

# Frank Borghi, man who blanked the Brits, passes away

*Goalkeeper from St. Louis was in the nets as USA blanked England 1-0 in 1950*

by **DAVE LANGE** | Tuesday, February 3, 2015

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Frank Borghi, the man who blanked the Brits in the United States' astonishing 1-0 victory over England in the 1950 World Cup, passed away quietly in St. Louis, his lifelong home, on Feb. 2, 2015. He was 89.

Walter Bahr is the sole surviving player from the 1950 U.S. starting 11. Bahr is 87.

A big man with a big heart, Borghi is remembered as perhaps the best goalkeeper in the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. He also played for the U.S. in its unsuccessful bid to qualify for the 1954 World Cup, as well as for Simpkins Ford, a team of St. Louis amateur players who won the U.S. Open Cup in 1948 and 1950.

Borghi, and every other member of the 1950 U.S. team, was inducted into the U.S. Soccer Hall of Fame in 1976. He grew up on The Hill, the Italian neighborhood that spawned five players, four of whom started, on the 1950 U.S. team. (The U.S. team had a fifth starter from St. Louis, right back Harry Keough.) Their contemporaries on The Hill included Baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra and Major League catcher Joe Garagiola.

"I was very fortunate to get picked to the U.S. team," Borghi said modestly in an interview in November 2009.

The truth was that his U.S. teammates were lucky to have Borghi.

The big moment in Borghi's soccer life came in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, on June 29, 1950. The U.S. team, comprised of players who had full-time jobs and played soccer on the side, were listed as 500-to-1 to win the World Cup. A mix of mostly Easterners and St. Louisans, along with Haitian forward Joe Gaetjens and transplanted Scottish player Ed McIlvenny, the Americans entertained no expectations of keeping the score close, let alone winning.

But there was quality in this team. Not often mentioned now is that the United States nearly defeated Spain in their World Cup opener. A first-half goal from St. Louisan Gino Pariani stood until Spain scored three times in the final 12 minutes.

In the Americans' second World Cup match versus England, Gaetjens' 37<sup>th</sup>-minute header improbably found the back of the English net. Meanwhile, stellar goaltending from Borghi turned back the British again and again as the Americans pulled off one of the biggest upsets in World Cup history. Keough often said Borghi was the difference in the match. The few snippets of video that survive show Borghi using his full 6-foot frame and huge hands to catch crosses and, in one sequence, leaping high to tip the ball over the top of the net.

Perhaps Borghi's biggest save came on a free kick just outside the U.S. penalty area late in the game. St. Louis center back Charlie Colombo tackled Stanley Mortensen from behind just outside the top of the penalty area. The controversial tackle, described as the kind legal in American football but worthy of a red card in soccer, resulted only in a free kick for England. England's Jimmy Mullen headed the free kick on the bounce past Borghi, but Borghi somehow reached behind and knocked the ball away. The British claimed they had scored, but the referee ruled the ball had not crossed the line entirely before Borghi reached it.

Had it not been for two unexpected turns in his life, Borghi never would have become the player that some of his teammates deemed to be the key to beating England in the World Cup.

Borghi was a field player in his early soccer career, “but I had no ball skills or passing ability,” he said in the 2009 interview. When his team’s regular goalkeeper wasn’t available, Borghi asked his coach, Joe Numi, if he could play in goal.

“I knew I could catch a ball and throw it 50 yards,” Borghi said. “Joe says, ‘Yeah, go ahead.’ It worked out really good for me.”

But there was one more twist to come in Borghi’s life. Like more than a few soccer players in St. Louis at the time, Borghi played baseball and was pretty good at it ... good enough to play Class D and Class B minor-league baseball as a catcher and third baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals.

“My ambition was to play Major League ball because I had played with Joe Garagiola and Yogi Berra in American Legion ball,” Borghi said. “I played two years in the minors.”

A scout from another Major League organization wanted to sign Borghi and showed up where Borghi lived with his widowed mother. “I wasn’t home and my mom ran him out of the house,” Borghi said. “She said my son is going to stay home.”

That was the end of Borghi’s baseball career, and the start of his full-time, lifelong relationship with soccer, which he coached as well as played. Borghi also was a veteran of World War 2, serving as a medic in a U.S. infantry unit that saw combat at D-Day, in the Battle of the Bulge, and in the crossing of the Remagen bridge over the Rhine River in March 1945. He won the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. After the war, Borghi directed a funeral home on The Hill.

Borghi is survived by his wife, Rosemary, and seven children.