



Poland vs. Brazil during the 1938 World Cup in France. In the picture are, among others, Ewald Dytko, Antoni Galecki, Leônidas da Silva. Photo: National Digital Archives

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Opening match. The first World Cup appearance of the Polish national

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On June 5, 1938, the Polish national football team had its debut at the World Cup in France. Their rival was the mighty Brazil and around 25 thousand spectators watched their clash at Stade de La Meinau, in Strasbourg.

The game lasted for two hours and ended up with a 5:6 win for Brazil. The match (1/8 of the final — different organisational rules) could have easily been called a “small final” with all its drama, goals and the players’ hunger for victory...

The Polish national team comprised of: Edward Madejski (goalkeeper), Władysław Szczepaniak (defender), Antoni Gałęcki (defender), Wilhelm Góra (midfielder), Erwin Nyc (midfielder), Ewald Dytko (midfielder), Ryszard Piec (forward), Leonard Piątek (forward), Fryderyk Scherfke (forward), Ernest Wilimowski (forward), Gerard Wodarz (forward).

The *Canarinhos* fielded the following players: Algisto Lorenzato (goalkeeper), Domingos da Guia (defender), Artur Machado (defender), Afonsinho (midfielder), Martim Mércio da Silveira (midfielder), Zezé Procópio, (midfielder), Hércules de Miranda (forward), José Perácio (forward), Romeu Pellicciari (forward), José dos Santos Lopes (forward), Leônidas (forward).

The last of the aforementioned Brazilians, Leônidas da Silva, was the biggest football star of these years and the 1938 World Cup's top scorer. His fame was later outshined only by Pelé.



Polish national team before the game with Brazil at the Meinau Stadium, 1938 World Cup in France. Photo: National Digital Archives

Overtime, everything to play for

Przegląd Sportowy wrote on June 6, 1938:

“You have to admit that the course of the match looked like it was dreamed up by the most skilled director, perfectly familiarised with the psychology of the masses.”

The first goal came in the 18th minute after a solid strike from Leônidas. Poles stood their ground and

responded only five minutes later — Scherfke calmly scored from a penalty kick. The first half finished with the score 1:3 (Pellicciari scored in the 25th minute and Perácio in the 44th).



Polish national team captain Władysław Szczepaniak (on the right) greets the Brazilian skipper before the match of the World Cup in France, 1938. Photo: National Digital Archives

Salvation for Poland came in the form of rain, which began pouring at the start of the second half. Ernest Wilimowski then stole the whole show. His three goals evened the score at 4:4. Perácio scored for Brazil in the 71st minute.

The second half ended with a draw and the game went into overtime.

“But it was then when true tragedy struck. Instead of the first goal for Poles, Brazil scored twice. Both goals came from the invincible Leônidas, who even played with his bare feet after he struggled on the wet pitch.”

— as it was described by *Przegląd Sportowy* (1938, issue no. 45, p. 2).

In the 118th minute, Wilimowski defeated the Brazilian goalkeeper once more, setting the final result at 5:6.



Poland vs. Brazil during the 1938 World Cup in France. In the picture are Władysław Szczepaniak (in the middle), Leônidas da Silva (on the left) and Edward Madejski (on the right). Photo: National Digital Archives

An even fight

After the game, the Brazilians had a lot of respect and admiration for the way Poles performed. The then honorary president of the Brazilian federation, P. De Costa, said:

“I liked them so much that we already began talks for a game in Poland, next year. Poles are playing efficient football, they are mentally and physically resilient. They are also gentlemanly.”

In the rest of his statement, published in *Przegląd Sportowy*, he emphasised that the match against Poles was their toughest game of the tournament, and that the rest of the fixtures would be easier. Poles dropped out of the World Cup in great style. That year, Brazil ended up winning the bronze medal after defeating Sweden.

The rematch came no sooner than 36 years later, in 1974, when the Polish national team, led by Kazimierz Górski, defeated the *Canarinhos* 1:0 in the clash for third place in the World Cup.



Front page of *Polish Daily Zgoda* from July 8, 1974, donated to the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in July, 2018, by Frank Spula, the CEO of Alliance Printers & Publishers Inc. in Chicago

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