



Team Stars and Stripes in front of the Palace of Versailles near Paris.

# American Football *Goes Global*

In Europe, there's more to football than just soccer

BY **JEFF SCURRAN**

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I first heard about football being played in Europe from the legendary Oregon high school coach Tom Smythe back in the late 1970s.

He'd had coaching stints at Oregon State and at Lewis and Clark College, but later Smythe decided to return to prep coaching. He built one of the Pacific Northwest's best-ever football programs at Lakeridge High School in Lake Oswego, a Portland suburb. Smythe, never one to brag, would disappear for the entire second semester of the year, heading to Europe. The coaching

fraternity of the area always spoke of Smythe writing a book on the famous golf courses of Europe, but they were wrong. Without any fanfare or notoriety, Smythe was building another great football program in the heart of soccer country, the Vikings of Vienna, Austria.

"American football," as most people in the world refer to our version of the sport (it's called gridiron in Australia) got its start in Europe after World War II, when it was played by the more physical GIs in their down time away from combat. Local young men started

playing along with the US soldiers, but it never became anything serious and was almost forgotten over the years.

The rebirth of American football in Europe came from these same GIs, some of whom stayed on in Europe after the war, and through the cooperation of some cities that were looking for a spare-time outlet for the men who had returned from the war but still hadn't come down from the intensity of combat. Local teams, guided by American coaches, would compete against barracks teams from the various military bases scattered around Europe. Besides the Vienna Vikings, newly formed teams included the Frankfurt Lions, the Dusseldorf Panthers, the Munich Cowboys, the Ansbach Grizzlies and the Berlin Bears.

American football has now spread throughout Europe and is thriving with players who normally pay a large fee to belong to a club team and must purchase their own equipment. To say they are passionate about football is a tremendous understatement.

Teams from Italy, Germany, France,

Austria, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, all of the Scandinavian countries, and a few others, field teams of varying degrees of excellence, but the quality of some players and coaches would surprise you.

And at the start of each summer, their best teams come together to play for the Euro Bowl Championship, won this year by the Berlin Adler, closely followed by the Vienna Vikings, the team Tom Smythe coached 30 years ago.

John Grisham's book *Playing for Pizza* does an extraordinary job of telling the story of the Parma (Italy) Panthers (a real-life club) and their fictitious NFL quarterback who leads them to their first-ever championship. As Grisham points out, practices are held in the late evenings, usually around 9 to 11. After working a full day, players go home to eat dinner with their families, put their children to bed, and then drive, some of them up to two hours or more, to strap on the often-too-old equipment and play the game they have grown to love.

Because teams in most countries are divided into levels of competition, the lower-level teams are not very good by our standards. But the upper-level clubs, often with up to six Americans "hired"

as player-coaches in exchange for airfare, apartment and a meal-a-day, could come close to small-college ball if they practiced every day. But rules, again different in each country and level, limit practice time, and teams often struggle with subpar facilities such as locker rooms, weightrooms and storage.

Fields for practice are often dirt, and the weather during the first part of their traditional spring season for senior teams is normally cold, with snow and rain punctuating the dismal fields' lack of grass, compacted dirt or poor drainage. Game fields are often soccer stadiums or large track and field venues. If players are fortunate, the field is lined as a true football field would be here in the States. Often, fields are 10 yards or so short, or maybe 5-6 yards too narrow, but no one really cares. It's Sunday, it's football and it's fun.

My first introduction to European football was when I recruited a very talented place kicker from Germany, Peter Gaitner – formerly of the Berlin Adler ["Eagles"]. After Peter played in the Adler's Junior Program, he opted to become a foreign exchange student and was placed at Sahuaro High School, the

archrival of my Tucson Sabino Sabercats. While we easily defeated Peter's team that year, I couldn't help but notice this great kicker in action.

A few years later, when I was the head football coach at Pima College, also in Tucson, my desperate need for a place kicker inspired my memories of Peter. A few emails and phone calls later, he was on a plane back to Tucson and stardom. After only one season, Peter earned a full scholarship to Delaware State, where he completed his degree with a 4.0.

Two summers ago, while visiting Europe looking for programs to host our much-requested BFS certification clinics, I visited the Guelfi Firenze of Florence, Italy, and the Franken Knights of Rothenburg, Germany, and watched them in action. The Florence team is headed by Fabrizio Bocci, a coach who would be a great offensive coordinator at any US high school, regardless of the size. Bocci, who doubles as the technical director for a Florence television station, works tirelessly with film, equipment and player attendance problems until the wee hours almost every night with faithful assistant Simone Lori, in their tiny office/locker/storage/meeting room.



Team Stars and Stripes in Amiens, France. This photo was taken two hours before kickoff of the Global Bowl versus the Belgian National Team.



The practice field in Florence is typical Euro: hard, compacted dirt with a scrap of green here and there, so poorly lit that I couldn't see the ball when thrown high or kicked, and the evening was very chilly, especially by Arizona standards. But practice was crisp and well organized, and most importantly, it looked like real football.

The American players were talking in English to players on the field, and often without a hint of understanding from the local guys. Other players, semi-fluent in English, would come over and try to explain in Italian, and sometimes that would help, but mostly not so much. Sign language was the norm for the best communication, but just as here in the US, a good demonstration goes a long way.

I was surprised by the quality of some of the local guys, especially a quarterback that I nicknamed "Kurt Warner" (because he was easily in his mid-30s and could play on most any small-to-midsize college team) with his rocket arm, and many of their receivers. But football practice it was, and it was fun to watch.

Also in attendance was Sandro Ciccarelli, the owner of The Olympian's, a fitness studio and gym just outside of Florence at the base of the beautiful Tuscan hills. Sandro, a former competitive weightlifter, has become the European representative for BFS equipment and was there to meet me again after we worked together at the FIBO Convention in Dusseldorf earlier and to help put together a BFS Introduction Clinic for the coaches in Italy.

Some of the coaches in Europe have spent several years watching US colleges, and many American college coaches have gone to Europe on vacation/clinic trips. And while their knowledge of football fundamentals and strategy is growing, their understanding of modern training and athletic development is in the



Coach Scurran gives last-minute reminders to Team Stars and Stripes about the "international importance of representing the USA" just before the game.



Team Stars and Stripes staff (l-r): Andy Krause (DB/WR, Tucson, AZ, Santa Rita), Global Football president Patrick Steenburge (Granbury, TX), assistant head coach John Storey (VA, St. Joseph High School, Cleveland, OH, Villa Angela-St. Joseph), head coach Jeff Scurran (QB, Tucson, AZ, Santa Rita), equipment manager Jose Duran (Tucson, AZ, Santa Rita), Bill Gallagher (RB/LB, Philadelphia, PA, Episcopal Academy), trainer John Roslien (Pella, IA, Central College).

Dark Ages. But all coaches who visit are universally treated fantastic, just as I was, and are hit on for tips and knowledge by eager players and coaches alike. After practice, everyone heads to a local restaurant hangout to stuff themselves with the very best pizza, pasta and breads you could possibly imagine. If you've read Grisham's book, you will understand. That part of his book is NOT fiction.

From Florence, I was taken up to visit beautiful Bologna, the heart of Italy in the Middle Ages. Giorgio Longhi, a bruising running back for his local team and now the president of the Italian Federation of American Football, hosted us and gave us great insight into the state of football in Italy. Longhi, a great coach in his own right, is one of the most informed people in European American football.

Just like Fabrizio Bocci, Longhi felt that the only thing holding football from great growth in Italy is money (sound

familiar?). The cost of equipment, travel, practice facilities and league/association affiliations makes football very expensive. As they point out, no one makes American football equipment outside of the US.

Then I drove up through Austria to visit the Franken Knights of Rothenburg, Germany, and their well-schooled coach, Martin Halbelt. Martin, who now runs a fitness gym where the American players work as personal trainers, is also a great coach and stresses the game's fundamentals as well as anyone I've been around.

Martin often collaborates with Marcus George, the wildly successful coach for Ansbach High School on the nearby Army base (host of our first-ever BFS clinic in Germany). Between these two, American football excels in all areas.

Achim Gleiss, a local doctor, pitches in as team president for the Knights; and while he worries constantly about

having enough money to properly fund his growing program, his Knights junior team is among the very best in Germany and his Flag youth team is the nine-time champion of Bavaria. This growing youth program will represent Germany in the European Youth Championship this year.

Rothenburg is a magnificently preserved, 15th-century walled city that sits atop a hill looking down on the beautiful Tauber River and its famous Double Bridge, a still useful construct from Roman times. The Frankish people of the area are friendly and colorful, and they represent the very best of old German folk tradition. Visiting there is a treat for any tourist, but being a football coach with information to share made me an instant celebrity.

This past year, wearing two hats, as the head coach for Team Stars and Stripes in the Global Bowl of American Football, and as a BFS clinician, I went back to Europe to coach and to teach. In mid March, I took 45 scholar-athlete football players to Paris as part of the Global Bowl 2010. This bowl game, sponsored by the French Federation for Sport, the McDavid Company (which supplies our braces and practice wear) and Team Rebel Sports (suppliers of nifty game clothing), and organized by Global Football (former Notre Dame QB Patrick Steenberge) is a true exhibition of American football and a chance for aspiring players from the host country to work with and observe great players from US high schools.

After touring Paris and enjoying the local culture, Team Stars and Stripes played the Belgium National Team and then had a chance to exchange jerseys and stories. Later that month, I returned to visit my friends and did the very first BFS clinic at the Ansbach Army Base for the students of soldiers serving overseas in Europe and in the war zones of Iran

and Afghanistan. The following week I did another at The Olympian's outside Florence. Both clinics were very well attended, and each group vowed to get full BFS certification on my next trip to Europe. The word is spreading.

This year, with the help of the Franken Knights, Team Stars and Stripes will hold its mini-camp in my favorite German city of Rothenburg. The US team will stay with host families from the Knights organization before touring southern Germany and playing an all-star junior team from the Munich area on April 16. Those athletes fortunate enough to be part of Team Stars and Stripes will have a life-changing

experience and will see sights and make friends they never dreamed possible. The trip is truly an experience of a lifetime, and being an "ambassador for American football" is an opportunity almost too good to be true for any high school player.

Even though it's expensive and difficulties abound, Europeans have taken to American football and the sport is growing fast. The players love the game and play with a passion that every coach in the US would envy. And while the best athletes are still playing soccer, a highly energized group of dedicated men and juniors is making football a world-wide sport. BFS



At top, "The Santa Rita Boys" (clockwise from top-middle): head coach Jeff Scurran, OT Jaquari Kountz, RB Tamarin Jones (game's leading rusher), OG Reggie Ewesuedo, DB Devonttay Jones, place kicker Chris Mayer. Above, Coach Scurran with game MVP Wyatt Benson (Philadelphia, PA, Germantown Academy).





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Although athletics in high school means different things to different people most will agree that athletics can be a huge part of a young persons development. From making the varsity team to participating in PE classes, students can get the most out of athletics if they have a clear understanding of what is being taught and why. Even better, is if there is a consistent methodology that allows the students and athletes to move easily from sport to sport, season to season. The BFS Total Program is a complete system that can unify the disparate goals of athletic and PE programs.

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Its an amazing group of young men. We went up to Glasgow for the semi-finals One of their players was diagnosed with cancer earlier in the season so the football team and school raised money and we took a check of \$900.00 and gave it to their team captains at the coin toss.

Gotta go to the girls basketball practice now...  
God Bless

**Jay Santy**  
Head Coach  
Huntley Project

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