

THE FIRST EUROPEAN SOCCER MATCH

Walter Bensemann, a twenty-six-year-old German student, set the ball rolling

Heiner Gillmeister

University of Bonn, Germany

On Saturday, 8 June 1996, at 3 p.m., the whistle was blown for the UEFA Euro '96 at Wembley. Soccer, it was said, was back home again at last. The coming home was watched by a capacity crowd of 76,000, and on TV by an estimated 400 million.

Almost a hundred years before, on 23 November 1899, a measly crowd of scarcely 1,000 had watched the very opposite. Britain's soccer had only just left home. It was a cold and rainy Thursday afternoon on the ground of the Athletics Ground Company on Kurfuerstendamm in Berlin, and an All Germany soccer team was taking on a selection of the F.A.

It is true that the first international fixture of an English side against Scotland had taken place twenty-seven years earlier, in 1872. But this was the first international match ever played by an English representative team outside the British Isles, and the first truly European one into the bargain.

On 28 August 1899, a letter from Germany had arrived at the F.A. headquarters in Chancery Lane. It had been sent by the secretary of a *Committee for International Soccer Matches* (the German Federation DFB had not yet come into being) requesting that England should play three matches against an All Germany side, and another against a combined Bohemian and Austrian one. The sender was a certain Walter Bensemann, a twenty-six year old German student. When on 9 October the F.A. Selection Committee met in London, Bensemann put in an appear-

ance, too, and politely explained his plan. Not least because of his excellent command of English, the committee members nodded their approval.

A great deal of controversy in the Fatherland preceeded the matches. Officials of local associations hurled imprecations at the man who had arranged them and set himself up as the High Lord Everything of German soccer. The FA had stipulated £ 200 to cover expenses which Bensemman blandly paid from his own purse. Of course, events took exactly the course Bensemman's German critics had predicted. All the matches against "the Master" ended in ignominious defeat. And yet, for the pupils there was a lot to learn. When they received their 2:13 and 2:10 whackings in Berlin, the reporter of the Berlin-based sporting journal *Spiel und Sport* [Play and Sport] noted the fact that the English forwards "very rarely kicked the ball with their toes (for that was apparently what the forebears of Berti Vogts' boys were doing), but nearly always with the inside and the outside of their boots." Sheer wonder for the Germans was their antagonists' skill at quickly stopping the high balls. From a more modern perspective, the two matches in Berlin reversed the roles. Much to the surprise of the Britons, the Germans were by no means addicted to the "kick-and-rush game", that brand of soccer causing the midfielder with a more continental approach to the game a stiff neck, and today normally associated with the insular game. [The definition of the English term, given by the journal *Sport im Bild*, in brackets, was something like: 'punting the ball afield, and, running after it, attack']. "As for their aptitude for shots at goal", the correspondent of the English journal *The Sportsman* wrote, "we had of course little opportunity to assess that."

The second match was set for Friday at 10 a.m., because the English squad had to catch the train for Prague at 1 p.m. This time the German side got off more lightly. "The reason for this", wrote a Berlin correspondent, "may have been that most of the Britons were somewhat affected ('etwas mitgenommen') by the *Commers* (the ceremonial drinking sessions for which German footballers were as notorious as German students) and the spree following it which at least for some drew to a close around seven in the morning only."

The Prague match almost showed up to advantage, the result for the Bohemian and Austrian combination being 0:8. Mr. Bentley, editor of the

Athletic News, when asked by the Prague daily *Prager Tagblatt* for his candid opinion, above all recommended the home team to pass the ball lower.

After the journey, and more drinking sessions and dinners had made further inroads into their physical fitness, the English selection in their final match in Karlsruhe scored the narrowest victory of all, 7:0. The Black-White-Reds, as Bensemann's kicking elite were called after the colours of the imperial flag, this time had been lucky that their fourth defeat in a row was somewhat delayed. At the kick-off, it was found that there was no ball. A cyclist had to be sent into town immediately in order to fetch one.

For the last time the continentals were provided with some remarkable insights. A Gustav Rudolf Manning, writing for the sporting journal *Sport im Bild*, again noted the English side's efforts to keep the ball low, and seemed well aware of the advantage resulting from "always playing the ball to where a player was not marked." Manning, an Englishman born in Lewisham in 1873, was the secretary of the Verband Süddeutscher Fussballvereine (Federation of Southern German Football Clubs) which had opposed the matches against England most vehemently. In 1905 he emigrated to the United States, where he was elected, as Dr Gus(tave) Randolph Manning, first president of the United States Soccer Football Association (USSFA) in 1913.

After their return home, the members of the English side received commemorative badges, whereas Bensemann, "in recognition of his merits for the cause of international sporting competition", was awarded an F.A. gold badge.

There was hardly anyone else who would have deserved it more. Born in Berlin on 13 January 1873 as the son of Berthold Bensemann, a Jewish banker, Bensemann was educated at English public schools for six years. In 1887, he founded his first football club, Montreux F.C., Switzerland, a country to which he remained very much attached throughout his whole life. In 1889, he founded his second club, Karlsruher F.C., while attending the Grand Ducal gymnasium in Karlsruhe where his class-mates took him for an Englishman and from which he graduated in 1892. He studied

English and French language and literature at the universities of Lausanne, Strasbourg, Freiburg im Breisgau, and Marburg. In Freiburg, he was expelled for three years: he was accused, and found guilty, of having induced pupils of Freiburg secondary schools to play soccer, and to indulge in drinking bouts after matches in pubs and a local brewery. He never seems to have obtained a degree, despite his remarkable astuteness and writing skill, conspicuous in his many publications, and most notably in a pamphlet titled *Public School und Gymnasium* which he had published when he was nineteen, and in a press campaign which followed two matches played by a German team in Paris in 1898. Bensemman's criticism of the public school was as devastating as his praise of the gymnasium was high. The former, to his mind, was 'a never ending sequel of matches of all sorts for which classroom-hours formed an unpleasant interruption', the latter the preserve of scholarship, not least because of its high percentage of clever Jewish boys attending it.

Bensemman's international outlook became evident at an early date. In 1894, he wrote, on behalf of Strasbourg F.C., a club which he said he had founded the year before, a letter to the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA) in Paris, the supreme body of sports organisations in France, regarding the organisation of international soccer matches between German and French teams, but the Union, presided at the time by Baron Coubertin, could not be persuaded. Two years later, he and the Berlin-based *Deutscher Fussball- und Cricket-Bund* (one of the local organisations preceding the DFB) offered their help in sending a German soccer team to the first Olympic Games in Athens. A team was selected which consisted of six players from Berlin and five of Bensemman's Karlsruher Kickers and included Bensemman, of late a member of Strasbourg F.C. Unfortunately, this second initiative of Bensemman's to play soccer at an international level also failed, since the Olympic soccer tournament was called off.

In 1898, Bensemman was successful at last. He was able to arrange two matches of an All Germany team against White Rovers, a team mainly consisting of English residents in the French metropolis, and a scratch team styling themselves "Tout Paris". Bensemman, chubby, shortsighted, and a bonvivant, who as usual had paid for it all himself, captained the German team. Eager to win recognition for his sporting prowess, the

intellectual had chosen himself, although his team-mates clearly played in a class above him. That is why his rather poor performance was justly ridiculed by Andrew Pitcairn-Knowles, the editor and proprietor of *Sport im Bild*, Germany's first illustrated sporting journal, who described him as an international football clown.

A journalistic battle followed the insult. It was waged mainly on the pages of the rival journal *Spiel und Sport* edited by another Englishman, John Bloch, the chief antagonists being Bensemman and Dr. Manning. It reached its climax when the matches between Germany and England were being contended, and eventually resulted in the foundation of the Deutscher Fussball-Bund (DFB) in Leipzig on 28 January 1900. The main issue of this meeting was how a supreme board representing all German soccer players might be constituted, and controversies such as those accompanying the Germany vs. England matches might be avoided in the future. Among the delegates representing 86 clubs and federations, there was Gustav Manning and his brother Fred, the Doctor representing the Verband süddeutscher Fussballvereine, his brother VfB Pankow. Another prominent participant was, of course, Walter Bensemman, who took part on behalf of the Mannheimer Fussballbund and the Phoenix club from Karlsruhe, the club which had, in the face of all other local clubs partisan to Doctor Manning, brazenly hosted the Germany vs. England match.

On the question of how one association for all German soccer players might come into being, basically two opinions existed. There were those who, like Bensemman, believed that it was too early for an All-Germany association. They advocated the creation of a commission to settle technicalities such as the rules of the game first. This faction was, as one delegate put it, against building the roof before laying the foundations. Perhaps the most prominent member of the opposition who, following a suggestion made by a delegate of Hanauer F.C., Herr Wamser, insisted on the formation of an association then and there, was Dr. Manning. His federation would not want anything done by halves, he said. Those present had come to act in a definitive way, and he brought forward a motion for putting to the vote whether an association should be inaugurated at once or not. This motion, formally made by his brother Fred together with the delegates Sommermeyer, Hueppe and Wamser, and, cleverly, shortly before lunch, was adopted by 64 votes against 22, a result greeted with

thundering applause. In the afternoon, Professor Hueppe, of Prague, was elected president of the newly created German Soccer Federation's provisional committee whereas the man so instrumental in bringing it about, Gustav Manning, became its First Secretary (Schriftwart).

Dr. Manning was also appointed by unanimous vote to a commission of eleven in charge of drawing up the statutes of the new organisation as well as the rules of the game. It was he who worked out the statutes by making those of the English association his guideline. The statutes were approved at the second general assembly in Erfurt (on 2 and 3 June 1900) where both Professor Hueppe and Dr. Manning were entrusted with conducting the federation's affairs until the next assembly. This took place in Frankfurt, and it was there that Dr. Manning, having before "as a tangible result of his untiring activities" reported a cash balance of 304 marks, regretted having to resign from his post, owing to the demands of his exacting profession. For his services to the German Soccer Federation he received the thanks of its President, Professor Hueppe. It was on the same occasion that the doctor made peace with Walter Bensemann: as strong a supporter of international sporting meets as ever, Bensemann had urged the delegates to send a German soccer team to Paris in order to compete in the competitions of the 1900 World Fair which later became known as the Games of the Second Olympiad. The German Committee for the Participation of German sportsmen in Olympic Games had offered the Soccer Federation 1,100 marks for sending to Paris a representative team. Bensemann eloquently commended the expedition to Paris, and Manning rallied to his support, but to no avail. Their initiative was voted down. Bensemann, the outsider, did not obtain a post in the new organisation. However, it was to him that it owed its name, *Deutscher Fussball-Bund*.

It was not without a touch of irony that Walter Bensemann in 1901 went to England in order to become a master at English public schools. He taught French (and, presumably, German) at Dollar Academy in Scotland (1901-1902), Denstone College in Staffordshire (1902-1905), Elstow School in Bedfordshire (1909-1910), and Birkenhead School in Cheshire (1912-1914). Contemporary school magazines of these institutions contain his enthusiastic reports of educational tours to the continent (France, Germany, Switzerland), and of rugby matches in which the massive Teuton (in Birkenhead he was referred to as the Man-Mountain) strength-

ened the masters' team against the boys, and scholarly articles in which Bensemann enlarged on "Translation Limits" and "Football on the Continent".

When Bensemann arrived at Birkenhead, he was reputed to be able to win, for any school at which he was teaching, the Vase de Sèvres, a prize presented by the President of the French Republic for successful teaching of the French language. At Birkenhead, he won it twice, once by telling his pupils on the eve of the examination to learn by heart the names of birds. The boys got them all off pat: raven, crow, rook, swan, etc., but unfortunately the question turning up next morning was "Name six singing birds"! (Perhaps Bensemann, because of his shortsightedness, had failed to pry into the examiners' papers successfully.) The school won the prize all the same, perhaps because the examiners were better linguists than naturalists.

When the First World War broke out, Bensemann was on holiday in Germany. In Birkenhead, his sudden disappearance, according to W.E. Woodhouse's book *One in Heart*, was followed by a cloud of rumours. One of them was very funny. The *Adelphi*, it was said, would have to close, since Bensemann's lavish dinner parties had been discontinued. The *Adelphi*, a hotel in the heart of Liverpool which still exists, was renowned in 1914 for its French cuisine. It was the well-known haunt of wealthy Americans who stayed there for the Grand National at Aintree.

Back in Germany, Walter Bensemann for a while continued to work as a foreign language teacher at a German boarding school, the Institut Adam in Würzburg, before he launched, in 1920, what was to become perhaps his greatest achievement, the German soccer weekly *Der Kicker*. As *Kicker Sportmagazin*, it celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1995. Bensemann resigned as editor-in-chief in 1933, after the Nazis had assumed power and shortly after his sixtieth birthday. He was given a place of refuge by friends in Switzerland, but died in Montreux only a year later, on 12 November 1934.

Captions



1. Walter Bensemamm, master at Birkenhead School in 1913. Courtesy George de Ritter, Birkenhead School Archive.



2. Walter Bensemamm (back row, standing, second from left) and the *Karlsruher Kickers*, a selection of players from Karlsruhe, Baden-Baden, and Strasbourg, renowned for a long uninterrupted series of victories between 1893 and 1895 when the team dissolved. Photograph by Heiner Gillmeister.

The First European Soccer Match



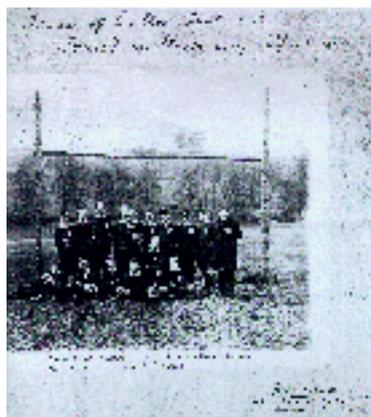
3. Bensemann's All Germany team who beat White Rovers and a team called Tout Paris in 1898. Bensemann captained it in white trousers! Courtesy KB-Van Landeghem Sportarchief, Louvain, Belgium.



4. The German team fielded against the F.A. selection on the second day. It wore a black shirt which had a white and a red strip of linen sewn onto the left sleeve: the colours of the German Empire. Courtesy KB-Van Landeghem Sportarchief, Louvain, Belgium.



5. The F.A. selection who played four matches on the continent in 1899 and officials. Back row: Cox, Sherrington, Taylor, O.E. Wreford-Brown, Hughes, Waller, E.D. Brown, Crabtree, Alcock, Stanley-Briggs, Timbs, Chadwick; front row: Wilson, Bassett, Holt, Bach, Rogers, Forman. Courtesy KB-Van Landeghem Sportarchief, Louvain, Belgium.



6. Walter Bensemann (last on the right, wearing a coat) organized a rugby Easter tour for the team of Dollar Institutionals, Scotland, in 1901. On the continent, where they not only played rugby matches in Bremen and Hanover, but also two soccer matches in Berlin, the team was referred to as Middleton's XV or Middleton's XI respectively, apparently after J. Middleton who is seated leftmost. Courtesy Bruce E. Baillie, Archivist, Dollar Academy, Scotland.



7. Walter Bensemenn (middle row, fourth from left) master at Denstone College, Uttoxeter, Staffordshire. Courtesy The Headmaster H.C.K. Carson, Denstone College.



8. Walter Bensemenn (middle row, second from left with cap) and the rugby teams of Denstone and the French school Albert le Grand. Courtesy The Headmaster H.C.K. Carson, Denstone College.



9. The Swiss contingent of the first issue of Bensemann's soccer weekly *Der Kicker* is being carried across the Swiss border in 1920. Bensemann, wearing a white stand-up collar and a tie, is standing to the left of the wheel-barrow. Courtesy *kicker sportmagazin*, Nuremberg.



10. Andrew Pitcairn-Knowles, editor of the Berlin sporting journal *Sport im Bild*. Courtesy The Andrew-Pitcairn-Knowles Gallery, Springbank House, Sevenoaks, Kent.

Walter Bensemam

A Selection of his Writings

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