

Soccer in the Seventies

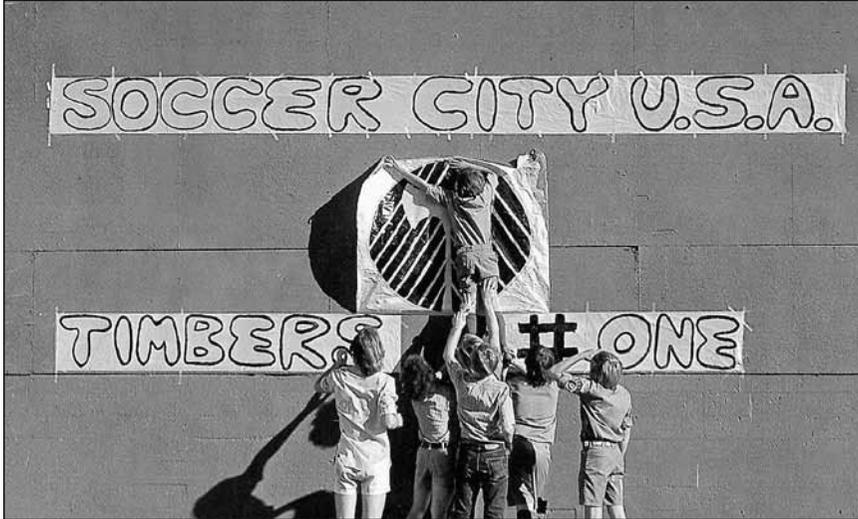
Chris Dangerfield and the Original Portland Timbers

by Michael Orr and Morgen Young

WITH THE PORTLAND Timbers' ascent this year to Major League Soccer, the current highest level of North American soccer, reflection on the first Timbers team and the North American Soccer League (NASL) is apt. Prior to the Timbers' establishment in 1975, Portland featured mostly minor league baseball and hockey teams, and the Trail Blazers of the National Basketball Association (NBA) had not yet won their famous 1977 championship. For a professional team from Portland to reach the final of their league — as the Timbers did in 1975 — was quite a novelty for Portlanders and certainly contributed to the city's overwhelming support for the team. Chris Dangerfield was a member of that team, and his memories of the season help explain how soccer was established as a viable professional sport in Portland.¹

Dangerfield played in the NASL between 1975 and 1984, wearing the uniforms of seven clubs in his ten seasons. Born in the suburbs of Birmingham, England, Dangerfield became a professional with Wolverhampton Wanderers of England's First Division at age sixteen. He was capped three times (that is, played in three international matches) as an England Under-20 before going on loan to the Portland Timbers in 1975. Two summers in Portland convinced the young Dangerfield that his future in soccer was in the United States, and he spent the rest of his playing career on the West Coast, appearing in over 400 games and scoring over 150 goals. In 1992, as coach of San Jose Oaks, Dangerfield won the U.S. Open Cup, the longest-running club tournament in the United States. He was one of

The authors are co-curators of Soccer City USA: The Portland Timbers and the NASL Years, 1975–82, an exhibition showing at the Oregon Historical Society until September 4, 2011.



Young Timbers supporters and Boy Scouts hang banners on the outfield wall at Civic Stadium. The “Soccer City, USA” moniker was adopted during the 1975 season and has been used in Portland ever since.

hundreds of players who came from outside the United States to play in the NASL.

The NASL was founded in 1968 and, until its collapse after the 1984 season, was the pinnacle of professional soccer in the United States and Canada. Star players from Europe and South America flocked to the NASL, particularly during the late 1970s, before big spending and small gate receipts led to financial instability, the folding of individual clubs, and, ultimately, the demise of the league itself. The Portland Timbers joined the NASL in 1975 and played through the 1982 season, always featuring British players like Dangerfield. The club’s first manager was Vic Crowe, a Welshman who brought many players to Port-

land from the West Midlands region of England, where he had played and coached during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Dangerfield was one of five players to come from Wolverhampton Wanderers, one of several clubs from the Birmingham area represented in the early Timbers teams. Many NASL Timbers players, including Dangerfield, were on loan for the summer. That experience helped establish Portland’s international reputation when they returned to their home clubs each fall.

Dangerfield’s time in Portland, though short, highlights the birth of soccer culture in the Rose City. As fans learned about the sport with each passing game, the Timbers themselves became ingrained as a part of the sport

for Portlanders. The early crowds and advent of the Booster Club in 1976 were the forerunners of the large-scale soccer support surrounding the modern Timbers. NASL teams and players were most successful when there were personal interactions in the community. Dangerfield and his fellow British teammates were importantly both good on the field and strong ambassadors for the sport and the team. Despite being just a teenager, Dangerfield recognized the value of these interactions and reveals that they were just as significant in Portland as having a winning team. The need for such day-by-day building of a soccer culture is no longer a necessary part of the lives of the modern Timbers players, yet the tradition of the relationships with city and fans remains.

Dangerfield shares the fun he had in the summers of 1975 and 1976 to help the newest generation of Portland soccer fans appreciate the path that has led to the Timbers' position in the sporting culture.

The following excerpts are from a September 29, 2010, interview with Chris Dangerfield that is part of a wide-reaching oral history project by FC Media to document the memories and stories of NASL-era players, coaches, and fans. With a dearth of long-form interviews and even less general recognition of the history outside the biggest names, the oral history collection will serve as the basis of research and further inquiry on the era of soccer that established the sport in the United States and provided the foundations for current clubs



MORGEN YOUNG: Could you walk me through how you came to play for the Timbers? Who recruited you?

CHRIS DANGERFIELD: If you look at the background of clubs that the players came from in the first year of 1975, most of them came around from an area of England called the Midlands. The capital is basically Birmingham and there were five of us that came from Wolverhampton, which is just outside of Birmingham. Mickey Hoban, Brian Godfrey, Willie Anderson, Tony Betts and Barry Lynch all had roots in Aston Villa. Ray Martin came from Birmingham City. Tommy McLaren came from Port Vale. All the

players came from in and around the Birmingham area, and that's where Vic Crowe was. Vic Crowe was the manager of Aston Villa for many years. He played here in the old NASL with Atlanta and knew Phil Woosman, who was the president [Commissioner] of the league. Crowe was offered the Portland job and when he went looking for players, he basically went to his own backyard and brought us from there.

YOUNG: And Wolverhampton didn't have a problem with you going on loan and going to North America?

DANGERFIELD: I was the youngest of the crew, the youngest of us all. The



Chris Dangerfield (13) celebrates with Tony Betts (14) and Graham Day after scoring the match-winning goal against the Vancouver Whitecaps on July 3, 1975.

two players who were more established at the Wolves at the time were Barry Powell and Peter Withe. The others were just reserve team players. I had just finished playing for the England youth team, the under-18s. I was a little bit knocking on the manager's door saying "I want to play, give me a chance." So I think he got rid of me for a few months.

YOUNG: So you were familiar with Barry Powell and Peter Withe before you became their teammate at Portland?

DANGERFIELD: We trained and played together, the five of us — Donald Gardner, Jimmy Kelly, Barry Powell, Peter Withe and I. Donald, Jimmy, Barry and I were all youth. Donald and

I were the same age; we came through the youth system together. Barry and Jimmy were one year ahead of us in the youth system and Peter came in from South Africa. And so we all played together that previous year in the reserve teams. When we came over we were certainly familiar with our style of play, having played with each other. We were also certainly aware of the other players who were brought in. Willie Anderson played at Manchester United. Brian Godfrey was the captain of Aston Villa when I was a kid. So, it was a great opportunity to play with those guys as well. . . . I think most of us came on the same plane. We came over in a two or three day period to a very rainy Portland. But we had left a rainy Birmingham, so it didn't make much difference.

YOUNG: Did anyone greet you at the airport in Portland?

DANGERFIELD: Yes, amazingly so. There was a booster club of sorts that was there, in Portland green. We were very quickly introduced to people we'd never met before. They were very pleasant and seemed to be wanting to do anything they possibly could for us. And they certainly did. Within the next few hours and over the next couple of days they had taken us shopping, they had given us a car, they'd settled us into the apartments, taken us to dinner. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven!

YOUNG: Had you heard of the league [NASL] before you came over?

DANGERFIELD: No, it was all new. It was all brand new really because the league, although it started in 1974 [the NASL was founded in 1968 but suffered from severe financial difficulties until the 1974 season], 1975 was the first big year of the league. It was an opportunity for all of us to play over the summer and get some extra games in. The fact that it was in a different country, at that particular time, never really came into it. It was just a chance to go and get some playing time in with some good players that were, in what I was promised, in a competitive league. This all came from Vic [Crowe], through my manager at Wolverhampton, who said "You need to go over here and get some experience." So, that's what I did. We all seemed to think it was just something you'd do for a couple months and then go back and play for Wolves.

YOUNG: Was there any culture shock being a teenager in the U.S.?

DANGERFIELD: There were a few. The first was the size of the car they gave us, which was one of those large cars with a bench seat in the front. Everything was power steering and it took you three days to park it. And then the stores were different. We all remembered the first time we went shopping to buy steaks and they were huge. We wondered how could we possibly eat all that, but we did. Everything just seemed to be bigger and new and just different. We really enjoyed the first few days of sort of acclimatizing ourselves in that respect.

YOUNG: Were you treated differently because you were one of the youngest players?

DANGERFIELD: I wasn't so much the youngest, I was just one of the single players. We were divided into single guys and married guys. The guys who were married, and their wives, made us feel more than welcome. They made sure we were taken care of in the early days, as did the [sponsor] families like the Gilbertsons and the Wicks. They were generous, not only with their time, but also with their homes. We were taken care of by the other guys until we found our legs.

YOUNG: Can you describe a typical training session with Vic Crowe and Leo Crowther?

DANGERFIELD: Vic was an extremely tough manager. I believe he wasn't sure what to expect within the league. He

wanted to make sure that his team was extremely well prepared and fit. And so we ran and ran. As we got bigger crowds later in the season, we were attending after-game parties and Vic would see the lads were having a beer or two. In training the next day, you were running again to make sure that you were ready for the next game. It was fun and we enjoyed it a lot, but we took it very seriously and Vic certainly took it very seriously. The trainings were always competitive and tough.

YOUNG: Could you describe the field?

DANGERFIELD: The pitch was like something we'd never seen before. It was as wide as it was long. It crowned in the middle and took a dip on the other side. If you were sitting on the bench, you couldn't actually see Jimmy Kelly except halfway up his head. The pitch was Astro Turf, so there were new things to get used to. The ball would do certain things on the turf; it would skip and run quickly. But, I think it suited our style of play because we were very energetic. We kept the ball moving and passed it well, so the pitch actually suited us. And the fact that the field was so wide really suited us because we had two of the best wide players in the league, Willie Anderson and Jimmy Kelly. Our trainer, Ron Culp, was the trainer for the Trail Blazers. If you got a rug burn from the turf, he had this red spray that he would sneak up on you [so you] wouldn't get an infection.

YOUNG: Describe the uniform.

DANGERFIELD: You've seen it. It was

tight and short. They were the shortest shorts you've ever seen in your life. You look at uniforms now and their shorts are all long and baggy, and ours were short and tight.

YOUNG: They weren't any shorter than the shorts you were wearing in England, were they?

DANGERFIELD: They seemed to be. It was an Adidas kit. It was a nice uniform. We used to go through shoes really quickly, because they just didn't last on that pitch. They had not, at that particular time, designed a soccer shoe for Astro Turf. They had football shoes and baseball shoes, but we couldn't use those. We were playing in trainers, green trainers with yellow stripes. We would go through a pair of those a day.

YOUNG: What did you think about being a Timber? Had you ever heard of a Timber before you came over?

DANGERFIELD: I thought we had a strange name and a strange crest, something completely different compared to England. I remember the first year collecting all the pennants from the NASL teams because we felt like it was an opportunity we probably wouldn't have again, to see these places. We didn't necessarily have cheerleaders, but other places did. We certainly had fanatical fans.

YOUNG: Could you elaborate on the fan culture?

DANGERFIELD: Well, the whole thing grew, didn't it? We had perhaps a few thousand people at the first

Courtesy of Tony Betts



The Portland Timbers await the national anthem at midfield ahead of their final regular season home game, on July 29, 1975, against the San Jose Earthquakes.

game against Seattle. It rained that night. We lost one-nothing and there was a big pile of mud that used to be a baseball diamond right under the goal. We pounded them, but we couldn't score. I think we all came out of that thinking "What are we doing here?" But, then we started to win. The fans grew more and more; they sort of grew with us. They certainly enjoyed watching us and so we all know that there were massive crowds at the end. After we'd been there about a month, it started to really kick in. You'd be recognized outside of the stadium. We did a lot of work in the community as well. Every morning we'd do assemblies at schools; we'd juggle for little Johnny's birthday; or do whatever we could to try to spread

the word about soccer. We knew that was part of what we needed to do to be successful off the field, as far as the crowds were concerned. Vic made sure we did that. Everywhere I went, even after Portland, you wanted that kind of community, to get connected with the fans. After games, we would always do a lap of honor and thank the fans. That just wasn't something you did in England at the time. It was all about selling the game on top of actually having to play well.

YOUNG: After every home game would there be an after-party at the Hilton or The Benson?

DANGERFIELD: Yes, absolutely. They were a lot of fun. I was 19 at the time and so, theoretically I was not allowed

to go into bars, et cetera. But my best friend, who I'm still best friends with now and lives with me in San Jose, Nick Nicolas, he was one of the American players we had on the team. He took my English driving license and typed it in to make me 21 and I was just golden, so it was just fine.

YOUNG: How did you get along with the other Americans on the team? Roger Goldingay and Dave Landry.

DANGERFIELD: We were a close team. It really wasn't Americans versus Europeans at all. I think in later teams I've played in, there may have been that, because the whole league changed. Rightfully or wrongfully, at the end of the day, Vic as the manager could pick the team and he didn't have to play any American players. That slowly changed over the growth of the league and rightfully so. I think it was a very important step in the development of the US soccer players. Very quickly we started having players like Bob Rigby, Ricky Davis, Bobby Smith, who all played for the Cosmos. They were great American players. But in the first couple of years, you didn't have to do that. Later years, where there was a more of a competition for the starting spots for the teams, they had to play two Americans or play four Americans. It didn't exist the first year. I think we were all sort of enjoying the success we had and it didn't matter if you were American, British, yellow, green or black.

YOUNG: Some of the other players, especially Willie Anderson, have described that '75 season as a magical

summer. Did you think it was a special season?

DANGERFIELD: Absolutely, to go through what we did that first year. Every part of it was fun; it always is when you're winning. We did things like hang out with the Trail Blazers. In 1976, Bill Walton used to come to our trainings and hang out with us on the bench. We went to a party one time with the local ballet company at the house of Mildred Schwab.³ You know, she was one of our biggest fans.

YOUNG: I did know that. I also know that Graham Day kissed her!

DANGERFIELD: He did, he honestly did. She was standing there, as we went out the tunnel on the field [at Civic Stadium]. Graham used to [do] off the wall things at any time. You never knew what he was going to do when he woke up that morning. As the announcers called his name out, he suddenly turned, grabbed Mildred, pulled her down onto the stretcher of the ambulance, gave her a kiss, picked her up again and ran on the field. We had no idea why he did it.

YOUNG: But she was your biggest fan, right?

DANGERFIELD: She was amazing, absolutely amazing.

YOUNG: Could you tell us a little about the league?

DANGERFIELD: The NASL was an unbelievable league to play in. You would see different cities and in each city, different weather, different types

of people and different styles of play. You could be playing at home in Oregon, on Astro Turf and in the rain, then travel to Los Angeles and play in eighty degrees on grass. Then next week you could play in snow in Toronto, then fly to Miami and it would be ninety-five degrees with humidity. And everyone played different styles of soccer. We were a predominantly English team but we could be playing against Latinos in Miami, who were playing a different type of soccer on a different surface, in a different environment. Another thing about the NASL was the level of competition. I believe many players, when they first came over to America to play in the league, be it Rodney Marsh, George Best or Johan Cruyff, came over thinking the league wouldn't be too challenging. But, they quickly found out that there was a good standard of play and they had to be prepared to put a shift in.

YOUNG: Can you tell me something about road games, perhaps the trip to New York?

DANGERFIELD: We went to New York and played at Randall's Island. The story goes, and it wasn't any different when we played there, that they used to go through it before a game and take the broken glass off the field because it was part of the prison. Even before Pele's first game, they did that.³ It rained during our game. We were playing in dark green and the Cosmos were in white. They painted the dirt green so it would look good on TV. With all the rain, by the end of the game, most people were in green.

Everybody was playing in the same color. We won 2-1. It was a great night.

YOUNG: What do you remember from the playoff game against Seattle in 1975?⁴

DANGERFIELD: I remember that the commentators wore awful jackets, some of the worst I'd ever seen. I believe one of them was Cliff McCrath. I remember thinking that the field looked really wide. I actually thought we played quite well. It was a competitive game. The game against the [Seattle] Sounders I always remember because we won in overtime. I came off the field and Tony Betts came on and scored.

YOUNG: Did you feel like there was a rivalry between Seattle and Portland?

DANGERFIELD: Definitely. You certainly wear your shirts with pride. We were proud to play for the Portland Timbers. I know the Seattle players felt the same way about playing for the Sounders. Now maybe a lot of that was just instigated by the fans, but at the end of the day, you didn't want to let them down, not in a big game like the quarterfinal. So nobody left anything on that field that night.

YOUNG: Any other memories about the playoff series and that championship game against the Tampa Bay Rowdies?

DANGERFIELD: There was a tremendous crowd against St. Louis and a massive crowd against Seattle. Both were hard games. When I look back,



Chris Dangerfield challenges Arfon Griffiths (3) of the Seattle Sounders on August 2, 1975, at Seattle's Memorial Stadium.

I'm proud of the fact that I was a young player and I was starting. I was playing in the midfield with Barry [Powell] and trying to [get] the ball to Willie [Anderson] and Peter Withe. It was just fun, the first year. The fact that we got to the final was just a wonderful achievement for us and for Vic. But, at the end of the day it was a tremendous disappointment. I just don't think we played well in the final. The field didn't suit our style of play. It's a narrow field with no room to go. I happened to play for many years at San Jose for the Earthquakes and it was our home field. It suited us great because we'd press and get a goal up, then we'd sit back and we'd counter. We [the Timbers] couldn't get the ball to Willie [Ander-

son], we couldn't get the ball to Jimmy [Kelly] and it just didn't suit us. If we'd have played Tampa Bay at a field with another ten yards of width, we'd have won the championship.

YOUNG: Was there an issue that the playoffs maybe extended past your loan deal with Wolverhampton? That's something that other players have told us, that they got in trouble because their loan contracts should have had them going back before the playoffs.

DANGERFIELD: Yes, it became a bit of an issue. By the end of the season, in some cases, there were bigger and better things to move on to. Peter [Withe] had been offered a position at Birmingham City. They wanted him

back. The Wolves wanted us back. The other clubs wanted different players back. But, we didn't want to go back. We wanted to finish the season.

YOUNG: So when the season ended, how soon afterwards did you go back to England and Wolverhampton?

DANGERFIELD: I went back straight-away. The seasons sort of dovetailed into each other. So, we were straight back into playing in England. For me, I'd gone from playing the last month in Portland playing before crowds of 30,000 fans, playing in a final and all the adoration that came with that to playing in the reserves at the Wolves. I wasn't particularly happy. When the offer came to go back to Portland for the second year, I jumped at it.

YOUNG: Was it different in 1976?

DANGERFIELD: Yes. I think Vic was getting to a point where he wanted to be involved but not full-time, running the whole thing. He brought in Brian Tiler as well as some different faces. We weren't as successful. The expectation of the crowd was certainly greater than it was the first time we stepped on the field in '75. The fans expected us to start off where we finished and that never happens. The experience on the field was not as much fun as it was the previous season. But as far as being back in Portland, with the people I met before and the teammates I had from '75, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I have nothing but good things to say about the Portland area.

YOUNG: Why did you like Portland so much? You played for other NASL teams in other cities, is this city different?

DANGERFIELD: I was lucky because I played in Portland, Las Vegas, Hawaii, Los Angeles and San Jose, all good places to play. I've made my home in San Jose. But I love going back to Portland. I'm coaching a U.S. Soccer Academy team that used to come up and play against FC Portland. I take any chance I get to stop in Portland and see Mick and Linda Hoban or see Tony [Betts] or Jimmy [Kelly].

YOUNG: When you played for the other NASL teams, do you have any memories of playing against Portland?

DANGERFIELD: Only memories of beating the Timbers. The team that took over after I left, with Clyde Best, Stewart Scullion and the other guys, was a good team. But, 1975 really was, and it usually is in sports, a tremendously magical first year. Everything clicked. Everything went right and no matter how you try to repeat it, it's impossible to do unless you're like the New York Yankees and you can buy it.

YOUNG: To wrap up our interview, do you have any favorite stories about years with Portland?

DANGERFIELD: I've got a million stories. It was just one thing after another. It was so much fun. The front office as well, they were just great people. Don Paul, who at first came across as "I'm

the general manager,” halfway through the season was jumping into swimming pools after we won games because he was so happy. It was just fun. But, the fun came because we put a lot of hard

work into the practices and the games to get the success. We were treated so well by everybody and I think that’s probably the best story I can tell you. Other ones will get me into trouble.

NOTES

1. See “Terrific Timbers,” *Oregon Journal* compilation of 1975 season, available at Multnomah County Library; David Tossell, *Playing for Uncle Sam: The Brits’ Story of the North American Soccer League* (London: Mainstream Publishing, Random House, 2003); Michael Orr and Morgen Young, articles on John Bain, Bernie Fagan, Jimmy Conway, and Clive Charles, *Oregon Encyclopedia*, www.oregonencyclopedia.org; and “Timbers Battle LA Tonight: Dangerfield Set to Start,” *Oregon Journal*, July 8, 1975.

2. Mildred Schwab famously supported the Portland Timbers from their inception. As a City Council member, she arranged for the rental agreement between the Timbers and the city-owned Civic Stadium in 1975 and kicked out the ceremonial first kick at Portland’s first-ever game on May 2, 1975. Schwab purchased season tickets and stood on the sideline during games. She also helped introduce Timbers players into the Portland community by inviting the team to parties and arranging for American cultural experiences for the largely British teams of the mid 1970s. See “City, Timbers Sign Contract: Schwab Gets ‘Kick,’” *Oregonian*, April 19, 1975; and “Making Points,” *Oregonian*, July 6, 1975.

3. Pelé was the most famous player in

the history of the North American Soccer League. Signed by the New York Cosmos during the 1975 season, the thirty-four-year-old midfielder instantly brought credibility to the NASL as well massive live and television audiences whenever and wherever he played. The Timbers’ game against the Cosmos on July 16, 1975, was Portland’s first televised game, appearing on tape delay on KATU-2. Though Pelé retired in 1977, a season capped by the Cosmos’ championship triumph in Soccer Bowl ’77 at Portland’s Civic Stadium, the league has forever been linked with the great Brazilian. See “Timbers Shade NY, Gain First,” *Oregon Journal*, July 17, 1975.

4. August 12, 1975, saw the Portland Timbers come from behind to defeat the Seattle Sounders 2-1 at Civic Stadium in the quarterfinal round of the NASL playoffs. Tony Betts’s header in overtime saw the Timbers through to the semifinal after Barry Powell equalized for the Timbers in the second half; 31,503 fans were in attendance, with thousands running onto the field in celebration on Betts’s headed winner. The game is commonly known as the most famous game in Timbers’ history. See “Betts Nails Winner,” *Oregon Journal*, August 13, 1975, 21.