

THE FRENCH MENACE; THE MIGRATION OF BRITISH PLAYERS TO FRANCE IN THE 1930s

In the spring of 1932 the pages of the national and sporting press in England informed readers that domestic football was under threat from the 'French Menace'. This comprised a well-publicised, but rather futile, attempt to attract two of Chelsea's star players, Tommy Law and Hugh Gallacher, to play in the newly formed French professional league, effectively tearing up their English contracts in return for a reportedly large sum of money. The French Menace followed the 'American Menace' and the 'Irish Menace', occasions when British players had been induced to break their contracts and migrate to play in the American Soccer and Irish Free State Leagues. The potential migration of players was a menace because in each case, initially at least, there was a threat to the fundamental structures that enabled clubs to control their players: the retain-and-transfer system and (in England) the maximum wage. The British associations were passing through an isolationist phase and had left FIFA, hence agreements on player transfers only held on transactions between the Home Countries. A player moving to a club in another association could do so, in theory, without hindrance and without the payment of a transfer fee. In practice, as each 'menace' arose the FA was forced to reach agreements with local bodies to ensure that players could be held to their contract.

Football in France was nominally amateur prior to 1932, but this concealed the advent of a form of professionalism that had gathered pace in the years after the First World War. Certainly by 1925 many of the leading clubs were effectively professional even if the players were registered as amateurs. As debate over the introduction of professionalism proceeded matters took a step forward when the Peugeot backed club FC Sochaux began recruiting British players following the appointment of an Englishman, Victor Gibson as coach towards the end of 1929. The club instituted La Coupe Sochaux in 1930-31 and by early 1932 the authorities had agreed to introduce a new national league for the 1932-33 season. This initially comprised 20 clubs divided into two sections, with the sectional winners playing off to decide the champions. For 1933-34 this was altered to a two-division structure along the lines of the Football League with a total of 37 clubs. For the inaugural season, each club was bound to play at least eight professionals in each game, with four foreign players allowed in the line-up, although there was no restriction on the numbers a club could sign.

I shall begin by considering the nature of the British players who were attracted to France during this period: the numbers involved, the level at which they had previously played in Britain and other common characteristics. I shall then consider why these players moved across the Channel: problems they faced, how long they stayed and what success they enjoyed. Following this I will consider how the migration to France compared with to similar moves to the USA and the Irish Free State, before considering the significance of what may be termed the Nîmes Affair involving Law and Gallacher.

During the period prior to 1932 there were a number of English players who moved to France, most were probably of a status that would be considered part-time professional in Britain, with the amount of 'work' they were required to carry out often very limited. The first of these is generally considered to have been Victor Gibson who had previously played for Plumstead before joining Sète, where he was also employed by the club chairman in his shipyard. In the early 1920s Sète became known as a team that recruited English players and a string of men made their way to the Mediterranean club, which soon boasted one of the strongest teams in France. Amongst these was Billy Cornelius who joined Sète in 1922 before moving on to Alès as player-coach. Cornelius was from the Erith area and when it came to looking for some English talent he returned home and recruited Bob Smoker, a former Erith & Belvedere player in the summer of 1928. Soon a small colony of English players had grown up in the south-east of France, with Edward Skiller, Dave Harrison and Bill Barrett at Sète, Smoker, Billy West and Sid Skinner at Alès, Ted Donaghy and Stan Hillier at AS Cannes and Charlie Withington at Nîmes. There were others in the north of the country, for example, William Hewitt and George Berry at Racing Club de Roubaix. In general these players had held amateur status and had previously played for clubs in Kent or the south-east of England. Only four appear to have previously enjoyed Football League experience, all of whom were associated with AS Cannes: Donaghy and Hillier (both former Gillingham players), John Coshall (West Ham) and



Willie Aitken (Newcastle, Preston and Norwich). Others had held amateur status without making it to the first team including Sid Skinner (at Charlton) and Bob Smoker (West Bromwich Albion). However, after Gibson took over at Sochaux a string of players went over, often for very short periods, even a single match, as the club pushed the barriers towards full professional status. Recruitment seems to have been mostly by word of mouth, a typical case being that of Ernie Payne, a former Woking player, who moved to Roubaix in 1928 after being invited by a contact who had studied at Oxford University and whose father owned a large factory in the city. He also signed for one of the local teams, Excelsior de Roubaix. Others, of course had arrived through the influence of Gibson or Cornelius.

A detailed analysis of the players who appeared in the French professional league in 1932-33, its inaugural season, shows that this pattern of recruitment continued. With few exceptions the players who journeyed across the Channel had links with clubs in Kent, the South Coast, London and the south-east of England. Essentially they fell into four different categories: men who were already playing their football abroad, peripheral professionals (men who had yet to make their mark in the Football League or were at the end of their career), promising amateur players and what might be termed prestige players: valued men who for one reason or another no longer wished to play for the club that held their playing registration.

The largest group were men who are best described as peripheral professionals. Several of these had been previously been registered with Football League clubs but had yet to become first-team regulars. These included Fred Bartlett (Crystal Palace), Trevor Edmunds (Charlton), Owen McCahill (St Mirren), Harold Rivers (Southampton) and Alex Sherry (Preston). Both Tom Pritchard and Martin Woosnam had been registered with the ill-fated Thames club during the 1931-32 season and were now out of work after the club collapsed in the summer. Others were men at the very end of their career who perhaps saw the move as a way of extending their time in football for a year or so: George Harkus (Southampton), Sam Jennings (Burnley) and Fred Kennedy (who was on Oldham's open-to-transfer list and now playing for Northwich Victoria).

The second largest group, comprising around a third of the British players, were men who were already playing in France. To these could be added Joe Hogan, son of the manager Jimmy Hogan, who had played for Lausanne Sports prior to signing for Racing Club de Paris, where his father was coach, and two Scottish players, Denis O'Hare and Johnny Paton, who spent the 1931-32 season with Cork in the Irish Free State League.

A third group comprised amateur players and was essentially a continuation of an established practice that provided a route for the earlier migrants. Harry Ward of Kent Amateur League club Ramsgate Grenville linked up with Wilson and Cheyne at Nîmes, while Leyton's inside forward Sidney Bazin, who had represented Essex, signed for FC Sochaux after initially suggesting he would join Walthamstow Avenue. However, the highest profile player from this group was the centre half and captain of Isthmian League club Tufnell Park, Jock McGowan. McGowan, who had represented the Army at football, was described on his departure as "a tower of strength" for the club; shortly afterwards his colleague Bert Lutterloch followed him to Olympique Lillois.

The final group, the smallest of the four could be described as prestige players of which there were just three: Alex Cheyne and Andy Wilson, both Scottish internationals, who signed for Nîmes, and Southampton's Peter Dougall who joined Sète. Neither Gallacher nor Law, the two men who had made headlines in April, joined the venture. Cheyne was undoubtedly one of several disgruntled players at Chelsea, while Southampton's Dougall had fallen out with the club directors. He elected to join Sète for the 1932-33 season, before returning to England to play for Arsenal and later Everton.

It should also be noted that there was still a handful of players moving to clubs in France outside of the professional league. Two of Ward's colleagues at Ramsgate Grenville, Albert Newton (a Kent county player) and Calypso Pedder, signed for AS Brest, while Albert Locke, who had previously played with Racing Club de Roubaix and Coventry City, signed for Havre AC, another regional league outfit.



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A contemporary cartoon reflecting the fears of many players that they would be unemployed in the summer of 1932. (*Birmingham Sports Mail*, 14 May 1932)

What factors influenced players to agree to travel to a foreign country, with all the cultural and language problems that may arise? Firstly, it should be noted that France was both politically stable and more welcoming than, for example, Germany or Italy. It also offered more opportunities for foreign players than many other countries. Restrictive practices were the order of the day; for example, foreign players were not permitted to take part in competitive matches in Italy, while in England players from outside the Commonwealth were required to have two years residency before they could play professionally. Another factor was the threat of being unemployed,

which was very real for players on the fringes of selection for first-team duties. Football had to some extent avoided the more severe problems faced by industrial workers prior to the early 1930s, but there are signs that the financial position of many clubs at all levels of professionalism was entering crisis. Traditionally players who comprised the peripheral group of men who went to France might normally have been expected to sign for semi-professional clubs in England. A contemporary writing on the financial problems of Birmingham League clubs noted, "The general trade depression and the [radio] broadcasting of first-class matches have played havoc with their income." (*Sports Argus*, 13 August 1932) Men based in the north and midlands were more likely to select the option of a move to the Irish Free State League, for those on the south coast or living in the south-east it was a more practical option to cross the Channel to France. The Players Union believed it to be a viable option and circulated the names of men available to French clubs in June of 1932. The wages on offer were less than available in England: the maximum being set at 2,000 Francs a month (around £21) but with many Football League clubs not in a position to pay summer wages the prospect of regular employment may have been welcomed by those whose situation was insecure. Certainly the amateur players considered the terms to be an incentive. Harry Ward had been a miner at Chislet Colliery in Kent and saw the move to Nîmes as a way of escaping from a dangerous occupation, while according to the *Islington & Holloway Press* (3 September 1932) the offer made to McGowan was "a very good one" and clearly worthwhile. Those who joined FC Sochaux, a club financed by the Peugeot company, undoubtedly received excellent terms. Leslie Miller, who was one of four Englishmen to arrive in 1930, had previously played for Barking and Northampton Town as an amateur. At Sochaux, where he was initially considered an 'amateur' he became one of the stars of the team, scoring one of the goals when Olympique Lillois was defeated 6-1 in the final of La Coupe Sochaux for 1930-31. He remained in France until September 1936, only returning home due to the death of his father. He subsequently spent three seasons at Tottenham, scoring 26 goals from 65 appearances as a winger. His salary was around £15 a week (6,000 Francs), almost double the maximum wage allowed in England and well in excess of the maximum football wage allowed in France. Bernard Williams, a former Dover player, had arrived in France at the same time as Miller, but instead of signing for FC Sochaux, he found work in the Peugeot cycle factory and signed for AS Valentigney, another club linked to the company. When he transferred to FC Sochaux in 1933 he was given an office job (although he is unlikely to have been called upon to carry out much work) and he remained at the club for many years, marrying a local woman and taking out French citizenship. When war broke out he enlisted in the French Army and he later ran a grocery store in the nearby town of Montbéliard.

British players, right through to modern times have a reputation for struggling to adapt to life in different cultures and it was no different in the 1930s. Lanfranchi and Taylor contrast the successful integration of the former amateur players in the late 1920s to the problems faced by the professionals who moved in the



following decade: "Whereas they [the earlier arrivals] were generally successful and well-liked, and tried to integrate, the post-1932 professionals were not remembered so fondly by crowds, fellow players or employers." (*Moving with the Ball*, p. 56) The former statement is undoubtedly true, not least because the earlier arrivals had been forced to integrate as they were nominally employed locally. Expectations were high of some players and it is clear that either the clubs or the players themselves boosted their credentials somewhat. Hugh Vallance and Tom Pritchard were both said to be full internationals and Harry Ward a schoolboy international, although none of this was true. Gus Smith, who several years previously had starred for Dundee but more recently had turned out for the newly formed Wigan Athletic, was a huge disappointment at FC Sochaux, where it was noted that he had clearly dyed his hair to make himself look younger and was unable to last the full 90 minutes. Some of the British players were rather wild and uncultured: Joe Hillier was described by one former colleague as, "like a savage with women" while Jack Trees had his registration cancelled after a contracting "a disease unconnected with football". A second statement by Taylor, in *The Leaguers* (p. 232), that "most of those who left in August were back by May," is perhaps not true of the players who played in that first season. Certainly a number of men returned after unsuccessful trials including the Southampton pair of Harry O'Grady (Sète) and Bill Fraser (Olympique Marseille), Wall of Clapton (another target for Sète), George Leslie of Charlton (Red Star), Bill Devlin (Cowdenbeath, also at Olympique Marseille), Alex Dunn of Armadale (Metz) and Dyer at SO Montpellier, but with only one exception (Fred Bartlett) all the others remained until the end of the season at least. In fact only 9 of the 44 players returned after just a single year in France, while 16 stayed for four or more seasons (although most of these were men who were already in France in 1932). However, the figures conceal the fact that a number of men flitted between the two countries. The aforementioned Jack Trees, having played for Marseilles in 1932-33, was registered with Brighton for the first half of the following season before returning to France. Albert Locke and Joe Hogan were two more who crossed the Channel on more than one occasion.

Overall the number of players involved was fairly minimal. A total of 44 British players appeared in the league during 1932-33. It has been possible to identify all but one of these men: 17 of whom had been registered with Football League clubs previously and two each with Scottish League and Irish Free State League clubs. This was around the same number of English players that had featured in the American Soccer League at its peak, although the ASL also numbered some 70-80 Scottish players at this time. The numbers of players moving to the Free State League is less well recorded, but with only ten clubs (one of which, Bohemians, was amateur) there were fairly limited opportunities. Cork FC recruited nine newcomers for the 1931-32 season: two from the Irish League, two from England and five from Scotland. The following season Shelbourne brought in eight new men including six from Football League clubs. These mass recruitments were generally an exception to the rule, and some of the more provincial clubs had few outsiders. The total number of players registered in the Football League during 1931-32 was 2,543, so with less than 100 men featuring in Ireland and France, the number prepared to migrate was a tiny percentage of the total.



Alex Sherry, who joined Olympique Marseille from Preston in the summer of 1932 (Ian Payne)

The Nîmes Affair was a somewhat odd incident that acted as a precursor to the increased migration of players in the summer of 1932. It began on 13 April when the *Daily Mail* sports pages led with the story: "French Bid For Two Famous Chelsea Players", while the *Daily Herald* led with "French Bid For Law And Gallacher". The club concerned was Nîmes. The *Herald* noted that "For sometime past, representatives of certain football clubs in France, and possibly Spain, have been trying to induce players on the books of Football League clubs to sign contracts for them." The wages on offered seemed to vary from day to day and from newspaper to newspaper: was it £15, £18 or even £20 a week, or possibly £20 a month? Gallacher certainly considered a move, but the terms he demanded were too high as he recalled



many years later: "I was quite prepared to take a chance on it if I could get favourable terms. I asked for a cash payment of £3,000, £20 a week summer and winter and a four-year contract." (*Weekly Chronicle*, 19 August 1950) The deal seems to have been a non-starter for Nîmes, significantly *Les Sports du Midi*, a weekly football paper with which the club chairman Georges Pujolas was closely associated, barely mentioned the story. Chelsea, however, was a club riddled with internal disputes and it is possible that Law and Gallacher created the story to provide them with greater negotiating power over their contracts. Many of the players were clearly unhappy at the decision to effectively sack Alex Jackson towards the end of the 1931-32 season and this may have also contributed to the decision of Cheyne to join Nîmes. The importance of the Nîmes Affair is that it acted as publicity for the French professional league and alerted English players to the fact that there were jobs to be found across the Channel. The likelihood of either Law or Gallacher actually agreeing to play in France was never particularly high and once players began trials during the summer months their connection with France was largely forgotten.

British players were the dominant national group amongst foreign players involved in that first season, but the central European group of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary as a block provided greater numbers. The main reason for this, as has already been shown was that British players were already in France in significant numbers and when the number of newcomers (28) is taken into account they are not particularly greater than the numbers of Austrians and Hungarians.

As time passed the number of foreign players permitted was reduced firstly to three and then, from 1938, two, although as the number of professional clubs expanded employment opportunities were not significantly affected. Improvements in the British football economy made the move to France less attractive, particularly as wages in Britain were much higher. In contrast the wages offered in France were more attractive for central European players, whose numbers increased, while political uncertainty following the rise of Fascism in Germany was undoubtedly another factor for players from this region. A total of around 130 British players eventually featured in the French professional league in the period 1932 to 1939, with many of the later players travelling just for a single season. As time went on the nature of the men crossing the Channel changed somewhat and certainly by the middle of the decade many were journeymen professionals from the lower divisions, who perhaps saw the move more as a 12-month engagement to fill their need for employment. These men were often unpopular, failing to settle and integrate in a way that the first wave of players had done in the professional league.

To conclude, the English (and they were mostly English, with very few Scots) players who participated in the first French professional league in 1932-33 were generally men who had already been attracted to France for one reason or another or men who were on the periphery of League football in England: men who were just embarking upon or finishing their professional careers. They were generally drawn from clubs based in the south and south-east of England. Those who stayed beyond their trial period generally lasted for the full season and often two or more seasons, despite any problems they may have had with issues such as language and social and cultural integration. However, these are the characteristics identified for men who featured in the 1932-33 season, in later years the nature of the British migrant player in France was to change somewhat towards, typically, a journeyman player who perhaps saw the move as merely a way of making money and was therefore less likely to stay for a prolonged period.

Main Sources: Daily Mail; Les Sports du Midi; W Capel Kirby & Frederick W Carter, The Mighty Kick: Romance, History and Humour of Football (London, 1933); P Lanfranchi & M Taylor, Moving with the Ball (Oxford, 2001); M Taylor, The Leaguers, the Making of Professional Football in England, 1900-1939 (Liverpool, 2005); M Barreard, Dictionnaire des Footballeurs Étrangers du Championnat Professionnel Français (1932-1997) (Paris, 1998). Thanks to Antoine Mourat for information on FC Sochaux, Peter Holme of the National Football Museum for details of individual player registrations, Andy Porter for information about Tottenham players, Paul Joannou for detail on Willie Gallacher, and Brian Spurrell, Ben, Ray & John for arranging to transport copies of Les Sports du Midi to me.



BRITISH PLAYERS IN THE FRENCH PROFESSIONAL LEAGUE, 1932-33

SURNAME	FIRST NAME	1931-32	1932-33
Aitken	Willie	AS Cannes	AS Cannes
Balmforth	George	Reading	Sète
Barrett	Bill	Olympique Lillois	Olympique Lillois
Bartlett	David	Excelsior de Roubaix	Excelsior de Roubaix
Bartlett	Fred	Crystal Palace	Club Français
Bazin	Sidney	Leyton	Sochaux
Berry	George	Olympique Lillois	Fives
Cable	Alfred	Charlton Athletic* (29/30)	CA Paris
Caiels	Alf	Olympique Marseille	Olympique Marseille
Cheyne	Alex	Chelsea	Nîmes
Donoghue	John	Wrexham*	Excelsior de Roubaix
Dougall	Peter	Southampton	Sète
Eastman		Sochaux	Fives
Edmunds	Trevor	Charlton Athletic	Red Star
Edwards	R E	Sochaux	Sète
Harkus	George	Southampton	Fives
Hayward			Fives
Hillier	Joe	Sochaux	Sochaux
Hillier	Stan	AS Cannes	AS Cannes
Hogan	Joseph	Lausanne Sports	Racing Club de Paris
Jennings	Sam	Burnley	Olympique Marseille
Kennedy	Fred	Northwich Victoria	Racing Club de Paris
Lutterloch	Bert	Tufnell Park	Olympique Lillois
McCahill	Owen	St Mirren	CA Paris
McGowan	Jock	Tufnell Park	Olympique Lillois
Miller	Leslie	Sochaux	Sochaux
O'Hare	Denis	Cork	CA Paris
Parkes	Arthur	Club Français	Club Français
Paton	John	Cork	Excelsior de Roubaix
Payne	Ernie	Excelsior de Roubaix	Excelsior de Roubaix
Phoenix	Fred	Mansfield Town	Racing Club de Paris
Pritchard	Tom	Thames	Olympique Marseille
Rivers	Harold	Southampton	Sète
Sales	Arthur	Queen's Park Rangers	Alès
Sherry	Alex	Preston North End	Olympique Marseille
Smith	Gus	Wigan Athletic* (32/33)	Sochaux
Smoker	Bob	Alès	Alès
Trees	Jack	Olympique Marseille	Olympique Marseille
Vallance	Hugh	Kidderminster Harriers	Alès
Ward	Harry	Ramsgate Grenville	Nîmes
West	Billy	Alès	Alès
Williams	Bernard	Sochaux	Sochaux
Wilson	Andy	Queen's Park Rangers	Nîmes
Woosnam	Martin	Thames	Club Français

