PLAYING TO THE FLAG: A HISTORY OF DEAF FOOTBALL AND DEAF FOOTBALLERS IN BRITAIN

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Note on terminology
Within this article, the terms Deaf and deaf will be used. Deaf is used when referring to those people who regard their deafness as a positive, culturally defining factor in their identity - this group includes those deaf people whose first or preferred language is sign language. This group is also referred to as the Deaf Community.

dead is used in two contexts: firstly, when referring to all deaf people in general (hence, deaf football); and secondly, when writing specifically about those deaf people for whom deafness means being unable to hear, rather than having any linguistic or cultural connotations. This group includes those people who refer to themselves as ‘deafened’, ‘hard of hearing’, ‘hearing impaired’ and other such labels.

Introduction - football and the Deaf community
A dull, grey, damp October day does nothing to make Sheffield’s Don Valley Stadium appear a welcoming place. The concrete and steel bowl has a certain austerity on such days, especially when only 200 or so of its 25,000 seats were filled for the vital European Championship qualifying match which took place there on 3rd October 1998.

A casual observer, seeing the floodlights illuminating the gloom and popping in to see what was going on, may well have been struck by the apparent lack of atmosphere. The sparse crowd did not help of course, but
there was also no expectant buzz of conversation before the match; when the teams emerged from the tunnels, there was little clapping or cheering to greet them; the National Anthems were respected by standing but largely silent spectators; there was no roar of encouragement at the kick-off. In short, there were none of the activities one would expect at a football match at any level, never mind an international match.

But there was discussion taking place of the home team’s prospects; there was all the general conversation and socialising associated with attending a football match and meeting friends there. The match analyses at half- and full-time, and in the bar afterwards, were just as fervent and partisan as at any other match. The only difference was that they were mostly conducted in sign language - for this is deaf football, a form of football with a history as long as that of the professional game we hear so much about nowadays. Yet despite that long involvement in football, deaf football and deaf footballers have been – and up until now have remained - largely hidden from history.

How many people in Sheffield, never mind the rest of the country, knew that there was an international match taking place in their city that afternoon? Where was the coverage in the national media, before and after the match? How many football fans, if asked, would be aware that Great Britain had a deaf football team, or that they were playing in a European Championship? How many Glasgow football followers could name the second oldest club in the city? How many football fans could name a professional footballer who was deaf?

This is an attempt to provide the answers to these questions, and to reconstruct the history of those who play and watch deaf football. The picture will not be a full one; the sources for researching all areas of history pertaining to deaf people in Britain are patchy and incomplete - some of the reasons for this are highlighted below. For example, there appears to have been some involvement by women in deaf football at certain periods throughout this century, but there has not been enough evidence uncovered at the present time to accurately assess the extent of female participation, particularly in the early history of deaf football. For this reason, deaf women’s football does not feature in this report, and the focus is solely on the involvement of young deaf males in the game. Nevertheless, it is still
possible to show that sport - and football in particular – has played an important role in the lives of deaf people of both sexes over a long period of time. During the last century, a number of deaf players have progressed to join the ranks of professional clubs, but they are not included here. This essay will focus instead on the amateur game, and the role football has played in the history and social and cultural life of the Deaf community. Not only has it been a popular sporting pastime, but it has also played a major part in maintaining and strengthening the social and cultural ties which bind members of the Deaf community together. The social and cultural aspects of deaf football will be briefly addressed here, but will be investigated in more detail in the forthcoming Final Report of the Deaf United project to the Football Association. Despite its long history, deaf football is in decline, and the reasons for this seem closely linked to the changing nature of the Deaf community itself. Changes in government policies in regard to education for deaf children, funding for sport, and general perceptions of deafness and disability are all having an effect, as will be discussed later.

**Previous research into football and disabilities**

There has been little previous research carried out into the history or social aspects of any branch of disabled sport. Most work is largely concerned with the practicalities of sport for disabled athletes, with occasional references to the history of a particular sporting body, or with the passing on of information relating to facilities available to wheelchair athletes.

There are those who would argue that deafness is not a disability, and therefore deaf sport should not be considered to form a part of the body of disabled sport. Approximately one person in seven in Britain has some form of deafness or hearing impairment, with the majority of these people seeing their deafness as an impairment or loss. This group do not see their deafness as having any cultural connotations, and generally regard their deafness as a disability.

Those who see deafness as something positive, forming part of their social and cultural make-up, are referred to as the ‘Deaf community’, and are largely identified by their use of sign language for communication. It is this group of deaf people who do not regard themselves as having a disability,
and therefore do not see themselves as forming a disabled group. Consequently, they do not see deaf football – or any deaf sport - belonging under the banner of disabled sport. It is in this context that the cultural and social ties associated with deaf sport - and in this particular instance, deaf football – mark it out as serving a different role for its participants than disabled sport does for its adherents. The cultural aspects of the Deaf community are outlined in more detail in a later section.

The only significant work undertaken so far into the role of sport within the Deaf community which does not place it under the umbrella of disabled sport, is that of Stewart (1993). Focusing on America, he recognises the important social aspects of sport within the community, and also the role sport can play in providing -and strengthening - both individual and group identities for its members. Stewart’s work is also reflected in part in the work of De Pauw and Gavran (1995, pp.15-26), who at least acknowledge the wider cultural aspects of deaf sport, although they still view deaf athletes as belonging within the category of disabled sports people. Until now, there has been no similar work carried out into deaf sport in Britain.

The state of deaf history

Deaf history has also been a largely neglected field until recent years, and has generally had a narrow focus. Its main thrust has concerned the history of deaf education, and the place and status of sign language within that system, the Deaf community, and the wider population in general. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from hearing people working with and for deaf people - which formed the main area of interest in earlier work - to focus more on deaf people themselves (Van Cleve, 1993; Wrigley, 1996, p.43-71). Research into the specific cultural elements of life within the Deaf community has been another recent area of development in deaf history. There has also been a politicising of deaf history, with the pro- and anti-sign language factions using autobiography to express their point of view (Wright, 1969; Lee, 1992). At the moment, social history is confined largely to recollections of life in the deaf schools and deaf clubs, and the experiences of individuals there - for example Mason (1991).

A major problem in researching the history of the Deaf community is the lack of primary source material. English – both spoken and written – can pose difficulties for many profoundly deaf people, as for many, it is not
their first or preferred language. The consequence of this is that deaf individuals or clubs do not always consign their records or history to paper, and that which is recorded is not always preserved. Often the only reliable source is the deaf print media, which even today still relies largely on submitted articles and contributions, rather than having reporters to cover specific events. This leads to extensive coverage of some clubs and areas, and little or nothing from others.  

Very few deaf people write down their history, and deaf matters are not often covered in the mainstream media, other than as ‘novelty’ items. Nor are many deaf people trained in historiographical methods, and so they are often not aware of good practice or available resources when conducting research (Wrigley 1996, p.43). The vast majority of research into deaf history is undertaken by lay historians, and for all its value, the resulting work produced can be of an inconsistent nature.

An increasingly important source of material for research into deaf history is being derived from oral history interviews. This has the advantage of filling in some of the gaps in the written records, but is of course limited in its ability to reconstruct events beyond the experience or recall of interview subjects. Nevertheless, it can provide a rich and important source of information, and has proved to be particularly useful in relation to the social and cultural values attached by deaf people to participation in football.

An example of the consequences of inaccurate deaf history research was discovered during the researching of this project. Glasgow Deaf Football Club was preparing to celebrate what was thought to be its centenary in 1989, based on a reference club officials had found to the club playing in the 1889 Scottish Deaf Cup final. As this was the earliest reference held at the club, it was assumed to be the year of the club’s foundation, and arrangements were made for a grand celebration. In fact, Glasgow DFC had been formed in 1871, a fact which came to light in the course of Peter Jackson’s research for a book on the history of the British Deaf community. Deaf culture being as it is, the celebrations continued anyway.
Britain’s Deaf community – who do we mean?

There are only approximately 70,000 people in Britain for whom British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred form of communication; even so this still makes it the fourth native language of Britain in terms of the number of people for whom it is their first language. The Deaf community and its members have always been here, sharing in a vibrant and thriving cultural and social life, despite there being no geographical focus to what is a widely dispersed group of people. They are not highly visible; for many ‘outsiders’, the only time they may be aware that someone is deaf is when they see sign language being used, or a hearing aid being worn. Nor are many people outside the community aware of the rich and varied history and culture that is an integral part of the life of the members of the Deaf community.

It is these people who form the core of the community. However, there are also many others who have an interest and affinity with the Deaf community. It is not possible to definitively say that someone does or does not belong; membership of the Deaf community is to a large extent conferred or achieved, not assumed. Nor is deafness itself sufficient to warrant membership; according to Padden, its members have to behave in a way which identifies them as being immersed in Deaf culture;

‘Entering into Deaf culture and becoming Deaf means learning all the appropriate ways to behave like a Deaf person’ (Gregory and Hartley 1991, p.44)

The British Deaf community is an attachment community, based on shared feelings of identity, culture and sentiments. One way in which the Deaf community has demonstrated these shared feelings and perspectives is through its involvement in sport, particularly football, which has formed a central part of the cultural and social life of deaf people since the earliest days of the sport’s development.

The history of deaf football - an overview

The Scottish origins of deaf football

There have been deaf football clubs in existence for at least as long as their hearing counterparts. The interest of the deaf population, and particularly
the Deaf community, in football is illustrated by the continuous inclusion in the deaf print media of reports on the activities of deaf football clubs - DFCs for short - since the last quarter of the 19th century. The only other pastime to feature for as long and as consistently has been chess. Accurately quantifying the number of deaf football clubs or players at any one time is a virtually impossible task. This is due in part to the problem of accurate and complete sources mentioned earlier; another problem is that not all deaf football clubs included ‘Deaf’ in their name, and so trying to establish numbers from the records of leagues is not a straightforward task. Nevertheless, there is no dispute over where deaf football was first formalised in the form of a football club of and for deaf players.

Glasgow Deaf and Dumb Football Club was the first deaf football club to be formed, in 187113, and remains in existence today. This foundation date not only makes it one of the oldest football clubs in the world, but also predates both its illustrious Glasgow neighbours Rangers (1873) and Celtic (1881), and all but five English league clubs14. The club was founded at the Glasgow Deaf and Dumb Institute15 and had close links with the nearby Queen’s Park club. It is likely that the club was formed as an Old Boys club, rather than for pupils at the school, as their early matches were against senior teams in Scotland. One of their earliest matches was against a touring team from Oxford University in 187416.

The Church also played a prominent role in establishing outlets for the energies of their charges, both deaf and hearing. The majority of services for local deaf people were provided by missioners to the deaf, who were in the main drawn from the Churches17. The principles of ‘muscular Christianity’ which led to the formation of clubs such as Bolton Wanderers, Celtic, Blackpool and Fulham in the professional game18, were also applied to the ‘scores of young and stalwart deaf mutes’ in their care19. The role of the Church and Deaf schools in the development of deaf football would suggest that football was seen as a healthy and acceptable activity for young deaf people, just as it was for hearing children and young adults. Indeed, an article in The British Deaf Mute in 1895 reinforces this view:

‘Of all the healthy outdoor sports that which should be the most popular among the deaf of the United Kingdom is football’. The British Deaf Mute 1895, p.311
In Glasgow, one consequence of the involvement of the Church was the segregation on religious grounds of Glasgow DFC and the later Glasgow St. Vincent’s, reflecting the situation with the city’s two main professional clubs. Glasgow DFC were the club of the Protestants - as were Rangers - whilst St. Vincent’s was the Catholic club, with strong links to Celtic. This does not seem to have happened elsewhere in Scotland, and in recent years, this segregation has become less marked. One reason for this may be the small pool of players available, making such selectivity impractical. Religious segregation seems to be confined to Glasgow, as it is not apparent in other areas of Scotland, nor in England to any degree; this despite the links between churches and deaf football clubs being maintained well into the twentieth century, with deaf teams playing in Church based leagues.

**Early growth patterns**

The founding of deaf football clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mirrored in several ways the developments taking place in the hearing football world, particularly the professional game, with the initial development of deaf football clubs being confined to Scotland, and the north and midlands of England. Clubs were formed in larger towns, usually those with connections to a deaf school or with a strong deaf club. These usually took the form of school or Old Boys clubs, formed in part to maintain links and friendships established during schooldays; football in deaf circles therefore developed as a leisure activity in a similar pattern to that of other community groups. For example, the club in Doncaster was formed by pupils of the Yorkshire Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in the town, and they provided the opposition for their near neighbours Doncaster Rovers FC’s first match in 1879. Indeed, their links with Rovers extended to loaning them their kit during Rovers’ first season.

Glasgow DFC took a leading role in developing the game, actively encouraging the setting up of other deaf football clubs in both Scotland and England. This encouragement extended to offering advice on how to go about starting a football club, and offering to play matches once clubs were set up. This would seem to be a further indication of how football as a pastime was perceived by members of the Deaf community. It also
demonstrates the way in which the Deaf community acts as a means of providing mutual help between deaf people, and of encouraging the forging of links between its members by a variety of means.

Deaf football has always experienced periods of growth and decline. A major reason may be the changing numbers of deaf people; with approximately 90% of deaf children being born to hearing parents, the deaf population is constantly in flux. There is not the same guaranteed succession of community members, and so football teams have always had only a restricted pool to choose from, a pool which can and does expand and contract over time. As an indication of this waxing and waning in numbers, whilst Scottish deaf football experienced a period of decline in the late nineteenth century, the game in England continued to spread southwards, with clubs being formed for example in Bristol, Southampton and Portsmouth, as well as several in the London area, including St. Barnabas, Amicable and Fairbairn. With many of today’s southern professional clubs being formed during the same period, it is possible to see parallel development in the establishment of both deaf and hearing clubs, with deaf boys and young men emulating their hearing counterparts in finding football attractive as a leisure pursuit.

By the start of the First World War, deaf football clubs were firmly established as a part of the sporting life of both the deaf and hearing communities, with deaf teams playing in many hearing leagues across Britain. This was both a necessity and a practicality, as there were no competitions solely for deaf clubs in England until the 1920s, and the Scottish Deaf Cup suffered from periods when its contesting was suspended. Without involvement in hearing competitions, deaf football clubs would have had to be content with arranging friendly matches against whomever they could find. The reasons for the suspension of the Scottish Cup are not clear, but there has always been a high degree of fluidity in the number of DFCs, with clubs regularly folding and new ones being formed.

An extreme, but by no means unusual example of this process of expansion and contraction within deaf football comes from Leeds DFC in the 1920s and 30s. They won the first Healey Shield in 1927 and in 1928 set up a junior team, to bring school leavers up to first team standard. However,
1929 saw them so reduced in experienced players that they had to withdraw from their hearing league, and only play friendlies. However, some forceful recruitment saw them in a position to regain the Healey Shield in 1930. By 1932, they were once again depleted, and only survived by drawing players in from a wide radius. Given the problems Leeds DFC experienced, despite the apparent potential of a city the size of Leeds for finding suitable players, it should not be surprising to find clubs in smaller towns having similar, or greater, difficulties in maintaining sufficient numbers. There may of course have been some connection to the economic depression Britain was experiencing at the time, but the sources identified to date do not allow such a conclusion to be reached at present.

**League and cup competitions**

The first competition to be organised solely for deaf football clubs came with the establishment of the Scottish Deaf Cup in 1889, organised by the Scottish Deaf and Dumb Football Association. The first final was contested by Glasgow and Edinburgh, with Edinburgh triumphing by 3 goals to 1 in front of a crowd of over 2,000 at the Bainsford ground in Falkirk. However, the competition was to have a troubled time in establishing itself, falling into abeyance from 1893 until 1906; this despite the *British Deaf and Dumb Times* reporting that there were now several clubs well established in Scotland. Revived in 1906, the Scottish Cup was once more suspended in 1908. A second revival in 1920 lasted until 1934; since the third resurrection in 1947, the cup was contested annually until 1997. The existence of only two clubs in Scotland has once more caused the competition to be suspended; whether it will be revived remains to be seen. Although it has not been possible to obtain exact numbers, there seem to have been sufficient deaf clubs in Scotland throughout the early period of decline and revival to have supported such a competition. It also seems certain that deaf clubs in Scotland were involved in hearing leagues, which may well have provided a higher standard of football. There seems to be a general perception amongst deaf footballers that the standard of hearing teams is higher than that of deaf teams; this may have been a factor contributing to the temporary demise of the cup competition, with deaf teams preferring to play against hearing opponents, at what they believed to be a higher level. For those teams involved in hearing leagues, fixture clashes may have been another reason for not entering the Deaf Cup.
An equivalent competition was not established in England until the 1926/27 season, when the Healey Shield was contested for the first time; Leeds won the final 1-0 against Bristol ‘before a fairly good muster of onlookers’[^34]; Leeds had the advantage of playing in their home town after several attempts to arrange a neutral venue had failed. This competition was also to experience teething troubles whilst trying to become an established part of the deaf football calendar, only lasting until 1930 before failing, and not being revived until 1959.

The Shield was established as an alternative to a National Deaf Football League, an idea first proposed as early as 1896[^35]. Sadly, despite several attempts to establish such a league[^36], this concept has never come fully to fruition. A short-lived league was formed in the late 1980s, with north and south sections growing to include a total of 18 clubs in two divisions. However, given the amateur status of deaf football, and the wide geographical dispersion of clubs, perhaps such a competition was never really practicable. The costs and time involved in travelling long distances on a regular basis to compete in such a league may have conspired against its success. The London Deaf Football League, formed in 1926 for deaf football clubs in the London area, did not face these problems of distance and time. The league ran, with varying amounts of success, until 1989, when the declining number of DFCs in London brought it to an end.[^37]

One problem both leagues faced, however, was the involvement of deaf teams in hearing leagues. This led to the postponement of many matches, and in some cases the non-completion of the league season, due to matches in hearing leagues taking priority. Once again, this seems to indicate the way in which deaf players viewed the comparative standards of deaf and hearing football. The small number of teams in each league or division also meant that teams could not rely solely on matches against other deaf teams if they wanted to play sufficient games in the course of a season. This was another attraction of being involved in a hearing league, and may also help to explain further the postponement of deaf matches in favour of matches in the hearing league.

**International football**

International football soon became a feature of deaf football in Britain, with the first international match played between Scotland and England at
Easter 1891 in Glasgow. The match ended in a 3-3 draw. Seen as an annual fixture, it too soon experienced difficulties in continuing. Two years after the first international, there is clear evidence that the novelty of deaf football in Scotland was beginning to wear off, at least amongst spectators. The third match between the two countries had to be put back from March to June, because there were so many matches on at the same time that a good crowd could not be guaranteed. When the match finally took place, there was widespread disappointment amongst the organisers at the low crowd of only 800 who attended. 38

It is not possible to judge from the available sources whether this fixture also fell into abeyance during this period, as the Scottish Cup had done. However, there is some evidence of international club matches being played, with Glasgow DFC having a series of home and away matches against Belfast from at least 190139. The next firm evidence of international deaf football comes from the inter-war years, when reports of international matches - at both club and country levels - became a regular feature in the deaf media. 1923 saw the first match between England and Wales at Southampton, England winning 3-040. At club level, a London team travelled to Paris to meet their French counterparts in 1927, and this became a regular pre-war fixture. The fixture may well have resulted from contacts made at the inaugural Silent Games in 1924, held in Paris, at which, in the final of the football competition, Great Britain lost to France. Great Britain won in 1928 and appeared in three successive finals, winning all three, in 1935 (as the hosts), 1939 and 1949. The Silent Games - often referred to as ‘the Deaf Olympics’ - were organised by the World Deaf Sports Association, founded in 1924 with six member countries, including Great Britain. Under the title of the World Games for the Deaf, the event continues to this day, and is held every four years, combining social and cultural events with sporting contests, and bringing together deaf people from around the world.41

Not all developments at this time were positive, with 1927 seeing the suspension of the Scotland/England fixture42. The reasons for this are not clear, as there is no mention of it in contemporay deaf periodicals, or at the time of its revival in 1967. It seems unlikely to have been brought about by a decline in the number of players in either country, given the growth of the game in England, and the continuation of the Scottish Deaf Cup, but
any attempt to explain why would be merely speculation at this stage.

Deaf football at all levels took some time to revive after the Second World War, but from the 1960s, international club tournaments became a regular part of European deaf football, with annual tournaments held in many European countries. As with domestic deaf football, these were social as well as sporting events, and many spectators travelled with the teams, and took part in the socialising which formed an integral part of these tournaments. A full Home international championship took place for the first time in 1967\(^4\). The impetus may well have come from the World Cup in England the previous year, and the resultant interest in football, which saw attendances at professional matches rise in the following season. At the present time, there are European Championships for both clubs and countries, as well as the continuing World Games for the Deaf, and in 2000 the first Deaf World Cup will be staged in Spain. However, British deaf teams are losing their former pre-eminence at this level, as deaf football in Britain experiences a period of decline.

**The social aspects of deaf football**

Sport has long played an important role in bonding the members of the Deaf community together, and can be seen to play a central role in the cultural life of many deaf people\(^4\); in Britain, the most popular sport in this context has been association football. Travelling to play in a match between two Deaf teams, or playing host to visitors from another Deaf club or school, has been as much about the attendant socialising as about the game itself. This socialising is not merely restricted to the male footballers actually playing in the match; all elements of the Deaf community took an active part in the social gatherings connected to the games. Reports in the Deaf print media invariably mention the wide variety of social events that followed a Deaf football match. Such events provided an ideal reason for meeting other Deaf people, visiting different parts of the country, and indeed different countries, and increasing one’s own connections within the Deaf community.

Such was the perceived attraction of the first international fixture between Scotland and England in 1891 that two- and four-day excursions, to include sightseeing trips to Loch Lomond and tours of Glasgow, were
advertised from all major English towns. How successful these trips were in attracting customers is not known, but they serve to illustrate that deaf football, through the social opportunities it realised, was seen at that time as having an attraction worthy of travelling such a long distance. The novelty value of a deaf match would not seem to stretch to the expense of a four day excursion, so there may have been some genuine interest amongst the supporters of deaf football. It was of course an ideal opportunity to meet other deaf people from around the country, and to foster or rekindle relationships within the Deaf community.

During the First World War, there were several reports of deaf teams playing fund-raising matches for the war effort, with one match between Warrington and Liverpool DFCs in 1918 being watched by 500 spectators. Another match, in the south of England, took place on Boxing Day 1917, between deaf teams from Portsmouth and Southampton. These matches were not only a means of raising money, but also featured several social events which brought together members of the local Deaf community. One suspects that the match may have been an excuse for organising a social, as well as having a patriotic purpose.

By the 1920s, there was a regular timetable of friendly fixtures between English, Scottish and Welsh clubs, on similar lines to rugby trips on Bank holidays. For example, Newcastle versus Edinburgh, and Bristol versus Cardiff were well-established fixtures by this time. A series of articles which appeared in *British Deaf Times* during the 1920s and 30s advocated both the physical and moral benefits of football for deaf men, and also emphasised the role football could play in bringing deaf people together in a friendly social setting. Perhaps one of the best examples of socialising based around deaf football comes from 1938. A London deaf team travelled to Liverpool, to take on their counterparts there. Liverpool were a strong team at the time, with three players being members of a successful local amateur team, and London were entertained extensively both before and after the match. The London team’s trip started late the previous night, and they arrived in Liverpool by train at 4.00 am. From Lime Street Station, they were taken by charabanc to Speke Aerodrome, where they had breakfast and watched the planes arriving and departing. From there, they were taken back into Liverpool to visit the cathedral, and then on to a hotel for more refreshments. The social aspects of the match had not yet
finished, as the two teams, plus friends and relatives, then travelled to Chester for more sightseeing and lunch. Eventually, the party arrived back in Liverpool in mid afternoon, and the match took place.

All Liverpool’s entertainment of their visitors failed to pay off on the pitch, as the Londoners won by 2 goals to 1, and all retired for tea. The evening brought further amusements, with a play, a ‘shadowgraphy’ display and a cinema show before the visitors finally left Liverpool by train at midnight. Although this may be an extreme example, the deaf print media is full of such reports of social activities attached to deaf football matches. It was not always as easy as it is today to maintain contact with friends from outside one’s local area, and so such events as a football match provided an opportunity – or excuse – to travel longer distances. Even when the distances are not great, the culture of the deaf community is such that socialising is a part of any event where deaf people gather together, and a football match involving two deaf teams is one such event.

In one respect, such a trip was not exclusive to deaf football; fans of professional clubs travelling to London for the FA Cup Final – especially from the industrial north - would engage in similar activities, making the most of the opportunity to travel which the football match afforded. Where deaf football does differ is in the way such events seem to have played a regular part in the culture of the game and its participants, occurring virtually every time two deaf teams played a match. Match reports throughout the history of the game invariably refer to these social events, often going into great detail, as in the example given above.

Nor does travelling to another country stifle the social and cultural activities surrounding deaf football. Deaf footballers travelling abroad do not face the same problems in communication or adapting to different cultures as their hearing counterparts. The Deaf community, in having no geographical focus, has few difficulties fitting in with the local version of Deaf cultural life. Nor do international relationships within the Deaf community suffer the same communication barriers as those often found in the hearing world. Users of different sign languages find it much easier to adapt their languages to a common hybrid, making communication between users of two different sign languages easier in some instances than it is for their hearing counterparts.
In many ways, deaf players and fans are no different to their hearing counterparts, and this can just as easily manifest itself in anti-social behaviour at times. The professional game in the late 1960s and early 1970s was attracting the attention of many unruly elements, and hooliganism was rife. Although such unruly conduct both on and off the pitch is rare in deaf football, it is by no means unknown, as illustrated by the following examples. Several deaf footballers were arrested in Germany in 1972 following a drunken brawl with police in a night-club, after a friendly match in Hamburg between two deaf teams. Following the revival of the Healey Shield in 1967 as the British Deaf Sports Council Cup, ties between English and Scottish teams in the 70s could be violent affairs, as could games between the two religiously segregated Glasgow teams. English teams making the mistake of winning in Scotland during this period had to keep a low profile after the match, and fraternisation was not encouraged. John Bamber and David Tattersall, playing for Preston DFC in the 1970s, recall how, after matches in Scotland, they would not stop for a post-match drink until they reached the safety of Carlisle. The organisers of the evening social arranged for players and spectators at the British Deaf Sports Council (BDSC) national 6-a-side tournament in 1992 were forced to end it early, after fighting broke out amongst deaf people at the disco in Manchester. A BDSC Cup final in the 1990s led to a tense atmosphere at the social event held that evening, with members of the losing team trying to pick fights with the victors. So despite its central place in the culture of many deaf people, there have been occasional examples which show that deaf football is not always some form of social or sporting Utopia. As in all social groupings, tensions exist within deaf football and the Deaf community which can sometimes find expression in violence or anti-social behaviour, and when this occurs, the sociability and friendship generally found in deaf football is not sufficient to overcome such behaviour.

**Deaf football in crisis?**

Since the 1980s, deaf football in Britain appears to have been in a steady decline, which many of those involved in deaf football see as being irreversible under present conditions. Although there have been peaks and troughs before, there are now a number of new factors affecting the prospects for a continuation of deaf football. Perhaps it is significant that
The number of sports featured in the pages of deaf periodicals has dramatically increased in recent years, whilst at the same time football coverage has decreased. For the first time since the earliest days of deaf football, it no longer appears to be guaranteed inclusion in the deaf press.

Only six years after winning their ninth consecutive London Deaf Football League title, Lewisham – who had had enough players to run two teams until 1981 – folded in 1985, through lack of numbers. Most of the London deaf teams had suffered a similar fate, and nowadays only one deaf eleven-a-side team remains in London. Despite this, some clubs are prospering, but largely in hearing leagues; for example Bristol DFC became champions of their division of the city’s football league in 1999. The number of deaf clubs entering the national knockout competition reduces each year, with only eleven teams entering in the 1998/99 season. The format shrinks accordingly, to the extent that there is no longer a need for regional rounds early in the competition, which used to be necessary in accommodate the large number of entries.

An attempt was belatedly made in the late 1980s to establish a national Deaf Football League, with sections for clubs in the north and south of England. There was also a cup competition for league members, but both only lasted for a short while. The League ran from 1986 to 1989, with the cup continuing for one more year. The first season saw five teams in the northern section, and eight southern teams, although Oxford withdrew during the season. 1987 saw the south split into two divisions, of five and four clubs; the following year, the north followed suit, making eighteen teams in the league in total. However, this seems to have been the last season of the league, with only the cup competition being mentioned in the deaf press.

One of the major influences in recent years on deaf children’s participation in - and access to - sport in general, including football, has been the change in the way most deaf children are educated. Since the late 1970s, the majority of deaf schools have been closed down, in favour of integrated education for deaf children within mainstream schools. This has blocked what was always seen as the natural progression into deaf sport and the Deaf community for deaf children; deaf school to deaf club, and so into deaf sport through contact with, and entry into, the Deaf community. In
many instances, deaf children are placed in schools many miles from home, which severely restricts opportunities for involvement in sport outside school hours. Deaf school children in mainstream education do not have the access routes into the Deaf community which the former residential deaf schools provided, and so may have little or no link to their local Deaf Club, through which so much of deaf sport has been traditionally organised. The changing nature of the Deaf community itself also bodes ill for deaf football, with the Deaf Club no longer forming the hub of social and cultural life for young deaf people. As they become more integrated within hearing society, they are finding a wider range of leisure interests to pursue, with both hearing and deaf friends, and so are moving away from what might be termed ‘traditional’ deaf cultural activities such as the local deaf football club.59

The Deaf community also suffers because of its ambiguous position within disabled sport; in order to have the best chance of obtaining government funding – either directly through sporting bodies or from the National Lottery – deaf sport needs to come under the umbrella of disabled sport. However, deaf sportsmen and women, including footballers, do not see themselves as disabled sports people; they see no link between themselves and for example wheelchair athletes. The dilemma for deaf sport is that without this attachment to disabled sport, funding will not easily be forthcoming.60

**Conclusion -The end of deaf football?**

At the close of the twentieth century, the future of deaf football is uncertain. It seems unlikely that deaf people will lose interest completely in a game that has played such an important role within the Deaf community for the past 125 years and more. However, it also appears likely that deaf football will not continue to feature in the social life of the Deaf community to the extent it has in the past. The decline of matches between two deaf teams seems irreversible, given the continuing reduction in the number of deaf football clubs. Nowadays, many deaf teams prefer to concentrate solely on playing in hearing leagues, even though many teams and players still face prejudice and misconceptions from hearing opponents. This would appear to be the context in which deaf football will have most chance of survival, with deaf football clubs in London, Bristol
and Luton, amongst others, all having experienced a degree of success in their hearing leagues in recent years. Players with these clubs see their future here, rather than in deaf competitions; many DFCs no longer even bother to enter the national cup or five-a-side competitions for deaf teams. As the deaf schools have closed and deaf clubs have gone into decline, the breeding ground for deaf footballers has changed, whilst integrated education changes the way deaf people view themselves and their community. Already, deaf football is no longer guaranteed a place in the sports pages of the monthly deaf magazines. Other sports and activities are infiltrating these pages, reflecting the broadening range of leisure pursuits deaf people are now interested in. Deaf youngsters are as likely today to want to watch football on television as their hearing counterparts; equally, they are less likely to want to play it than sit in front of a computer screen. Maybe football was important to the Deaf community in the past because there was little other choice in terms of sporting activity, and now that it is easier to keep in contact with deaf friends around the country, through the advances in technology such as textphones and e-mail, then the social attraction of football has also faded for deaf people. It may be a little premature to declare the death of deaf football just yet, but the game is most certainly under serious threat. Whether the game can regain its place at the very heart of the cultural life of the Deaf community remains to be seen.

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Notes

1 After Woodward, 1972.
2 A history of deaf players’ involvement in the professional game can be found in the Journal of Deaf History 2 (4), Summer 1999. Deaf players with professional clubs have included Billy Nesbitt (Burnley 1912-23); James McLean (Cardiff City 1923-26); Raymond Drake (Stockport County 1953-57).
4 Writers expressing such views include Corker, 1998; Lane, 1998; Ladd, 1996.
5 See for example the work of Padden and Humphries, 1988; Wilcox, 1989.
6 For example, the coverage given to Leeds and West Ham DFCs in the 1920s in the pages of British Deaf Times.
8 Davies, 1995.
9 Ladd, 1988, pp. 27-43.
12 Crow and Allan, 1994, pp.1-23.
14 Inglis, 1988.
15 Now called Langside College.
16 Glasgow Herald, 27 April 1874.
19 Deaf and Dumb Magazine, 1880, p. 120.
20 Interview with Sandy Brooks, Glasgow 1998.
21 British Deaf Times, 1905, p.162; 1908, p.271; 1926, p. 21;1927, p.140.
22 For example, in Glasgow, Hamilton, Derby and Doncaster.
23 As was the case in Liverpool and Edinburgh.
26 Deaf and Dumb Magazine, 1880, p. 120.
27 Lane, Hofmeister and Bahan, 1996: 30.
28 Professional clubs formed in the south of England around this period include
   Bristol Rovers 1884, Bristol City 1894, Millwall 1884, Portsmouth 1898 and
   Brighton 1900.
29 Established in 1889; see p. 47 below.
30 See the following section on league and cup competitions.
31 British Deaf Times, 1927 - 1932
32 British Deaf and Dumb Times, 1889, p.10.
33 British Deaf and Dumb Times, 1889, p.10.
34 British Deaf Times, 1927, pp.115-6.
35 British Deaf Mute, 1896, pp.175, 318.
36 British Deaf Times, was again advocating the merits of the scheme in 1905 and
   1925.
37 Pink, 1998a.
38 British Deaf Mute, 1893, p.102.
40 British Deaf Times, 1923, p.112.
41 Grant, 1990, pp. 142-151.
47 British Deaf Times, 1928, pp. 43-44; 1929, pp. 42, 115; 1930, pp. 117-118.
48 Now Liverpool Airport.
49 Deaf Quarterly News, June 1938, p.16.
51 Ladd, 1988, pp. 27-43.
52 ABC Deaf Sports, 1972, p.17.
55 Jackson, 1998a.
56 Interview with Tony Pink, Gravesend, 1998.
57 Interview with Roland Haythornthwaite, Otley, 1998.
60 Haythornthwaite, 1998.