



PLAYING THE GAME

The Footballer of Loos

On 25th September 1915, at the front line near the French village of Loos, where one of the biggest artillery barrages of World War One had begun almost a fortnight earlier, the men of the London Irish Rifles moved up to the front line under cover of the noisy darkness. While staring death in the face, the group of soldiers hatched a plan to dribble six footballs toward the German front line in a unique display of courage.

But on the eve of the battle of Loos their commanding officer rumbled their plan and shot five of the balls. However, the soldiers managed to keep one of the balls hidden. This was kept in the possession of the battalion's football team captain, Rifleman Frank Edwards. He had grown up as a football-obsessed youngster and lived close to Chelsea F.C.'s Stamford Bridge ground. He joined the London Irish at the Duke of York's barracks in Sloane Square, on 2nd August 1914. A year before, his wife Georgina had died during childbirth together with their unborn child, thus making him more determined to make a fresh start or at least meet his end in a blaze of glory. Now the moment had arrived and he was not going to be denied it. Edwards had deflated the last remaining ball and concealed it under his tunic. Shortly before zero hour, he re-inflated it and, defying orders, kicked off the 'Big Push' by punting the football into no-man's land.

He and his comrades, the London Irish, dribbled the ball towards the German lines screaming, "On the ball, London Irish!" as they advanced. For some of them it was to be their

last game. Edwards, who suffered a gunshot wound to his thigh, survived the charge. However, he suffered the effects of the gas, which had blown into the faces of the footballers, for the rest of his life.

The problems in Ireland had led to questions being asked about the loyalty of Irish regiments at the front so the 'Footballer of Loos' story was quickly seized upon for propaganda purposes. In October 1915, *The War Illustrated* newspaper featured the story with a subtle twist - their illustration placed an officer in Frank Edward's role! One man undoubtedly influenced by this version of the story was Captain Billy Nevill of the East Surrey Regiment, who would repeat Edward's daring deed on the first day of the battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916. Nevill purchased four balls, one for each of his platoons, and offered a prize for whoever could advance furthest into German lines. Nevill painted onto one: 'The Great European Cup. The Final. East Surrey's v Bavarians. Kick off at zero' and on another 'No Referee.' Nevill was to die in the attack on what would become one of the most infamous days in the history of the British army. Perhaps because of this, in later years the East Surrey's story stole much of the London Irish thunder.

Until recently Frank Edward's story had been completely forgotten until author Ed Harris, husband of Frank Edward's granddaughter, Susan, began doing some research. He found the original ball, which had been retrieved from the battlefield, at the London Irish barracks in Camberwell. It was in poor condition, but has since been restored to remind us of the amazing courage of the London Irish a century ago.



Frank Edwards 'The Footballer of Loos'.
Ed Harris



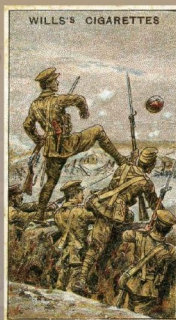
Captain Billy Nevill of the East Surrey Regiment



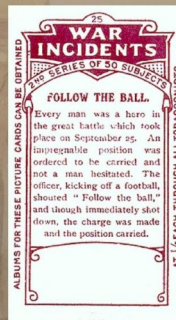
Recruitment poster for London Irish Rifles trivialising the 'drama' of war. Kensington & Chelsea Local Studies



Recruitment poster. Kensington & Chelsea Local Studies



The front of a Wills cigarette card, first issued in 1915 by WD & HO Wills



The reverse of a Wills cigarette card, first issued in 1915 by WD & HO Wills



Illustrations by Michael Foreman