



PLAYING THE GAME

Footballers' Battalion

The declaration of war in August 1914 coincided with the start of the 1914-1915 football season. As Lord Kitchener pushed for 100,000 new recruits to join the army, the Football League came under pressure to abandon the league programme so that both fans and players could 'play the greater game.'

Wellington's belief a century earlier that success on the battlefield could be traced back to the playing fields of Eton was still a widely accepted view among Britain's elite. Both *Mr Punch* and *The Times* depicted war in such a way. From a modern perspective it is hard to understand what appears to be the trivialisation of war. *The Times*, on the 24th November 1914, published a poem 'The Game' which made clear its expectations:

*'Come, leave the lure of the football field with its fame so lightly won,
And take your place in a greater game where worthier deeds are done.'*

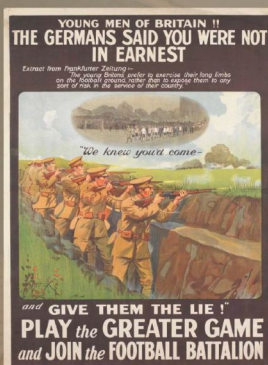
The 17th Football Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment was conceived by Fulham Mayor and Arsenal chairman, Henry Norris, and Brentford M.P. William Joynson-Hicks. Chelsea's gentleman centre forward, Vivian Woodward, joined the new battalion as an officer and marched around Stamford Bridge with members of the battalion appealing to fans to join up. The poor response from Chelsea F.C. fans appeared to be in direct contrast to successful recruitment drives among rugby players and sportsmen from public schools. A thinly disguised class bias seemed to depict followers of the working man's game as 'shirkers,' despite *The Chelsea Chronicle's* claims to the contrary. That 2,000 out of 5,000 professionals had already joined up, and over 300,000 amateur players enlisted, appeared to have escaped the notice of the critics.

One young lad who did heed the call was James Ridley. As a 13 year old living opposite Stamford Bridge, he had volunteered as a ball-boy, a first in the Football League. He had even sneaked into the first Chelsea F.C. team photograph so he could be seen with his idols. Ten years later, in 1915, he was serving alongside them in the trenches as a soldier in the Footballers' Battalion. He became a prisoner of war when he was captured at Cambrai in 1917, but he survived the war.

The 'Khaki Cup Final' was the last professional football game played during World War One and took place at Old Trafford on the 24th April 1915; Chelsea F.C. lost 3-0 to Sheffield United. Vivian Woodward had received special permission from his battalion commander to play, and raced up to Manchester only to give his place in the team to his replacement Bob Thompson, as he did not wish to deprive his fellow team-mate of a Cup Final medal.

With the temporary ending of professional football, players effectively had no choice but to join up. One such player was Jack Cock, who had grown up in Fulham before becoming a pre-war star with Huddersfield Town. He joined Woodward in the Footballers' Battalion, and at the end of the war joined Chelsea, scoring England's first post-war international goal.

Perhaps the most remarkable story associated with the Footballers' Battalion was that of former Spurs and Northampton professional Walter Tull. Britain's first black professional, outfield player, Tull also became Britain's first black combat officer, before his tragic death at the second battle of the Somme in March 1918. Second Lieutenant Tull confounded the social and class barriers of his era to succeed against all the odds.



Recruitment poster for the Footballers' Battalion. Imperial War Museum



Cartoon from the *Kentish Independent*, 1915. Peter Daniel Collection



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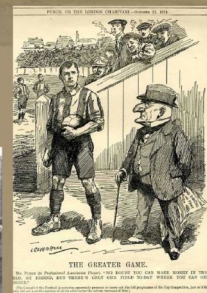
Second Lieutenant Tull of the Footballers' Battalion, 1917. Phil Vass/Finlayson Family Collection



Satirical recruitment postcard showing Kaiser Wilhelm being knocked into the goal by a footballer, 1915. Peter Daniel Collection



Chelsea hall boy, James Ridley, can be seen sneak into view (far right) in the very first Chelsea F.C. team group, 1905. Chelsea F.C.



The *Greater Game*, *Punch* vol.147, Oct 1914. City of Westminster Archives



Illustrations by Michael Foreman