



Arthur the Footballer

Strangely perhaps for a world record holding sprinter, Arthur's best position in football was as a goalkeeper.

Arthur started playing football for local teams when he was still at college. In 1885 he went on to play regularly as an amateur for Darlington Football Club. For the next two years he was selected for several district and county representative teams in the North, while, at the same time, excelling as a sprinter.

Notably, in 1887 he signed for Preston North End as an amateur who could play in their FA Cup matches. Preston were then one of England's top teams, known as the 'Invincibles', and one of Wharton's finest footballing achievements was helping them reach the 1887 FA Cup semi-final. He continued to play for Darlington, helping them win the Cleveland Cup in 1887.

The Football League, which marked the beginning of professional football, began in 1888 with 12 teams. It was then that Arthur became the first black professional footballer when he joined Rotherham Town in 1889 in the Midland League.

During his time with Rotherham Town he helped them win the Midland League in 1892 and 1893, and then to win election to the second division of the Football League for the 1893-4 season.

In 1894, Arthur signed for Sheffield United. The following year he became the first black professional footballer to play in the First Division when he made his debut in their 2-0 defeat away to Sunderland. Arthur made three first team appearances for Sheffield United, but was unable to dislodge the giant William 'Fatty' Foulke from his position as goalkeeper.

Arthur returned to Rotherham Town in 1895 then joined Stalybridge Rovers in the Lancashire League in 1896 as a player and coach, making him the first black manager. He moved to nearby Ashton North End in 1898 and back to Stalybridge when Ashton went bankrupt in 1899. He returned to the Football League with Stockport County in 1901 at the age of 36 before retiring from professional football in 1902.



Arthur's on the pitch antics

Strangely Arthur was known for his camaraderie and unusual antics on the pitch and there are several references to them in the local and national newspapers of the time.

Opinions were mixed; some said he was unreliable, fickle and behaved like a showman. The Athletic News, for example, described him as “the coolest customer that has ever stood between the goal posts”, (13/9/1887), but not as a compliment, rather to point out that Arthur seemed too casual and arrogant in his approach.

As many Victorians believed in the notion of Scientific Racism, (that the physical makeup of Africans marked them as an inferior race in terms of their standing, intellect and capabilities), Arthur was also ‘put in his place’ in the newspapers of the time through racial slurs. The most famous one:

‘Is the darkie’s pate too thick for it to dawn upon him that between the posts is no place for a skylark? By some it’s called coolness – bosh!’

(Football News and Athletic Journal, 29 October 1887)

Indeed crowds and critics alike did think Arthur was ‘cool’ in a positive way and many reporters were impressed by Arthur’s skills and thought he should play for England. There were rave reviews of some of his goalkeeping displays:

“In a match between Rotherham and Sheffield Wednesday at Olive Grove, I saw Wharton jump, take hold of the crossbar, catch the ball between his legs and cause three onrushing forwards to fall into the net. I have never seen a similar save since and I have been watching football for over fifty years”

(Sheffield Telegraph & Independent, 12/1/1942)

At that time, goalkeepers could handle the ball anywhere in their own half of the pitch, and could be charged down even if they didn’t have the ball, making it a dangerous position. Arthur was known for punching the ball a long way and for crouching in the corner of the goal – both habits may have been to protect himself from opponents, they certainly impressed some:



Arthur Wharton: 1865 to 1930

The World's First Black Professional Footballer

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Football c.1882-1902

1882 - 1884	Cannock FC Cannock Whitecross FC
1885 - 1886	Cleveland College Darlington
1886 - 1887	Darlington Cricket & FC Newcastle & District Northumberland & Durham Durham Cleveland
1886 - 1888	Preston North End
1889 - 1894	Rotherham Town (professional)
1894 - 1895	Sheffield United
1895 - 1896	Rotherham Town
1896 - 1897	Stalybridge Rovers
1897 - 1898	Ashton North End
1898 - 1900	Stalybridge Rovers
1899	Rest of Lancashire League
1901 - 1902	Stockport County
1902	Last FL appearance v Newton Heath Retires from professional football