

Soccer legend Harry Keough dies at 84

J.B. FORBES

Harry Keough talks in 2003 about the movie filmed here that highlighted the U.S. World Cup soccer team he played on in 1950. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

Harry Keough, a St. Louis postman who reached the highest levels of American soccer, as both a player and a coach, died Tuesday of natural causes after suffering from Alzheimer's. He was 84.

Keough may be best remembered as one of five St. Louis players on the United States team that stunned England 1-0 in the 1950 World Cup, considered one of the greatest upsets in international soccer history.

And while that win assured that him a spot in soccer history, that was just one part of his soccer life. He won eight national titles as a player and led St. Louis University to five NCAA championships as a coach. He made 19 appearances for the U.S. team, from 1949 through 1957, and captained the U.S. teams at the 1952 and 1956 Olympics.

After retiring from SLU, he would often serve as the head of the delegation for U.S. soccer teams when they traveled abroad, serving as an ambassador for the sport.

"His greatest legacy is his ability to give back to the game," said Dan Flynn, secretary general of U.S. Soccer and a former player under Keough at SLU. "He set an example for how it should be done, how you played and how you went about your business off the field. ... What I really remember is his willingness to help other players, other coaches. That's a tremendous attribute. That's what stands out. He was a true gentleman."

"Soccer royalty has passed away," said veteran soccer broadcaster Bill McDermott, who also played for Keough.

Keough never left the game, still working as a referee and as an assistant coach for the Washington University women's team into his 70s. He loved to compete, bringing home countless gold medals from the Senior Olympics in swimming and track and field, medals he would immediately give to his grandchildren.

Keough, his son Ty recalled, used to joke that he was the first fullback in St. Louis who ever passed the ball -- previously the idea at the position was to kick the ball as far as you could out of danger -- and that he invented the position that Germany's Franz Beckenbauer made famous in the '70s, that of a roving back who orchestrated the team on the field.

As center back for the Kutis team in the 1950s, considered one of the best teams in the nation in that era, Keough ran the show. "Harry was the main guy," said St. Louis soccer historian Dave

Lange. "Players on that team said everything they accomplished was attributed to Harry's leadership."

But for all the things he won, Keough is remembered best for one game: when the underdog American squad defeated England, 1-0, on June 29, 1950, in the World Cup in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The Americans were amateurs going up against an English team considered the best in the world.

"We didn't think we'd beat England," Keough recalled before the United States met England in the 2010 World Cup. "We thought we'd give them a game."

Keough was 22, the youngster on the team, and might not have gotten a spot on the roster if the head of the soccer federation, Walter Giesler, wasn't from St. Louis and familiar with Keough's play. Four other amateurs from St. Louis, Frank Borghi, Gino Pariani, Charley Colombo and Frank "Pee Wee" Wallace, were in the lineup that day, with Borghi in goal. Keough anchored the backline for the U.S. squad, holding the English scoreless.

The 1-0 win was so shocking it was treated suspiciously by newspapers when it first moved on the wires. (Only one American journalist, Dent McSkimming of the Post-Dispatch, was at the game.) The win turned the Americans into celebrities in Brazil -- Borghi got carried off the field by Brazilian fans -- but ultimately, the United States didn't advance to the second round after losing its next match and the players returned to America in anonymity, with Keough resuming his duties for the post office.

"Rarely have teams, on paper, had such a wide margin in abilities," Keough told the Post-Dispatch in 1990. "Nobody in the world had heard of a single player on our team. We were just unknowns ...and we were still unknowns after we beat them. But we did make our mark."

Keough grew up near Carondelet Park on the city's south side and learned the game from his older brother, Billy. In 1946, at 18, Harry won the U.S. Junior Cup, and after two years in the Navy, returned to work for the post office and play soccer. He won six straight U.S. Amateur Cup titles with Kutis, starting in 1956, and the club also won the U.S. Open Cup in 1957, becoming the last team to win both in the same year.

In 1967, when Bob Guelker left SLU to start the soccer program at SIU Edwardsville, Keough, who had been the coach at Florissant Valley Junior College, took the SLU job while continuing to work at the post office, now as a supervisor. His teams won NCAA titles in 1967, 1969, 1970, 1972 and 1973 and his career record at SLU was 213-50-23. His teams dominated. From 1969 to 1971, SLU went 45 games without a loss. From 1969 to 1973, the Hermann Trophy as the national player of the year went to one of Keough's players.

"Coaching SLU in my day wasn't that hard," Keough once said. "We had outstanding individuals and depth." So deep was the talent in St. Louis that Keough said he would go to the players he didn't want and recruit them for other schools.

Keough was always active. As a coach at SLU, he and his longtime assistant Val Pelizzaro would take to the field and join in practices with their players. "He and Val were always two of the best players on the field," said McDermott. "We would play until Harry and Val's team won or midnight, whichever came first."

"I don't know if anyone read the game as good as Harry," Flynn said. "He was on the field every day in practice. I was 18, 19, and he played the game as skillfully as anyone in that game, and he was spotting us quite a few years. His ability was as sharp as ever. That was another great learning tool."

Keough was elected to the National Soccer Hall of Fame in 1976 and into the national soccer coaches association Hall of Fame in 1996.

He is survived by his wife Alma, three children, Ty, Colleen (Erker) and Peggy (Disbennett) and seven grandchildren.

In the 1980s, Keough returned to Belo Horizonte, the site of the win over England, and his visit was front page news in the city. A large picture of him appeared in the newspaper, as he stood on the field with his arms outstretched under the headline "The mailman returns to the scene of glory."