

San Francisco Italian Athletic Club

Club History

The dream of establishing a great athletic and social club in our Italian community has its roots in the old Latin saying, "Mens Sana in Copore Sano" meaning, "A sound Mind in a Sound Body."

In June 1917, some enthusiastic young men of Italian extraction living in North Beach organized a club called *Circolo Recreativo Italiano Virtus* with its clubrooms on Mason Street between Green and Vallejo Streets.

In 1919, the *Unione Sportiva Italiana* followed with headquarters at 120 Columbus Avenue. Shortly after that, another Italian club emerged called *Sporting Club Italia* located on Powell Street at the corner of Broadway.

There were numerous sporting events and social functions which has a tremendous positive impact on the Italian community. The activities of these three clubs were related by the Italian newspapers newspapers *La Voce Del Popolo* and *L'Italia*.

On the first Sunday of June 1919, the *Unione Sportiva Italiana* sponsored the first Statuto Race, producing a response among athletes and spectators alike that gave birth to a new spirit in the North Beach community. This classic foot race has continued through the years, with the exception of a two-year moratorium during World War II. The competitors were for many years dominated by athletes of Italian extraction.

The clubs, especially the *Virtus* and *Unione Sportiva*, took a very active part in the welfare of our community and engaged in dramatics, music, and such athletic events as long distance running, soccer, basketball, baseball, cycling, fencing, and gymnastics. Many fine young athletes of Italian extraction were developed. The members also took an active part in civic affairs, bringing glory and fame to their respective clubs, and to the Italian community.

Membership grew rapidly. The clubs prospered and gained prestige and stature in the community. The *Unione Sportiva Italiana* moved to larger quarters on the corner of Stockton and Green Streets, above the old Flag Theater, what is now the Columbus branch of the Bank of America.

In 1921, the *Sporting Club Italia* and the *Virtus* merged under the name of *Italia Virtus Club*, located at 415 Broadway. Another merger followed in 1926 when the *Unione Sportiva Italiana* and the *Italia Virtus* unified their strengths under the name of *Unione Sportiva Italiana Virtus* with their main objective that of erecting a modern clubhouse for their many members on the side of our present building.

The social and athletic activities progressed, however, the membership did not grow as expected. The thought of erecting a new clubhouse lay dormant.

Then came the crash of 1929 and the depression which saw the folding of many businesses and organizations. The leaders and members of the club were unprepared to meet the situation, and to make matters worse, the lease on the Stockton Street premises expired. The club was forced to move back to 415 Broadway. Although the clubrooms were modernized at a great expense with all the facilities needed for an athletic club, the location once again proved to be remote from the life of the Italian community. The combination of the location, a large bank loan, and the difficult times, brought our membership to a very low ebb. The officers and the few remaining members carried on the club's work with diligence and fought gallantly to keep their heads above water.

The Club had special reason to be proud of the membership that remained. They had surmounted an almost bewildering number of problems while still maintaining various social activities and continuing their sports achievements.

In 1933, plans for building a clubhouse were revived. Specifications were drawn, financing mapped out, and estimates were received. A new membership and building campaign were carried out. On June 1, 1936, under the new name of **Italian Athletic Club**, we moved into our new building, which we still proudly occupy and which is a monument to the Italian community of San Francisco.

The years that followed were plagued by hard times: the continuing depression and World War II. The club struggled to make ends meet due primarily to the heavy burden of the loans obtained for the construction of the clubhouse. No period in the history of our club tested the sinews of our finances, the membership, and of our athletic and social activities. Our club faced many problems that challenged its every purpose but never its existence.

A few years after World War II we began to enjoy a new era of prosperity. In 1946, we were able to start paying off the debt on the building. The following decade was probably the most prosperous for our club, by now known as the **San Francisco Athletic Club**. During this period we were able not only to pay off the mortgage in full, but to acquire an adjacent property as well.

In the fall of 1978, a group of enthusiastic members decided to re-insert the word Italian to the name. While they were proud of the accomplishments of the San Francisco Athletic Club, they were equally proud of their ethnic identity which had been removed during World War II. These members waged a vigorous campaign. It was presented to the membership, voted on and passed with an almost unanimous vote. On January 1, 1979, the club officially changed its name to the **San Francisco Italian Athletic Club**.

The **San Francisco Italian Athletic Club** is proud of its many athletic, cultural, and social achievements during its history. Most rewarding is the fact that it is in a very solid financial condition, active in sports sponsorship and participation, and offers a fine variety of social activities for the member and their families during the year. Our athletes, past and present, have an enviable record of victories as witnessed by the numerous trophies on display in our clubrooms.

But we are not satisfied to stop here. We continue to involve ourselves as an organization in Italian community affairs. The club continues to improve upon its sports and clubhouse facilities. We encourage our members to participate in athletic as well as social activities to bond, within

our membership, a relationship to their ethnicity. Progressiveness, a love of sports for the sake of sports, and spirit of confraternity are all synonymous with the *San Francisco Italian Athletic Club*.

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