

*The Anglo-Italian Cup had a pretty chequered history, and for ten years it was played between non-League clubs. Here is a brief review of that fascinating period.*

In the pantheon of defunct football competitions, the Anglo-Italian cup polarises opinion like few others. An arbitrary tournament that endured low crowds and media indifference, it also offered smaller English sides the chance to play competitive European matches and experience the novelty of a continental atmosphere. Originally instituted for professional members, the concept was at its most intriguing between 1976 and 1986 when relaunched for non-League clubs, producing a raft of improbable encounters whose details are often airbrushed from history.

The genesis of the Anglo-Italian Cup can be traced to Swindon Town's Football League Cup triumph in 1969. The winners should have qualified for a place in the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup but, like Queens Park Rangers two years earlier, *the Robins* were denied entry as third-tier clubs were not eligible to participate. It fell to the entrepreneurial Calabrian football agent Gigi Peronace, a broker of high profile transfers between British and Italian clubs, to offer a solution. Peronace organised a two-legged 'Anglo-Italian League Cup Final' between Town and *Coppa Italia* winners, AS Roma. The Wiltshire side, with an honours list largely restricted to county cups, pulled off an unlikely 5-2 aggregate win.

The fixture convinced the respective authorities to inaugurate the Anglo-Italian Cup the following year, featuring six invitational teams from each country. Initially games were held in the summer months, providing an opportunity to generate extra revenue and appraise squads. However, interest soon waned. Hampered by hooliganism (the first final in 1970 between Swindon Town and Napoli was abandoned after crowd trouble) and a byzantine scoring system, the tournament was wound up in 1973, only to be revived three years later in semi-professional format. The seemingly bold and experimental move had precedence. Predating the Anglo-Italian Cup was another Gigi Peronace innovation, the *Coppa Ottorino Barassi*, contested between the winners of the English Amateur Cup and the Italian Amateur Cup and named after Dr Ottorino Barassi, president of the Italian Amateur Football League. Leytonstone were the inaugural winners in 1968, beating S.T.E.F.E.R Roma on away goals.

Pairing provincial part-timers from two vastly different nations made for an inevitable clash of cultures. Skelmersdale United's Barassi Cup Final first leg home tie against Monte Belluna in 1971 set the tone for what might lie ahead. The Lancastrians' post-match hospitality – pork pies and sandwiches on a pool table at the local pub – proved a stark contrast to the lavish chandelier-lit banquet held in Italy a fortnight later. Not that a decade of Mediterranean ceremony drastically civilised English attitudes. In 1981, Southern Leaguers Poole Town and Oxford City, the latter managed by Bobby Moore and Harry Redknapp, travelled by coach to Civitanovese for a civic reception, carrying a boxed presentation plaque for the host president. At some point on the long journey, Redknapp secretly switched the gift with an item of underwear. It was only a fortuitous last-minute check that prevented a diplomatic incident.

Unfortunately, the more sinister side of the competition surfaced after Poole Town beat Civitanovese 2-1. "When we arrived with our police escort, the town centre was absolutely packed" recalls Poole Town chairman Chris Reeves. "Clearly the game was a big deal. To say the locals were partisan is something of an understatement. The hospitality and bonhomie quickly disappeared after we won. We couldn't leave quick enough." Incidents of hostility were by no means isolated. Enfield's match at Pistoiese in June 1976 was abandoned after manager Fred Callaghan ordered his players off in the second half following a constant barrage of fouls and abusive behaviour from their Italian counterparts. The decision almost sparked a riot. "I was one of four Enfield supporters who found refuge after the game in the dressing room area, having been escorted there by gun-wielding police

who realised the crowd were a little unhappy, “says Steve Small. “It took us three hours to escape from the ground in police cars after home fans surrounded the team coach.”

The Italians certainly took the cup seriously. National team manager and future World Cup winner Enzo Bearzot even attended a tie between Cremonese and Nuneaton Borough. English officials were also keen to acknowledge the significance of the event. Hungerford Town’s touching souvenir brochure from 1981 has Chairman Ron Tarry explain how the second group game at Bulpit Lane “will provide football enthusiasts in the district with the unique opportunity to see an International Cup fixture on their doorstep.” He also thanks nearby Swindon Town for allowing use of the County ground for Hungerford’s opening match against Francavilla, presumably one of the few occasions in history an event has been relocated to Swindon to add a touch of glamour.

Sutton United have especially fond memories of the tournament, winning the final 2-1 in Chieti in 1979 wearing England shirts gifted from The FA. Fans celebrated with their heroes to the backdrop of the Montagne del Morrone mountain range. A far cry from the usual Isthmian League vistas of Walthamstow and Dagenham. That United were the only English non-League winners of the Anglo-Italian cup pointed to one of its biggest failings: The Italians were simply too strong. Although *Serie C* was semi-professional at the time, the disparity was obvious. For illustration, the 1978 final saw Udinese beat Bath City 5-0. Two years later, Udinese were in *Serie A* holding champions Intenaitonalze to a draw, while Bath City were playing Bangor City and Redditch United in the Alliance Premier League.

From 1982, the competition was reduced to four teams and lost any lingering sense of prestige. The English entrants were increasingly drawn from the lower reaches of the pyramid and included long since disbanded outfits like RS Southampton and Woodford Town. It limped on until 1986 by which point few could see what purpose was being served. A brief resurrection in the 1990s, this time with professional clubs, did little to rekindle enthusiasm. Nobody could have been surprised. The Anglo-Italian Cup belonged to a different time with different priorities. It would be anachronistic in the modern game. Semi-professional football in particular has too many pressing concerns to be distracted by frivolous overseas trips. It may be a sad indictment of the times, but any fan hoping to watch a non-League player perform abroad in the near future is better served watching an episode of *Love Island*.

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**Note to editors:**

- Mike is Campaign Manager for Non-League Day. This year’s event takes place on 13<sup>th</sup> October. <http://www.nonleagueday.co.uk/>
- You can follow Mike on Twitter: [@mike\\_bayly](https://twitter.com/mike_bayly)
- Mike is working on a new book about Britain’s favourite football grounds. Release date is scheduled for late 2018/early 2019. More information can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/100GroundsProject>