusion. Initially, the new NASL had two commissioners, Dick Walsh and Ken Macker, who had held the posts with the USA and NPSL respectively. Neither came from a soccer background, with Walsh, a renowned baseball administrator, admitting, 'I hardly even know what a soccer ball looks like.'

Only 17 of the two leagues' combined 22 franchises remained, with some teams being moved to prevent having more than one in any market. On the field, a compromise approach was adopted in an attempt to boost the number of home players involved, while at the same time increasing the quality of play. In short, it meant fewer, but better, foreigners, with the number of Americans in the league rising to 30.

The British contingent at Atlanta was largely unchanged, with Newman moving to Dallas during the season after losing his place in the team. Cleveland retained the name of the Stokers and continued to wear red and white stripes, even though most of their players were no longer from the Potteries. The exception was Stoke's reserve goalkeeper Paul Shardlow, who played in all 32 games and would die a couple of years later after suffering a heart attack during training in England. With former Liverpool, Newport and Norwich centre-half Norman Low in charge of team affairs,