

How Football Can Bounce Back

For those on the Left who see sport and recreation as a diversion from the real struggle, the past few weeks should have been a useful lesson. We've grown used to Mrs Thatcher's speculators being licensed to extract what they can from every sector of British society. Privatising public services, cuts in the health service and most recently the 'Tell Sid' gas venture have been accomplished without much discernible anger from the 'man in the street'. But suddenly, terms such as asset stripping and speculative development are being bandied around on the terraces and in the tea rooms of our football clubs. Football, in spite of its bad press and unfashionable reputation with sociologists, is still *the* British national game. It is under attack and the fans don't like it.

The news that Marler Estates had purchased Queens Park Rangers football club, to add to their ownership of Fulham and its Craven Cottage ground and that they intended to merge Fulham with QPR on the Loftus Road ground hit the football world like a bomb (they were already Chelsea's landlords owning Stamford Bridge). David Bulstrode, chairman of Fulham and Marler Estates, must have known the immediate reaction would be unfavourable. What he did not expect was the united nature of the opposition, not just from the regular fans of both Fulham and QPR, but from the Football League, from sleeping fans who hadn't been near Fulham since the 'good old days' and from local people who had never been inside the grounds in their lives.

The attendances at Fulham matches have been dropping steadily, especially since the previous owner and chairman, Ernie Clay, started to sell off the best players and the club was relegated to the 3rd division. Clay had bought the ground from the Church Commissioners for £900,000.

His own partial redevelopment plan for Craven Cottage was rejected by Hammersmith and Fulham council and after a 'Clay Out' campaign, he sold out to Marler Estates, making an estimated £4m profit.

At the time Bulstrode was said to have given a verbal promise that soccer would stay at Fulham for a guaranteed further three years. But Bulstrode represents a new breed of soccer chairman who put profit before promises. These sort of men are true Thatcherites. Entrepreneurs who can take an 'idle' patch of grass and turn it into a handsome financial reward. The sort of men to whom a football tradition means nothing, who have no loyalty to anything but their own advancement. The truth is, of course, that Marler Estates have never claimed to love football and to be involved because they wanted to promote the game. As Irving Scholar, chairman of Tottenham Hotspur, said 'Marler Estates were always property developers first and last'.

Football has shown a remarkable unity in face of the most serious threat yet to its survival in London. The outpouring of emotion has led to the occupation of pitches being praised by commentators and sports reporters. Rival club fans have united to show their opposition to mergers. The Football Association, the Football League and the Players' Union have joined together. Even Jimmy Hill has stepped off his papal throne. Two thousand people turned up to a public meeting to protest. The reaction has been far more intense than anyone could have thought possible considering the cloud hanging over football since the Heysel stadium disaster and the ban on our clubs playing in Europe.

The announcement of a backdown on the merger plan has given the game a short breathing space, but Bulstrode is determined to

press ahead with the plans to build luxury housing on the Craven Cottage site. To their credit, the local council is showing real interest but if only a few more politicians, particularly at local level, had taken an interest much earlier then maybe the situation would never have arisen.

The Football League already has powers to prevent clubs from changing titles or transferring property without permission. Yet nothing was done to investigate earlier when Marler Estates first bought Fulham. The only way forward for most football clubs today is in genuine cooperation with local councils. Schemes which will involve a commitment from the club to community use of the ground; opportunities for supporters to have a real say in how the club is run; and a recognition from all concerned that a football club is more than just a development prospect.

In turn Labour councils have to stop knee-jerk opposition to all development proposals. If the local authorities took the initiative and were prepared to look at more imaginative mixed-tenure housing schemes then there would be no need for any of London football clubs to fold. It is time for councils to be sitting around tables with their local clubs, the Football Trust and the League, to look realistically at the future of their clubs.

Football's fightback against property speculators could, if the League itself is responsive and sensible, bring the game closer than ever to the people on whom it depends. It might just be that those who have been urging the Labour Party to put sport firmly on its political agenda may see some progress towards this. In the meantime politicians could well consider carefully that the average football voter has learnt more about the unacceptable workings of insider dealings and other City of London practices, from being a football supporter than from any amount of political statements from the House of Commons. •

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