

# The Ruhleben Football Association

## How Steve Bloomer's Footballers Survived a First World War Prison Camp

By Paul Brown

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"The real Escape to Victory" – Sports Journalists' Association.

Around 4,500 British civilians were interned in the brutal Ruhleben camp during the war.

Among the footballers in Ruhleben was the great Steve Bloomer of Derby County and England.

Other notable players included England internationals Fred Pentland and Sam Wolstenholme.

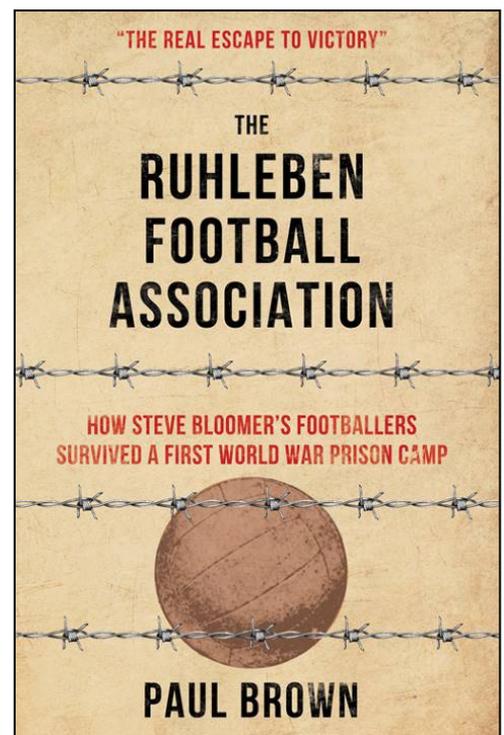
"Myself and many others would not have survived without football" – Steve Bloomer.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, several of Britain's greatest footballers were interned in a civilian prison camp at Ruhleben, near Berlin. Among them was Steve Bloomer, the prolific England striker widely regarded as the best player of his generation.

Surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, living in squalor and on meagre rations, and with their families and freedom far out of reach, Bloomer and the others found salvation in what they knew best – football. They bartered for balls, marked out pitches, and formed the Ruhleben Football Association, organising league and cup competitions involving hundreds of players and watched by thousands of spectators.

The conditions at Ruhleben – a former horse racing track – were appalling, with around 4,500 men packed into 11 filthy stables. Food was scarce, the guards were cruel, and the commandant was incompetent. Gradually, though, as the Great War for Civilisation raged around them, Bloomer and his fellow prisoners established some order within the confines of the prison camp. This is the true story of how the prisoners used the game of football to survive, and how some of them used it to escape.

Paul Brown writes about football and history for publications including *The Guardian*, *FourFourTwo*, *When Saturday Comes* and *The Blizzard*. He is the author of *Savage Enthusiasm* and *The Victorian Football Miscellany*, and has appeared on BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5Live, TalkSport, BT Sport and Premier League TV.



**Press:** Review copies, author interview, images on request. Cover image: <http://bit.ly/rucov>

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