

Extraordinary but true stories from over a century of football.

By Andrew Ward

Sheffield, November 1879

In January 1879 Cetewayo, the Zulu King, marshalled some 50,000 warriors to repel the British army's invasion of Zululand. The Zulus fought with assegais, spears and ox-hide shields, and wore uniforms that were no more than a tuft of hair acting as a loincloth, but were well organized and disciplined. The British completely underestimated them. After bloody battles at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, it wasn't until August that the Zulu force was overcome. The British army lost over 1,300 men, about 1,000 natives and the French Prince Imperial, who was in their charge. Zulu loss of life was even greater. The Zulu War also heralded the breakdown of the Zulu Kingdom. Cetewayo was captured, British Zululand was eventually handed over to the colony of Natal and it became part of the Republic of South Africa.

Just ten weeks after the Wolseley's settlement had ended the Zulu War, a team of Zulu warriors arrived at Sheffield's Bramall Lane by Hansom cab. They bore names like Cetewayo, the great king himself, Sirayo, a famous chieftain, and Dabulamanzi, Cetewayo's brother. They left their assegais and shields on the touchline, took on the best players in Sheffield, which was the centre of world soccer, and beat them 5-4. Cetewayo, now in his 50s, did very well against Mosforth, the England international winger.

Perhaps I should point out that the Zulus were only Zulu in name. They were not black men but white soccer players, faces and hands corked, bodies covered with black jerseys and stockings, feathers round their heads and white beads around their necks. The Sheffield players complained that some of the burnt cork rubbed off during their jostling in the match; they needed a better bath than normal.

The players were announced with Zulu names, but Dabulamanzi, for instance, was really Jack Hunter, one of the best Scottish players of the generation. The game was played to raise money for the widows and orphans of soldiers killed in the Zulu War, and a crowd of around 2,000 contributed to the cause. The Zulu warrior team, formed by Mr Brewer of Fargate, had already played one game at Scarborough. Now, encouraged by the success in Sheffield, they began to tour the region, visiting places such as Barnsley and Chesterfield. It became an exhibition team, masquerading, experimenting more and more with war paint, frolicking and clowning. They never lost a game.

After a few months the Sheffield FA began to disapprove. A storm broke when Jack Hunter was dropped from a North-South representative game, because he had played in a Zulu game in Scotland. W. Pierce Dix of the Sheffield FA wrote to the local newspaper in January 1881 to explain the action: 'The Zulus were going about the country playing matches in a manner which in the opinion of the committee was calculated to degrade the game and bring discredit upon those connected with it; and further, that these players were receiving payment for playing'.

Zulu players were warned that they would be barred from representative games and FA cup ties. The team disbanded. They hung up their assegais and shields forever. The next year, Cetewayo visited London as part of his temporary exile. Dressed in European clothes, he was a popular figure with great authority, dignity and adaptability. In another life he might have made a football manager.