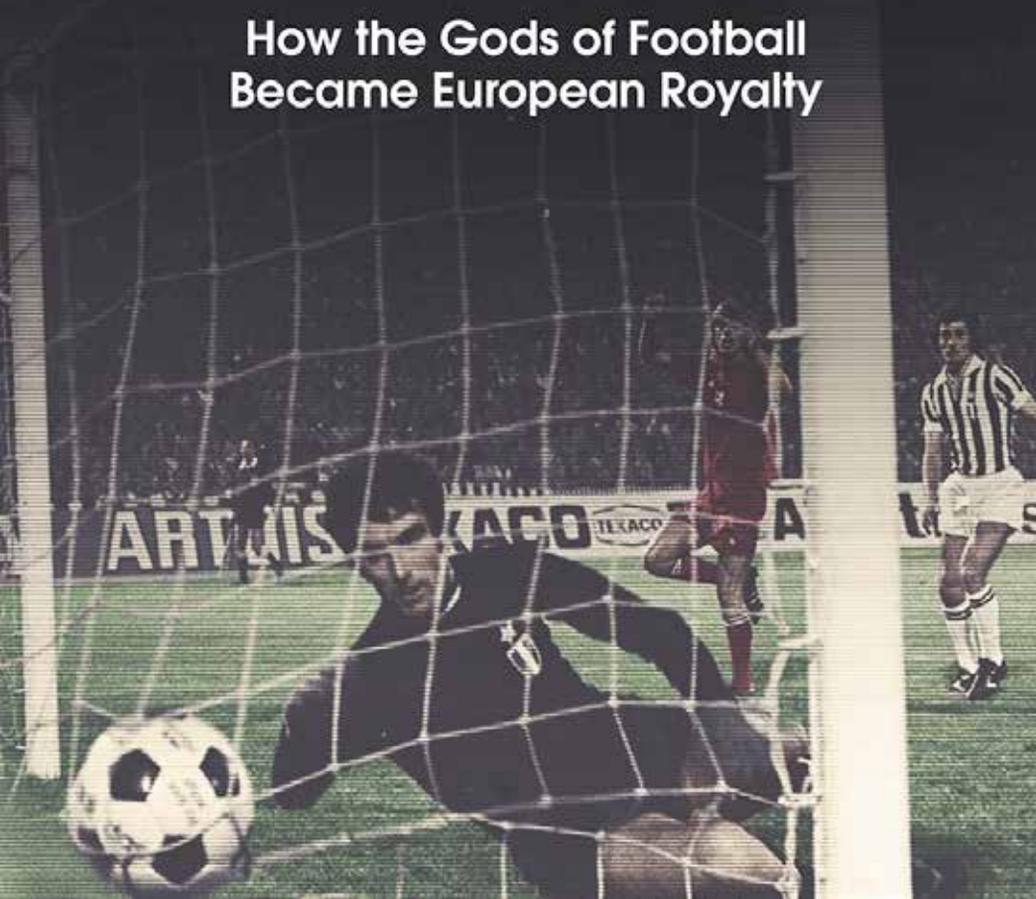


STEVEN SCRAGG



THE
UNDISPUTED
CHAMPIONS OF EUROPE

**How the Gods of Football
Became European Royalty**



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S T E V E N S C R A G G



Contents

Acknowledgements	8
Introduction.	9
1. Who Do You Think You Are?	17
2. Hampden Park, 1960	29
3. A Team of Light	38
4. Milanese Magic	48
5. Immortals	79
6. 1968/69 – The Shifting Tectonic Plates of the European Cup.	95
7. Lowlands Uprising.	114
8. Bavarian Bravado	126
9. With Such Simplicity, the European Cup Surely is Won	139
10. Midland Bank.	165
11. With or Without Keegan	226
12. Heysel	238
13. The Years of the Ban.	253
14. Belgrade Calling.	277
15. The Holy Grail	287
Afterword: A Super League of Their Own.	309

Who Do You Think You Are?

IT WAS within the pages of the French sports weekly *Le Miroir des sports* in 1934 that Gabriel Hanot suggested football's future lay within the concept of a cross-border European club competition. Not a cup competition, but a league.

Hanot had put plenty of thought into his idea. Under his plan, the top two teams in each national league would advance to a pan-European league for the following season before returning to domestic duties 12 months later, replaced in Hanot's league by two more teams per nation from the previous various domestic campaigns.

Some 87 years later, football threatened to tear itself apart all in the name of a cross-border Super League. Nothing in the sport is as new as you might think it to be.

While there had been a series of other attempts to create compelling cross-border competitions before, the Mitropa Cup being the most cohesive entity, the concept of challenge games between teams from different nations can be traced back to a time before the inception of league systems.

Added to this, as soon as football had gained organised traction in most industrialised nations it did not take long

before touring clubs set off to conquer others. Rather than love thy neighbour, it was a case of beat thy neighbour, while also enjoying the gracious hospitality on offer.

By 1887, Aston Villa and Hibernian were facing off in the self-proclaimed 'World Championship', the first of a cluster of games that was eventually contested by England and Scotland's respective league champions.

In the 20th century, 1909 and 1911 saw the playing of the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy in Turin, which was comfortably won on both occasions by West Auckland, the second of these successes coming with a 6-1 victory against Juventus. Classed as an international tournament by some football historians, it was even dramatised by Tyne Tees Television in 1982, in a production entitled *The World Cup: A Captain's Tale*, starring Nigel Hawthorne, Dennis Waterman, and Tim Healy, among a list of other fine actors.

Interrupted by the Second World War, beyond his 1934 musings it would take 21 years before a heavily tinkered version of Hanot's vision was put into operation, inspired for launch by a series of high-profile floodlit friendlies during 1953 and 1954.

A game at Molineux particularly caught the imagination, between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Budapest Honvéd in December 1954, which was broadcast live by the BBC. It was the first of a hat-trick of such matches in as many days, the others being West Ham United vs Milan and Chelsea vs Vörös Lobogó, one of the many pseudonyms of the great MTK Budapest.

Wolves were no stranger to games against continental opposition, something they were embracing even before the arrival at the club of Stan Cullis, but the installation of floodlights in 1953 brought with it a new impetus. The evocative feel of a classical European night beneath artificial light was broadcast live to the nation, while 55,000 spectators

clicked through the Molineux turnstiles to drink in the experience for themselves. A month earlier, the visitors had been Spartak Moscow. These were games which ensured the floodlights soon paid for themselves.

Put into context, in an era in which the FA Cup was of vital importance and enjoyed massive popularity, two months later, when Wolves welcomed Charlton Athletic to Molineux in the fifth round on a Saturday afternoon, there were 6,000 fewer paying customers than there had been for their friendly against Honvéd. Even the visit of Arsenal in the fourth round had attracted a smaller gate than the great Hungarians did.

Classed by many as an unofficial world championship match, Wolves' victory against a team which boasted the presence of six members of the Hungarian national team who had helped to defeat England 6-3 at Wembley a little under a year earlier, was used as irrefutable proof of English football's continued imperialism over the game.

Hanot and others were less convinced and renewed their calls for a Europe-wide cup competition, imploring that one game on a far from perfect English winter pitch was not representative of a footballing summer of pomposity. What Wolves really needed to do was to travel to Budapest, Moscow, and Milan, and show that they could do it there too.

What Honvéd brought with them was an air of mystique, these games coming eight years after Dynamo Moscow's magnificent British tour, during which they faced Chelsea, Cardiff City, Arsenal, and Rangers.

While the British public were certainly displaying an appetite for matches against mysterious continental opposition, the bureaucrats who ran the game had other ideas. The English and the Scottish, notorious when it came to bristling at new ideas, had only relented to re-joining FIFA in 1946, along with the Irish and Welsh associations, having been in exile since

1928. Nor had this been the first time the home nations had walked away from the world game's governing body.

Hanot had argued against this exile but it was with it in mind in 1934 that he would have his work cut out in obtaining the involvement of British clubs for his European league. A prickly yet visionary character, he had been a fine footballer in his own right then later the coach of the French national team, and turned his hand to journalism too, becoming the editor of the influential newspaper *L'Équipe*, where he anonymously lambasted his own management in print.

Finally the European Cup was born, proposed to the UEFA congress of March 1955 and ratified the following month. In Jacques Ferran, Hanot had found a kindred footballing spirit, and together they are credited as the founding fathers of the tournament, Hanot driven by his long-held vision and Ferran by the notion that South America had beaten Europe to the punch in creating a continental club competition of purpose.

For their knowledge, passion, commitment, and administrative skills, Hanot and Ferran would be at the forefront of *L'Équipe's* organisation of the first half-decade of the European Cup.

Up and running for the 1955/56 season, true to form, English football shunned the new venture, with the champions Chelsea being pressed not to take part. Not until the era of the Champions League would Stamford Bridge host games from Europe's premier tournament.

With the first five years of the European Cup operating on an invitational basis, when the Scottish champions Aberdeen followed the example of Chelsea in turning down their opportunity to take part, it eventually fell to fifth-placed Hibernian to accept the invitation.

Progressives in British football might have been in the minority, but those who were sold on the idea were in

possession of great influence. At Wolves, Stan Cullis was under no illusions just how important the infant European competition was, and how combined with increasing television interest the future was plain to see. Manchester United's Matt Busby was another to be attracted to the challenge.

Up to this point, English football had been quite happy with its position as the givers of the game to the world, spreading the word as part of the industrial revolution and being the benevolent missionaries, drifting through all manner of global seaports, building railway systems and raiding the natural resources of countless nations, while leaving them the gift of football as recompense.

The problem came when many of those nations took to football with a skill, zeal, thirst and vision that often superseded the motherland. When it came to the Football Association, the British authorities were incensed by movements and inventions such as FIFA, UEFA, the World Cup, European club competition, and the European Championship.

There was an oft-repeated reticence to take part that was nothing short of damaging. As the footballing world turned, the English dug their heels in and refused to be party to these new and unsettling innovations. The FA was not for rocking the boat it felt it had constructed. It looked at the altering landscape and promptly took its ball home.

Difficulties in obtaining the involvement of teams for the inaugural European Cup was not solely confined to the British, however. Of the 16 teams to accept the first wave of invitations, only seven of them were their nation's reigning domestic champions.

Hibs were rewarded for their enthusiasm and would go on to become the first British team to contest a European Cup semi-final, where they were defeated by the enigmatic Stade de Reims.

Reims would contest the final in 1956, and again in 1959. A team frozen in time, by 1964 they had been shockingly relegated from the French First Division just two years beyond the last of their six league titles, from where they would sink into semi-obscurity. They have periodically returned to the top flight but also suffered a 33-year exile during which they almost ceased to exist, befalling liquidation and embracing rebirth in 1992.

In the formative years of the European Cup, however, Reims were the essence of French football, boasting the skills of Raymond Kopa, a player so impressive that Real Madrid would swoop for him beyond the 1956 European Cup Final.

After three glory-laden years at the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, Kopa made the return transfer to Reims after the two teams had again faced one another in the 1959 European Cup Final. He would remain dedicated to the club for the remainder of his career, even sticking with them in relegation.

Kopa was not the only legendary figure to star for Reims. To cushion the blow of his transfer to Madrid, Just Fontaine arrived from Nice, while they were also served with distinction by Dominique Colonna, Roger Marche, Robert Jonquet, Armand Penverne, Jean Vincent, and Roger Piantoni. For a while, they also had the future French national team manager Michel Hidalgo.

One of the great enigmas of European football, these two European Cup Finals came within the eye of the Reims storm. Those six league titles were won within a 14-season span, between 1948/49 and 1961/62, a period in which they also won the Coupe de France twice.

Shining brightly for a decade and a half, the way they faded was stunning, but in 1956 they came desperately close to setting an alternative landscape to the one that Madrid sculpted. Twice

leading the first European Cup Final, Reims disorientated Madrid in the opening ten minutes at the Parc des Princes, cutting a swathe through the Spanish side's defence.

Michel Leblond became the first European Cup Final goalscorer, catching out Juan Alonso at his near post with only six minutes on the clock, while it was a gift from the Madrid goalkeeper that handed Janusz Templin the second goal just four minutes later. By the half-hour mark the scores were level, Alfredo Di Stéfano slamming one in from close range after an intricate build-up, and Héctor Rial doing likewise 16 minutes later.

Hidalgo restored Reims's lead shortly after the hour, with a glancing header, yet within five minutes Marquitos had claimed a fortuitous equaliser. From there, Madrid ended the game the stronger of the two teams and it fell to Rial to strike the winning goal.

Madrid's success in the first European Cup Final came by the narrowest of margins, leading only after scoring the winning goal and having trailed for a third of the game. Fate smiled upon them and they used that momentum to take advantage for the next four years.

It had not been the only sliding door that Madrid had worked their way through in that inaugural European Cup campaign, as in the quarter-final against Partizan, a 4-0 first-leg victory was very nearly overturned in the second leg, when the Yugoslavs won 3-0. The two teams would later face one another again, in the 1966 final.

Another massive set of games were then played in the semi-final against AC Milan. There was almost 130,000 in attendance at the Santiago Bernabéu for the first leg in what should forever stand as the stadium's record attendance. A 4-2 victory for the hosts left much still to be played for in the return.

European Cup fever was running rampant in the Spanish capital, yet in Milan it was still to fully catch on in terms of enthusiasm. Only 30,000 turned up at the San Siro to see I Rossoneri claw back to within a goal of taking the tie to a play-off match, on an occasion when the Italian champions were awarded two penalties for the vaguest of infringements. A sizeable contingent of travelling Madrid supporters had been in attendance to see their team reach the final.

Three years later, it was less of a contest as Madrid eased to a sedate 2-0 victory over Reims at the Neckarstadion in Stuttgart. The French side never recovered after conceding to Mateos in the first minute, and it was the same player who won yet missed a penalty not long after.

Kopa, given no quarter by his former team-mates, was put out of proceedings for a spell before the interval, falling to an uncompromising challenge from Vincent but eventually returning to limp through the rest of the game.

With Di Stéfano hitting Madrid's second goal, via a low drive from outside the penalty area just two minutes after the restart, it was enough to deflate Reims, who were overrun by their opponents for the remainder.

Again there was a fork in the road on the way to the final, where Madrid could have been deflected away from their stranglehold on the tournament. A family affair, a neighbourhood spat. Atlético Madrid made a wonderful nuisance of themselves, taking the semi-final to a third game, at Real Zaragoza's La Romareda, where they were narrowly beaten 2-1. Reims, too, had dived with an earlier exit when forced to fight back from a 2-0 first-leg reversal against Standard Liège in the quarter-finals.

These formative years of the European Cup were undeniably monopolised by Madrid's successes. Between the two finals won by defeating Reims, they had beaten Fiorentina

in the 1957 final, within the comfort of their own Santiago Bernabéu home, and Milan a year later in a classic final at the Heysel Stadium.

Fiorentina had been stubborn opponents, with their goalkeeper Giuliano Sarti in a determined mood. It took an erroneously awarded penalty to break his resistance midway through the second half, converted by Di Stéfano.

With the entire complexion of the game changing, the Italians were forced to go on the front foot and Alonso was made to work. Yet it was Madrid who struck a second goal, on the breakaway, as Paco Gento clipped the ball over the advancing Sarti when put clean through with 15 minutes left. The unfortunate Fiorentina goalkeeper would return to European Cup Finals and enjoy later success with Internazionale.

For Madrid, it meant the further growth of their burgeoning legend having beaten Manchester United in the semi-final, Matt Busby having ignored the suggestions of English football's rule-makers not to take part. It was where Di Stéfano and Bobby Charlton crossed paths for the first time and an enduring mutual respect was born, on the same pitches that the ethereal Duncan Edwards worked his monochrome and haunting magic.

A year later, at the same stage of the tournament, while Madrid were enjoying a formulaic run to yet another final Manchester United were paired with Milan. Along with seven of his team-mates, Edwards would not play a part, however, each of them victims in the Munich air disaster. The 21-year-old had hung on to life for 15 days until succumbing to his injuries on 21 February 1958.

Forever the committed pencil pushers, the Football Association denied Manchester United the services of Charlton for the semi-final games against Milan, instead insisting he be called to international duty during an era in which club games

overlapped with internationals. After a spirited 2-1 win for United in the first leg at Old Trafford, the Serie A champions were too strong at the San Siro.

In Brussels, it was Madrid who prevailed once again, twice coming from behind to defeat the Milan of Cesare Maldini, Nils Liedholm, and Juan Alberto Schiaffino.

It was Schiaffino who opened the scoring just before the hour with a curled effort that evaded the despairing dive of Alonso. Di Stéfano was again seemingly Madrid's saviour with his 74th-minute equaliser, yet it was a goal that sparked a wild five minutes in which two more were scored.

First, Ernesto Grillo gave Milan the advantage once again from distance, before Rial looped in Madrid's second leveller. With Madrid utilising their greater experience in the big moments, it was left to Gento to roll in the winning goal in extra time.

As impressive as this all-encompassing domination of Madrid's was, the European Cup was already becoming a wonderfully layered competition and its first playing certainly turned heads and changed minds. In 1956/57, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, England, Luxembourg, Romania, and Turkey all joined the party. Madrid aside, who were granted entry as holders, all participants had indeed won their respective domestic league title, although Galatasaray's was more of a provincial Istanbul-based competition.

It was a marked contrast to the 1955/56 interest in participation. Suddenly, after the success of the inaugural playing of the tournament, no club seemed blasé enough to decline their invitation for the second event.

By 1957/58, Ireland, Northern Ireland, and East Germany were now on board. Turkey, however, fumbled their spot in the tournament, with the Turkish FA not being swift enough to register Beşiktaş in time for the draw.

Again, it was in the main domestic champions taking part, yet with Madrid having completed a European Cup and La Liga double, 1956/57 La Liga runners-up Sevilla were allowed entry, upon which they were ruthlessly beaten in the quarter-final by the holders.

Meanwhile, in Poland, Gwardia Warszawa did not win the Ekstraklasa but still took part in the European Cup. To offset the unease of their participation, Gwardia were then knocked out in a play-off, on the toss of a coin, against Wismut Karl Marx Stadt, when the second leg of their tie was abandoned at 100 minutes due to a floodlight failure. The East German team had procured their equaliser in the 90th minute to take the game into extra time.

Added to this, it was also the first time that Benfica and Ajax took part, while Milan required a play-off to progress past Rapid Wien, and when Shamrock Rovers faced Manchester United at a Dalymount Park without floodlights, the first leg of their first round tie did not have a half-time break. The players simply swapped ends and played on. A fatigued Rovers had held the visitors to only a 1-0 half-time advantage but they capitulated during the second half, eventually going down 6-0. In the second leg at Old Trafford, with floodlights and a half-time interval, Rovers put up strong resistance and Busby's side only managed to win 3-2.

In 1958/59, Greece and Finland took up their right to places in the tournament for the first time, although Olympiacos withdrew when drawn to face the Turkish champions Beşiktaş, who had gained entry by winning the second, and last, Federation Cup tournament. It was a success that went unrecognised as an official Turkish title until 2002.

Manchester United were given a special invite to take part as a gesture in support of the club in the wake of the tragic events in Munich. In typically draconian fashion, the

FA prevented them from taking up the offer, and unlike in 1956/57 this time the club did not ignore the will of their governing body.

Again, just as in 1956/57, Real Madrid completed a European Cup and La Liga double, thus Atlético Madrid, as runners-up in the league also represented Spain.

While most nations' league champions took up those precious European Cup berths, the Ekstraklasa continued to be something of a renegade, with Polonia Bytom taking Poland's place, from a sixth-place finish. This was also the season in which Juventus took part for the first time.

All the while, the European Cup was working its way into the soul of football, proving to be such a success that a secondary tournament by the name of the European Cup Winners' Cup was already on the drawing board, and the more cumbersome Inter-Cities Fairs Cup began to streamline itself.

European club football was here to stay. Even the British Isles had belatedly caught the bug, and Hampden Park was allotted the hosting rights for the 1960 European Cup Final. Now all it needed was for a history-defining game to take place and the deal would be sealed.