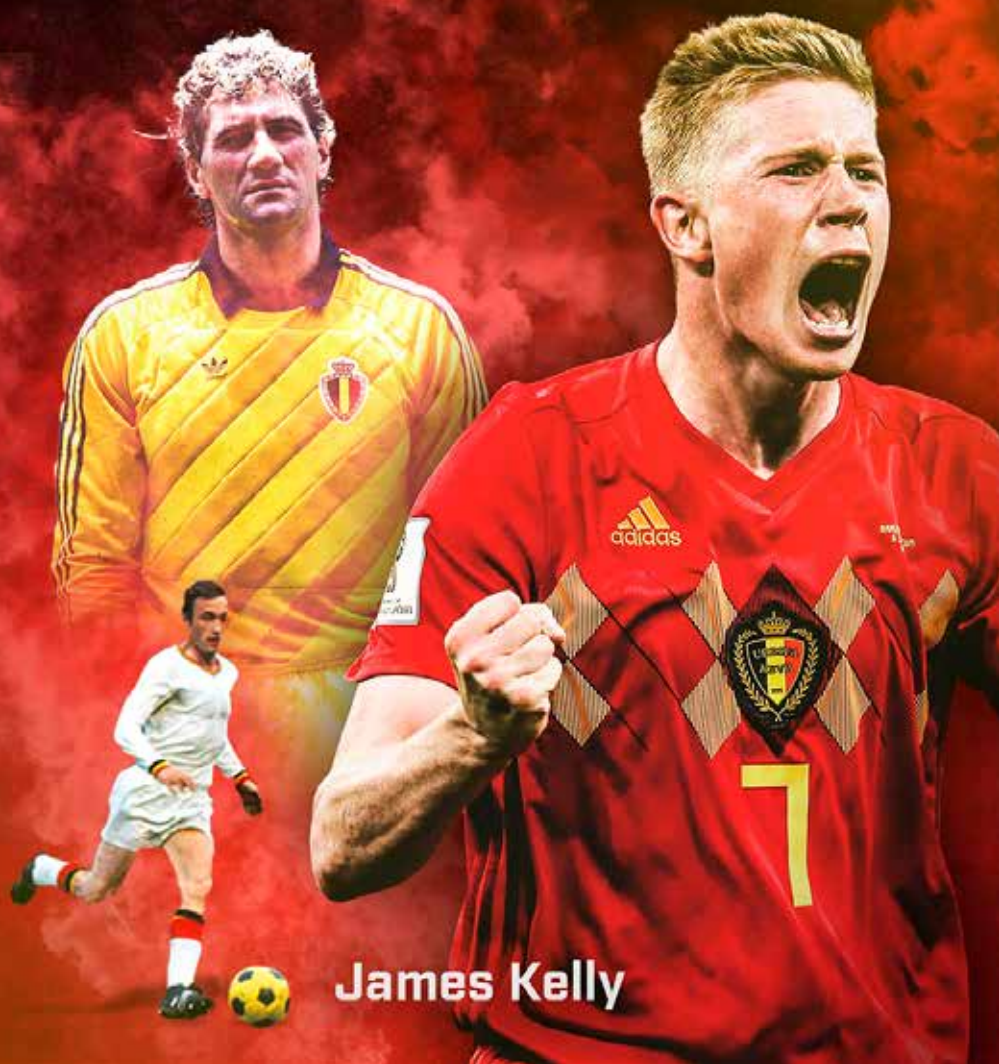


GOLDEN

Why Belgian Football is More
Than One Generation



James Kelly

GOLDEN

**Why Belgian Football is More
Than One Generation**

James Kelly



Contents

Acknowledgements	9
The English Football Pub	11
1. Origins	17
2. Purple.	28
3. Le Football Champagne	39
4. Roger the Shame	52
5. Elvis	62
6. The Austrian	75
7. The Mystic and the Snake	91
8. Bewildered	108
9. Tainted Glory.	123
10. Heysel	138
11. A Summer in Toluca	149
12. Malinwa	166
13. Enzo	183
14. Que Sera, Sera	198
15. Jean-Marc	210
16. The Fall	221
17. A New Approach.	234
18. Failure?	251
Appendix	261
Bibliography	271
Index	278

Origins

AN OLD lady sits on a park bench with her bichon frise gazing out on to the lake opposite. As a nearby road sign warns of deer for the next three kilometres, further along two builders are nearing completion of a driveway. Parents and children leave a primary school, nestled among a row of well-kept houses.

Strolling through Bois de la Cambre towards Brussels' Uccle district is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon, but suddenly, I see it. As if removing blinkers from a horse, the narrow street on which I have been travelling widens out. On my left, a blanket of trees is penetrated by a cycle path. On the other side is a car park, with a sign on the gatepost, 'Royal Racing Club De Bruxelles – Le Racing Club House'.

It also informs visitors of an on-site restaurant, but a bite to eat is not on my mind. Situated slightly behind two men playing a game of tennis is Stade du Vivier d'Oie. Also known by its Dutch name Stadion De Ganzenvijver, it was here on Sunday, 1 May 1904 that the Belgian national team played their first official football match.

As Brussels expanded, the open spaces of Uccle became a favourite destination for the wealthier contingent of life in the capital. Its location towards the outskirts of Brussels meant no duty had to be paid on alcohol, leading to a

series of bars and brasseries popping up. At the beginning of the 20th century it was the place to be for anyone who was anyone.

Racing Club, whose members also played cricket and tennis, built Stade du Vivier d'Oie and moved across Brussels in 1902. For the main stand they chose the medium of reinforced concrete, back then an expensive commodity. It was the very first time this method was used in a football stadium in mainland Europe, and at the time it was one of the most luxurious venues around.

In a plethora of firsts, Belgium's opponents were also playing their first official match. Mind you, it wasn't easy for France to field a team. At the time there were multiple French governing bodies for football, while some players encountered difficulty travelling to Brussels. Others couldn't get time off work, with two daring folk taking part without permission and having to get the press to refer to them by pseudonyms.

Approximately 1,500 spectators took in the 3-3 draw, the first international fixture in Europe between two independent states. The lead changed hands three times before Gaston Cyprès volleyed home an equaliser for France three minutes from time. As a result the one-off Évence Coppée Trophy, donated by a wealthy mining industrialist, was never claimed.

With farmers owning the surrounding land paid to keep the prying eyes of non-paying spectators away, the honour of scoring Belgium's first ever official goal fell on the shoulders of 22-year-old striker Georges Quérítet. Putting the hosts in front after just seven minutes, he was fittingly one of two members of Racing Club – one of Belgium's early footballing powerhouses – in the starting XI.

The first 15 league titles would be won by either Racing, FC Liègeois or fellow Brussels side Union Saint-Gilloise.

Utilising the country's small size and advanced railway network, the domestic competition began in 1895/96, making it the oldest in continental Europe. An initial seven-team round robin tournament was first won by FC Liègeois, fired on by the goals of top-scoring Englishman Samuel Hickson.

Like in many other European countries, football was introduced to Belgium by the British. Legend has it that Melle, a small town on the outskirts of Ghent, was the site of genesis. On 26 October 1863, coincidentally the same day as the founding of the FA in England, an Irish student named Cyril Bernard Morrogh took a ball with him to Jozefietencollege. This school contained many wealthy British students, who were instantly enamoured by the sport, and from here it spread.

Football was first reported in Brussels in 1865. Rodolphe Seeldrayers, who would later become president of both the Belgian FA and FIFA, recounted how his father Emile told him stories of matches played in an area just north of Uccle named Tenbosch. Three years later, an English shop was recorded as placing what is thought to be the first advert selling 'un foot-ball' in a Belgian newspaper.

Teachers at Anglican schools quickly included the sport in their athletic programmes, with several Brussels institutions playing games in Tenbosch. Meanwhile, Catholic colleges also embraced the sport, feeling it encouraged fair play and willpower.

Many of Belgium's first games took place at exclusive cycling clubs, with kick-about on the grass encompassed by the slopes of velodromes. The first Belgian competitors were the sons of doctors, lawyers and wealthy industrialists, who had learnt the game from British class-mates. Meanwhile, British residents in Antwerp and Liège, where there were expat communities of engineers and port officials, also began playing.

Geographically it is no surprise that Belgium was one of the first places in Europe to play football. Its location in the centre of the continent meant it was prone to adopting practices of neighbours. There was a similar influence in the uptake of cycling, Belgium's other main sporting passion, from the French during the Belle Époque era of the late 19th century.

In terms of organising themselves into football clubs, it is generally accepted that Royal Antwerp are the oldest in Belgium. Founded in 1880 by English students as Antwerp Athletic Club, they performed sport on the sandy plains around the northern docks, later moving to military training squares in the district of Wilrijk.

However, this is somewhat complicated by reports from 1882 referring to a Brussels Football Club. Antwerp only began playing football in 1887, which would therefore make this Brussels team older. Football historian Kurt Deswert explains a friend of his at Antwerp claims this club would have played rugby football and not association football, but tells me, 'I have very big doubts about this!'

Something not up for debate is that Antwerp were the first club to register with the Belgian FA. Founded as an athletic association on 1 September 1895 to administer the increasing number of clubs, this later splintered into the Union Belge des Sociétés de Football-Association (UBSFA).

However, like in France, rival organisations existed. To tie clubs down, Antwerp coach Alfred Verdyck came up with a system of registration numbers – 'stamnummer' in Dutch and 'matricule' in French. In December 1926 the UBSFA published an official list. As the first to register, and with no mixed interest at all, Verdyck's Antwerp were awarded number one. Daring Club de Bruxelles received number two, even though they were younger than both numbers three and four, Club Brugge and FC Liégeois.

Although to an outsider such numbers may seem trivial, in Belgium they are the stuff of folklore. Having a low figure next to your name proves you are a historic club, and also that you have not been forced to merge in times of financial difficulty, something that is common practice in Belgium.

While unique in European football, other aspects of the early game in Belgium have touched the entire continent. As football began to grow, so too did calls for increasing regulation of international matches. In April 1901, Dutch side HVV walked off the pitch after what they perceived to be biased refereeing towards Racing Club in the Coupe Van der Straeten Ponthoz.

Hosted by the extremely elitist Léopold Club de Bruxelles until 1923, the cup was one of a growing number of international competitions organised by Belgian clubs. The first edition in 1900 was dubbed the ‘continental championship’ in the press, featuring two Dutch sides and Swiss champions Grasshopper Club Zürich, alongside four Belgian qualifiers. Curiously the trophy was donated by a wealthy count, who had a son who would later marry into the Stella Artois family.

In Antwerp, Beerschot – who were founded in 1899 after virtually the entire team of bitter rivals Antwerp defected – tried to organise a similar competition in 1901. However, after a last-minute cancellation, it was decided to instead host a match against the Netherlands. Unfortunately, Dutch administrator Cees van Hasselt was only allowed to pick players from the second division, meaning Belgium won 8-0.

Despite predating the France game, this match is not recognised as official, since Belgium’s team contained English players. A common practice at the time, at the 1900 Olympics in Paris, Belgium’s squad contained an English goalkeeper and a Dutchman. Termed by the International

Olympic Committee as a 'mixed team', Belgium were never recognised for finishing third. Admittedly that sounds better than it was, as only two other sides took part.

Seeking more coordination across internationals, after the official match in Uccle, Belgian FA secretary-general Louis Mühlinghaus spoke with his French counterpart Robert Guérin. Mühlinghaus managed to convince his friend to set up a meeting three weeks later, at which the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, FIFA to you and me, was founded in Paris.

As modern football began to take shape, Belgium's national team were given a nickname that would stick: the Red Devils. This name originates from a match against the Dutch in 1906, which Belgium went into as huge underdogs. Despite the crushing win over the Netherlands some five years previously, Belgium had lost the two contests in 1905 by an aggregate of 8-1.

After a shock 5-0 win in Antwerp, Pierre Walckiers, editor in chief of the Belgian FA's official magazine, wrote, 'The Dutch were the big favourites; all that was needed to give new courage to our little Red Devils.'

Obvious connections can be made to the colour of the Belgian shirts, but the name actually stems from a racing driver. Several years earlier, on 29 April 1899, Belgian engineer Camille Jenatzy became the first man to break the land 100kph barrier. Jenatzy was renowned for his red beard and known as 'Le Diable Rouge' (the Red Devil). The speed of Belgium's play is said to have reminded Walckiers of Jenatzy zooming along in a car, and the rest is history.

Despite being a founding member of FIFA, the first 12 of Belgium's officially recognised internationals were played against either France or Holland. Owing to a home and away challenge match played annually until the 1960s, Belgium versus the Netherlands is the third most staged international fixture in history.

Meanwhile, a year after the Uccle debut, a rematch was staged with France that descended into comedy. On an extremely wet day the game started with only 21 players, as Belgium striker Gustave Vanderstappen arrived late. Seeldrayers had to referee the first 15 minutes, after the carriage driver of Englishman John Lewis, at that time regarded as the best official in the world and also a founder of Blackburn Rovers, got lost.

Continuing the theme, France's Georges Cozier had to leave with 25 minutes still to play, and his side already 4-0 down, in order to catch an 18-hour train back to his barracks. It was hardly a ringing endorsement of the goalkeeper's ability that France conceded fewer goals without him there. In the end, France lost 7-0.

The previous year, Cozier had become the first French footballer to play in England after he signed for Fulham. Despite introducing the game to Belgium, it was sides from this nation who caused the most trouble in Belgian football's early days. In April 1908 England won 8-2 in Brussels, before inflicting what is still Belgium's record defeat, 11-2, at White Hart Lane 12 months later.

Decimated by four and a half years of the First World War, in 1919 Belgium was awarded the following year's Olympic Games. Originally arranged for Berlin, an alternative venue had to be sought given the outcome of the conflict, and Antwerp was chosen as compensation for the suffering the Belgian people had endured.

The International Olympic Committee hoped that staging the Games would serve to reunite the world in the aftermath of the Great War, not to mention the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. In order to foster these ideals, they raised a flag with five rings, intended to represent Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas coming together. This now famous Olympic logo had been created in 1913, but was first flown above Antwerp's Het Kiel stadium.

Still home to Beerschot over a century later, the stadium was quickly given a Greek-inspired makeover as seating was expanded. It is possible that part of this redesign was worked on by renowned Scottish architect Archibald Leitch, who designed many of Britain's most famous stadiums, after he reportedly made several consultancy visits to Antwerp prior to the Games.

In an era when the concept of a World Cup was still a decade away, a total of 14 teams participated in that summer's football tournament. Despite losing 2-1 to Italy in the first round, the inclusion of Egypt made this the world's first intercontinental competition. Mühlhlinghaus was one of the first people to propose such an idea shortly after the formation of FIFA, but a lack of interest was quickly followed by him resigning and disappearing from football administration.

As hosts, Belgium received a bye for the first round, which featured Norway sensationally eliminating two-time winners Great Britain. In the quarter-finals the Red Devils defeated Spain, who only the day before had played their first ever international, against Denmark. Union's Robert Coppée scored a hat-trick in the 3-1 win, but reflecting the complex national identity, the presence of nine Brussels-based players caused large sections of the Antwerp crowd to boo before kick-off.

Belgium were drawn to face neighbouring Netherlands (it'll become a theme) in the semi-finals, winning 3-0 after a goalless first half. The scoring was opened just after the restart by Rik Larnoe, subjected to cheers as the only Beerschot player on the pitch.

The second goal came from Louis Van Hege, who later finished ninth in the two-man bobsleigh at the 1932 Winter Olympics. He was also pretty handy weaving around on the pitch, scoring nearly a century of goals at AC Milan, including five in one game against Juventus. Were it not

for the outbreak of the First World War, when he had to return to Belgium, Van Hege would have arguably become one of the Rossoneri's greatest ever players.

Mathieu Bragard sealed the result to emphasise Belgium's canter into the final, but playing against Czechoslovakia was anything but. Local demand for tickets was such that the ground was full an hour prior to kick-off. Estimates place the attendance at nearly double the 27,000 allocated places. Legend has it that some spectators were so determined to get in they even dug a secret tunnel underneath one stand.

Such extreme efforts would be worthwhile. Belgium took the lead after only six minutes, Coppée scoring his fourth of the tournament from the spot. This advantage was doubled on the half hour courtesy of a goal by Larnoe, and Belgium went on to win their first – and to date, only – tangible honour.

As newspaper *L'Auto* reported afterwards, 'The Belgian 11 proved splendid from start to finish, triumphant thanks to their speed and the fast and lucid design of their game, and through the efficiency of their unstoppable shots. The best team in the tournament won.'

The issue, however, was what actually constituted a 'finish'. For the first goal, goalkeeper Rudolf Klapka had been knocked over by a Belgian player. In the resulting melee, a defender stopped the ball with his hand. Then, just before half-time Czechoslovak full-back Karel Steiner kicked Coppée in the chest. He was sent off by referee Lewis, who this time had found a driver with a sense of direction. Enraged at the perceived bias of the now 65-year-old official, the remainder of the Czechoslovak team walked off with 39 minutes on the clock.

Their places were taken by the local crowd, who spilled on to the pitch in celebration. The motivation for this may have partly been that the Belgian press had portrayed

Czechoslovakia as an aggressor in the First World War. Technically this was not correct, as the nation had declared independence from Austria-Hungary in October 1918. However, given the impact of the conflict upon their homeland, many soldiers were in the stadium, which is said to have made the Czechoslovak team uncomfortable.

Still raging at Lewis, their delegation in Antwerp attempted to get the game annulled. Instead, the following day Czechoslovakia were thrown out of the tournament. Belgium's victory was allowed to stand, but it was to be a hollow one.

As football's popularity spread across the world, Belgium suddenly found themselves unable to compete. Paris 1924 wasn't so much a defence of the gold medal as a surrender, with an 8-1 loss to Sweden. Argentina also proved too strong in 1928's edition, and by the end of the decade the Red Devils had lost twice as many games as they had won.

Hoping to turn a corner, in 1930 Belgium celebrated 100 years of independence by inaugurating the Stade du Centenaire in Brussels. The Red Devils also became one of the first European teams to play at a FIFA World Cup, alongside France, Romania and Yugoslavia. Jules Rimet floated his idea for the tournament at the Antwerp Games, and, having initially been shot down in a similar fashion to Mühlinghaus, by the end of the decade got his way.

The location choice of Uruguay led to mass boycotting by European nations, especially given the world's troubled finances. The Wall Street Crash had taken place in the previous year, and being away from work for so long was impractical for many players.

All four European teams travelled to Montevideo aboard Italian ship *SS Conte Verde*, a journey that took two weeks. For Belgium, it was largely worthless as they lost both games – to the USA and Paraguay – and failed to

score a goal. Two Belgians would reach the final, however, as referee John Langenus officiated Uruguay's defeat of Argentina while compatriot Henri Christophe ran the line.

Belgium's challenge had been exacerbated by the fact their best player, Raymond Braine, was missing. A prolific striker, he had helped fire Beerschot to four league titles throughout the 1920s. Confusingly, Braine had been banned by the Belgian FA themselves, for opening a cafe.

Back then, football was an amateur activity in Belgium, with every player having some form of employment. Running a cafe was a popular option but Braine was ruled to be using his reputation to enhance profits, something outlawed at that time as an amateur. The whole situation is even stranger when you consider Braine's parents ran the cafe in Antwerp, and his brother Pierre was allowed to captain the Red Devils in Uruguay.

Feeling suitably aggrieved, Braine looked to take his talents abroad. He very nearly signed for Clapton Orient but saw that dream scuppered by work permit issues. Braine would eventually get to play in England, captaining a Rest of Europe line-up in a friendly in 1938.

In the absence of being able to move to London, the striker instead joined Sparta Prague, averaging more than a goal a game and winning two Czechoslovak league titles to become one of Sparta's greatest ever imports.

An *Antwerpenaar* through and through, in 1936 Braine returned to Het Kiel, where he won two further championships. In the near eight decades since, Beerschot have not won another league title.

Despite being exiled from the Red Devils for five years, it tells you everything about Braine's legacy that he was still voted Belgium's seventh-greatest player of the 20th century. As his country's first professional, he would kick off a long line of Belgian footballers making their mark around the world.