

FOCUS

FOOTBALL IN CRISIS

It should have come as no surprise that Brian Clough, one-time England centre forward; tub-thumping socialist; manager of the European champions; media controversialist; should most accurately assess soccer's crisis and name the culprits: 'Yes, there's a lot of hooliganism in football — 92 League chairmen for a start'.

One would expect a manager who has taken two struggling clubs to their first ever League championships, and who has political aspirations via the Labour Party — another struggling club in need of a successful run? — to know who to attack.

Professional football is in crisis. Declining attendances; spiralling transfer fees; media over-exposure; defensive play and the ravages of inflation and large scale unemployment are threatening its extinction. The bite is on, and already the talk is of pro soccer not surviving another decade. Such speculation is not misplaced. From a peak of 41 million in 1949, paying customers have steadily declined to last season's all-time low of 24 million. With attendances over the first third of this season already down by 15%, the final total could well be below 20 million — an £8 million loss of income.

The worst hit are the shoestring outfits of the Fourth Division — gates down 28% — some may not be able to complete this year's fixtures. But no matter how well-heeled a club, the recession makes no exceptions. Liverpool, the most successful ever club, and accustomed to 40,000 plus home gates have seen their support in an area of 15% unemployment dwindle to twenties of thousand. Manchester United, traditionally Britain's most popular club, had an average home attendance last season of 51,566 — this year they will be fortunate to achieve their break-even figure of 45,000.

Concern that they will make a loss on the season however did not deter United from lashing out £1.2 million for Garry Birtles to add to the £3 million they have spent on players in the last three years. It is a sign of the times, following a spree of million pound deals in the last two years, that the Birtles move is the only significantly high transfer this season. Clubs are now more cautious in the market, and like their counterparts in industry are keen to cut wages and procure redundancies. Already 300 players are available for transfer — some clubs, like Middlesbrough and Bristol Rovers going so far as to entertain bids for any of their players. It is estimated that more than 250 players will have to sign on the dole, and that at the end of the season over 20% of full-time professionals, some 500, will be given a free transfer.

The popular explanation for this crisis is that saturation television coverage, football hooliganism, and lighter wallets — particularly among the unemployed — have driven away the paying customer. Some also blame the game for not being sufficiently entertaining. But while all those points are true to some degree or other; and while one can add changing social and cultural patterns, greater choice of leisure pursuits, and a reluctance to stand in the wind and the rain in nineteenth century conditions — resistance to the reality that 'they're in a whole new ball game' is rife.

Professional football clubs may have woken up to the fact that they are not immune to the exigencies of the late twentieth century, but they still find the pill hard to swallow. This month the League chairmen meet in a specially convened meeting to ratify crisis-solving proposals that came from an historic, two-day seminar in October when all 92 club chairmen met at a Solihull hotel — ironically in the Versailles suite — to thrash out a new profile for themselves.

Of course the League's Treaty of Versailles did no such thing — instead the self-made businessmen who have presided over this

self-made crisis proved once again their capacity to duck and dither, to compromise and fudge, is directly proportional to the seriousness of what is at stake. A programme could have been agreed that would have put a realistic ceiling on transfers; reduced the excessive number of games played; regionalised the lower divisions; reduced television coverage; improved facilities; opened clubs up to the local community and engendered a spirit of optimism and adventurism in a sport hidebound by its own backward and negative thinking.

Instead they avoided all the major issues, plumping for three points for a win to encourage positive football (it will probably do the opposite as clubs strive to hold on to a single goal lead); tinkered with transfer fees — a larger cash deposit to ease cash flow; called on the government to solve hooliganism; and generally mucked about with trivia. Nothing could better illustrate their 'never mind the ball, let's get on with the game' attitude than their recommendation to extend half-time from ten to fifteen minutes.

Brian Clough's castigation of League chairmen as the real football hooligans is no overstatement. It matters nothing whether



they ratify the Solihull Silliness this month or not. They may as well spend the afternoon at the cinema.

The game is no longer the thing, the fan is. No amount of lotteries; shirt sponsorship — televised or not; better dividends from the pools or grossly inflated returns from transferred players can gloss over the basic fact that if nobody will pay to watch you, the game is up. Nor will fiddling with the rules revolutionise the fare. As the Spurs manager Keith Burkinshaw says: 'There's nothing wrong with the rules of the game, if it was played in the spirit that was intended.'

And there would be nothing wrong with attendances if the club was administered in the way intended. Last month Willie Waddell former manager and now a director of Rangers FC, hardly the most progressive club in Britain, said: 'People have to feel they are getting value for money. At Ibrox we have spent £10 million on ground re-development and increased seating capacity. The result is that over the past year our attendances have risen, and hooliganism declined — and it has nothing to do with the way the team are playing.'