

Dave Triesman

Football in Decline



Some nine months ago on a 'phone-in' programme devoted to the 'crisis in British football', Stan of Shepherds Bush advocated that soccer's problems could be resolved over-night if all football hooligans were branded on the back of their hands.

The theory underlying this medieval sentiment was that as the hooligan was convicted by drum-head court martial rather than appearance before magistrates, a branding would be immediately administered. He had thought the matter through and discounted dyeing or tattooing as messier, more likely to fade, and difficult to see on the skin of black youths. When a terrace recidivist had accumulated three brandings, the zealots of the turnstile would refuse admission to the ground as they would be immediately able to detect three-time losers as they pushed then-gate money under the grill. A new rule would have to be introduced to the effect that those paying at the turnstile must do so with their right hand and would not be allowed to wear gloves however inclement the weather.

Now Stan, who turned out to be the most moderate caller that evening, had advanced this proposition to the then secretary of the Football League, Alan Hardaker, and more than once. No reply had ever been received (a discourtesy for which Stan thought Hardaker should be branded as well until I pointed out that Hardaker was dead). More of Hardaker, later.

Stan's rescue plan for British football was conceived in response to the annual declaration that the national winter sport was in crisis. While he, and Frank of Camden Town and first-time caller Clive of Putney attributed this to hooliganism, others had focused on different problems, player behaviour, referees — naturally, the weather, and Isobel of Golders Green — the Palestinians, and other solutions. Just as every late May produces 'crisis in cricket' fever, so football has a crisis each season in November. The regularity of these events is such that they deserve national holidays in their own right, like United Nations Day and

May Day. There is nothing new or unique about current problems in football (or cricket). It is just that they have never been solved.

The importance of football

Some might conclude that routine anxiety about a mere game is not worth the energy expended. They underestimate the place of soccer in British culture. It is the regular sport of approximately one million men and three quarters of a million schoolboys every week, forty weeks of the year. It is watched by a cumulative audience of over 25 million people each week, and the passions it engenders defy normal description. In other countries it has sparked wars, and in Britain the territorial disputes at the terraces have at least the appearance of running battles. In short, as an expression of physical culture, it arguably has greater leverage in culture as a whole than any other single sporting activity. Its centrality to the culture of leisure lies in its long history with roots in the fifteenth century, its universality in being played everywhere, in its expression of regional and local interests and in its relation to the lives of working class men, whose sport it has always been. For all its importance, the sport is collapsing financially and it appears incapable through its owners and administrators, of saving itself.

It is certainly worthwhile therefore to consider why football should be in so parlous a position, why average attendances ('gates') are down by nearly 17% since last season, and in their deepest trough since the war. It is my argument that it has little to do with the publicly proclaimed spectres, but a slow attrition, a cancer at the core of the sport that no one ever reports and one which, when alluded to by outspoken, richly-talented

critics like Brian Clough, is systematically ignored. First, though, a word about the myths.

THE 'VIOLENCE-CRISIS' MYTH

I offer no apology for violence on or near football grounds but cannot refrain from suggesting that it is no more the cause of football's long term problems than a sneeze is the cause of influenza. The argument about violence comes in several forms. At its simplest, it is attributed to the anti-social attitudes of young people. Variants propose that the behaviour of players stimulates additional aggression in young fans, that referees behave so inconsistently that it injects frustration into players and supporters alike. Remedies run the gamut from fencing the supporters in, keeping them out, through proposals for identity cards, all-seat grounds and, as we've seen, branding.

Let it be said from the outset that there is no proven relationship between football hooliganism and the level of gates. Indeed, other seasons have been vastly more violent although not always reported. The battles between the skinhead gangs of 1969-70 from the different 'ends' of football grounds, the near riots that brought us indellible characters like Millwall's Harry the Dog, Frankie Parrish and Dustman Bob of Tottenham, Arsenal's Johnny High and HJ Greenaway of Chelsea, make the current season look as sanitised as the famous North American 'family' league. Even pitch invasions aimed at changing the result are hardly an invention of this season. Rangers supporters did it at Newcastle in 1969. It happened again when Manchester United were relegated and when West Bromwich beat Leeds in 1971. Attendance figures were varied almost without regard to these events.

Machine-like football

Nor has there been a clear-cut demonstration of any relation between the number of cautions or sending-offs of players and incidents of crowd misbehaviour. Not only are such associations of events largely the creation of the media, but they underline, graphically, that what is understood about football hooliganism is itself largely dependent on how and whether it is reported. What is evidently neither understood nor reported is that the characteristics of bored or unemployed boys do not suddenly alter as they come off the train and walk to a football ground. They bring into football those problems and experiences they have outside it, the difference being that they are collected into a large group and presented with a powder keg of territorial loyalties and a

contest laden with passion.

What might hold their attention and divert them from mutual mayhem is, of course, entertainment in sufficient quantity. But that has not been the *raison d'être* of English football clubs since machine-like combinations won the World Cup for England in 1966 or the double for Arsenal in 1971. The lone voices of Billy Nicholson and, again, Brian Clough, in the mid-70s were regarded as faintly embarrassing as they talked about their teams having to give value to those who paid at the turnstiles. So bleak did matters become that Alex Stock

purchasing the right to see a game on a fairly regular basis, since casual consumption is unreliable in generating revenue. There is a refreshing simplicity about football that any monetarist would appreciate. To produce a game of football, one production company

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services compete to attract their attention. Support for football has traditionally come overwhelmingly from working-class men, whose disposable incomes have been limited by the usual range of financial constraints upon them. If football is to attract these consumers they must choose whether to pay to stand, for the most part, on gloomy, grimy, worn-down concrete terraces in the British winter, in uncompromisingly bleak buildings that look as though anything after the first flush of the Industrial Revolution passed them by.

Equally, they must choose not to spend the



commented (1972) that 'Recently my coach underwent a course on Attacking Football run by the FA. He didn't see a goal scored in the whole week'. Inevitably, it will be necessary to return to the question of who determines that football should not be entertaining. Fans have frequently received more entertainment at each others hands than from their teams. Suffice it to say that the perennial contest between the fans and the law, so hallowed by the press, is long in the making and not apparently, directly the cause of football's degeneration.

FOOTBALL AND FINANCE

The inner core of football's crisis, at least south of Hadrian's Wall, lies in its financial circumstance and in the economic climate in which it operates. It is essentially no different (except in some details) from other parts of the entertainment/consumption industries. Products are produced — games, club insignia, sport clothing and other by-products including gambling — and people choose whether to consume those products. Because the heart of the matter is the game itself, the consumer must be prepared to allot a certain proportion of disposable income to

(the professional club) must hire staff — playing, managing, administrative and ancillary — keep up a place of production, meet routine overheads including transportation costs, and, on occasion, make capital investments in either premises or playing/management staff. At any one time, the majority shares of at least one club and some 250 players are available for sale. To fund such an enterprise, the company must sell the right to attend the game (consume the product), the right to broadcast it (licence), a variety of subsidiary licences and products (programmes, team strips, cuddly toys, mementoes etc), and participation in various games of chance (lotteries, a share of the football pools etc). It follows, as night follows day, that if the cost is greater than the income, football will exist in Micawber-like plenitude or go out of business. Needless to say, in the background stand all the usual apparatuses of private business, the banks, shareholders, and what amount to trade federations, the Football League and Football Association.

Consumers too enjoy the same status as they would if they were being asked to buy any product. They choose how to dispose of part of their incomes, and many goods and

same amount on other sports, leisure activities, or, quite simply, on shopping. There is sound evidence for the fact that many more men of all classes now spend Saturdays involved in family shopping.

The blunt truth appears to be that the consumers are doing other things and spending their money in other ways. Moreover, as recession deepens, particularly in a period characterised by high rates of inflation, all these issues accentuate. Football's consumers have a great deal of flexibility in these choices (there is what economists call 'elasticity' in demand for the product); people are also more inclined to recognise that the money they spend on football removes the opportunity to spend the money on other products and services.

The growing costs of football

On the expenditure side, the costs to clubs of supplying football go up in real terms all the time in wages and capital expenditure. The rate of increase in costs has been higher than the average rate of inflation as in the whole entertainment industry. The top weekly rate paid to a footballer in 1893 was about 5/- to Derby's Stephen Bloomer, inventor of the high-speed dribble. By 1935, the England



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captain, Stan Cullis, took home £8 per week in the season. By the end of the 1950s, with the employers able to impose a wage limit, the top pay was in the order of £22 per week, until successful legal actions by George Eastham and the Professional Footballers Association, broke the monopoly restraint. Last season, over 50 English League players earned more than £25,000 in wages alone, the precise figure being compounded from basic payments and bonuses. The average increases for the stars of the game, to say nothing of their 5% cut of transfer fees, have been in the order of 25% per year since 1976, a rate far more rapid than general inflation. The wages of managerial-coaching staff have shown similar increases with billings for all items now double what they were six years ago.

Additionally, it is evident that given the massive amounts of capital required to buy players and improve dismal amenities, the pattern of financing the industry has had to change. New methods of financing capital requirements have appeared, and others are on the way. Few clubs have behaved like other capital-hungry commercial companies, and offered their shares on the market. Crystal Palace and Manchester United toyed with such schemes but appear to have recognised that all manner of people can acquire a share, admitting themselves to the magic circle that control the clubs. Clubs have generally gone to the banks for money raising substantial debts during the early 70s. It is known that several South Wales bank managers got themselves into acute difficulties with their head offices for lending huge sums to impecunious clubs with cash flows (as at Chelsea and Fulham) like baths without plugs. Other methods of financing major projects, notably new players, became more attractive adding complexity to player-

transfers. Part-exchange had long featured in the transfer market. Now were added hire-purchase arrangements, mortgages, low initial pricing with increments for first-team or international appearances, goals scored and the like. There is now private talk about leasing players from other clubs.

Yet just as these mechanisms were designed to enable clubs to pay super-inflationary transfer bills, where the £1m was no longer a rarity, they also meant that it was increasingly difficult to stitch together all the elements of a deal and to get the directors or the bank to fund parts of it. That and the sharp decline in gate income has begun the process of pushing prices down. Many of the traditional methods of financing football, however, remain intact and for the smaller clubs they are paramount. Here, gambling schemes yield a sizeable proportion of income now, but fundamental to the whole funding structure are 'loans' given by the directors. 'Loans' are to all intents and purposes gifts and it is not unknown for directors to invest between £30,000-£40,000 per annum.

The financial crisis

Thus with costs spiralling and income remaining at best stable, in most clubs falling, the firms that produce football do not, other than in exceptional cases, make any money. Of 92 clubs in the English Football League, only nine were profitable in 1978-79. The owners of British football make very little out of it; in fact, most of them spend rather than receive. Yet they still appear incapable of understanding that their product is marketed under poor conditions, is lacklustre, is subject to unrelenting competition from other goods and services, and, perhaps most telling of all, it is subject to the same recessionary pressures as the rest of the economy.

Therein lies the cause of the worsening of soccer's crisis. With upward of 2.5 million working people without jobs and sustained inflation in the cost of essential goods and services, the number of paying customers is collapsing. At an average price of £1.80 to stand on a weather-bitten terrace, or £2.80 for a less-than-comfortable seat, unemployed young fans will choose to spend such income as they have elsewhere. What is astonishing is how little the club directors and the press have recognised this tendency. The deeper the recession, the longer its duration, the fewer the numbers who will routinely go through the turnstiles. The decline is sharpest in the Third and Fourth Divisions where average gates are down by 23% and bankruptcies could become widespread. The core attraction of a national system of 92 clubs could easily evolve into a small super-League

comprising those who can pay their current bills. Even sensible cost-reducing schemes like regionalising the lower divisions cannot itself reverse the trend.

The recent decisions in Solihull to commence Sunday football and award three points for a win appear unlikely to have a traumatic effect. The three-point scheme, intended to heighten competition and entertainment has been tried over many years in the Isthmian League (at Jimmy Hill's suggestion), and the number of goals scored and the proportion of matches won has consistently declined. The maxim appears to be: get all 11 players behind the ball as you can't afford to lose.

MASTERS AND MEN

The fact that the owners, officials and media are not eager to identify the sources of the problems but prefer to blame the fans who still pay to see the game, or television coverage or whatever other myth can be resurrected, may lead one to wonder who it is that controls football, and how. It would be difficult to conceive of a group more exclusive as those in charge of the national sport.

At the apex sits the Management Committee of the Football Association who meet periodically in their headquarters at Lancaster Gate, typically isolated from the rest of the world by an ex-directory number. Aside from Professor Sir Harold Thompson of Oxford University, who rose to the pinnacle, his colleagues were born to the top table. The Earl of Harewood, the Marquis of Blandford, the Earl of Derby and, until he died, the Duke of Norfolk decorate the highest echelon, some military beef being added by an Air Chief Marshal, a Major General and an Admiral. They certainly have their connection with clubs, albeit Whites, the Turf, Bucks, the Junior Carlton, the Jockey Club and the Royal Yacht Squadron, though these clubs have little evident connection with football. Had the Association not appointed Ted Croker as Secretary, there is little doubt that the gerontocracy would have come close to vanishing without trace.

The Football League, an entirely separate entity, is, in one sense, even more exclusive. Taken at face value, it is run by the 92 League Club Chairmen whose periodic meetings, as their recent good news-value meeting in a Solihull motel, are hallmarked by perpetual anarchy since few conceive of themselves as having common interests. Whatever their internal divisions chairmen form a small community ('Football hooligans? Well there are the 92 club chairmen for a start'. — Brian Clough¹).



Directors as a whole are a small band, 586 in all, only 6.4 per club, and they wield absolute power in each club-dominion. Typically they are businessmen in the lines of trade dominant in their local neck of the woods. In the Midlands they tend to be from metal working and machine goods firms. In London they are often in property, insurance and brokerage. In the most illustrious boards, the parallel directorships are truly impressive. The Arsenal Board, for example, is littered with cotton barons, diamond mine owners and the occasional ex-Lord Mayor. It had, until recently, a co-owner of Wembley stadium. Even in loss-making clubs, the exclusiveness is both deliberate and defended. The story of the Clough/Taylor dismissal at Derby County is instructive for when the Supporters Movement, seeking to restore the managerial team, tried to buy the voting shares, they found that the old guard around chairman Sam Longson simply increased the number of voting shares they held.

Splendid isolation

Riveted by a parochial concern with their club alone, indifferent to football as a whole, and utterly powerful in their local control, it is evident that they have been ill-adept at facing current crises. They have failed to organise internally, or even to bargain with external interests like television or the pools with any success. Most of all, they have steadfastly fought to keep the voices of the players, their union, the staff and the supporters away from the club's affairs, much as the directors of any firm do not open the boardroom to workforce or consumers. They have, in consequence, insulated

themselves from any outside voice, criticism or statement of the facts. On the few occasions when the idea of full-membership clubs, with everyone who cares to join having access to discussion and decision, has been mentioned it has drawn gasps of incredulity from soccer's hierarchy. The irony appears to me to be that the parochial feudalism of the clubs has left a power vacuum at the centre of British football. It might have provided a key opportunity for someone with both a brief to be concerned with the game nationally and who was free to analyse the fundamental problems. Such a model was adopted in the United States in the appointment of Welshman Phil Woosnam as Soccer Commissioner.

The League however has never taken advantage of the vacuum. Its key paid official over a fifteen year period was Alan Hardaker whose power was such that he had the League headquarters moved from its

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long-time home at Preston to his own home town, Lytham St Annes, a bracing Lancashire resort. Hardaker, who simply disliked driving to Preston, thus produced that strange anomaly by which everyone had to gravitate to the least probable place in England to conduct football's national business. As to the remainder of his career, he is unlikely to be remembered for his

invention of the Texaco, Watney and Anglo-Italian Cups. The consequence of these innovations was that the season ran from early August to late June, in some seasons leaving under a full month without football. Hardaker took the view that it generated new revenue although, unfortunately, exhausted players, a matter to be remedied by desisting from other competitions. As he put it World Cup, European Cups — you can live without them'. These local cups which like the annual sale to Littlewoods of the rights to publish the fixture list for absurdly low prices, were hardly blessed with success. They were directed at resolving financial problems but failed to comprehend the economic and social structure in which football lives. The reform of ownership and membership of clubs was left untouched, just as it had been by the Chester Report on the state of soccer in 1968, a report which might have but didn't stir the dust that had settled on Hardaker.

WHOSE GAME?

If British professional football is to survive in the long term as a viable system involving a reasonable number of clubs supported by live fans, then it cannot simply subsist under the aegis of those who have either bought their way to membership of the exclusive club of directors or have managed to seize control of

¹ Arsenal Chairman Dennis Hill-Wood responded 'I have never been so insulted by anyone in football as by this little upstart puppy. He keeps appearing on TV saying that the reason football is failing is because of the 92 club chairmen in the League. I am thoroughly sick of it. Completely fed up with it.'

the reins of Lytharn. There is a long and well-documented history of their unwillingness to countenance change. Chairmen of known progressive sentiment, like Peter Swales of Manchester City, are not only a rarity but treated with suspicion by their colleagues. In most cases, the inheritance of clubs, as by the Wales' of Tottenham or the Mears' of Chelsea, will maintain the current feudal profile.

The time has surely come when the clubs become membership organisations. They should be open to membership by anyone wanting to join and pay an annual fee, and they should be governed by their members. There is little doubt that arrangements for a management structure involving representatives of members, players and the commercial apparatus could be achieved. In those circumstances it seems at least possible that intelligent discussions could take place on how to develop the major assets held in arenas, training facilities and other resources as key community sports centres. With such a set-up, they might both serve their communities and engage in wider, financially viable provision. They could become major leisure providers across a range of activities. Their resources could be intensively used. They would inevitably sell certain of these services to a wider public. Their connection

with municipalities could be developed.

When proposals of this kind emerge in discussions within football, the response is predictable. Directors and some managers take the view that a wider public is incapable of sensible engagement in club direction. They tend to state that it would be impossible to operate a club and, indeed, that the directorial circle has to be so concentrated that even past, tried employees of the club should have no role. Bill Shankly after remarkable years at Liverpool has had to while away his time at Everton so as to avoid accusations of interference in his old club.

Mass membership clubs

Yet there are many continental clubs based on precisely the membership-participation axis, where involvement of club members gives them access to vast leisure resources and where, during home matches, the club members produce stewarding and reasonable order rather than embattlement on the terraces. In Latin America such arrangements are equally normal.

Curiously, the other objections tend to come from among the very small number of socialists who take an active interest in football who distrust further commercial development of football clubs. Realistically, football must be financed to survive and its

current problems stem from the quasi-feudal character of its operators. It is arguable that even more viable capitalist forms of organisation would be an advance. Many commercially sound European clubs run coaching and youth leagues for large numbers of young players free of charge with professional footballers heavily involved in the endeavour. They also provide numerous other sports, paid for by adults but free or subsidised for children.

On a basis of the kind considered here, the character of the FA and Football League would inevitably change as the narrow basis of control was removed. That must, aside from its financial sense, be a more acceptable way of controlling a national sport and leisure interest. Either oversight of the final demise of a collapsing monolith is left to about six businessmen per club, or football takes a more creative path. Any sceptic would do well to look at a club like Benfica, whose position provides the best possible summary. It currently has over 60,000 club members. They contribute, through subscription and buying various services provided by their club, some 50% of its income each year. They, in the final analysis, control Benfica. It is not a football club with which one associates either chaos or lack of success. It could happen here. •

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