

SPORT Foul Play

Some of sport's most hallowed institutions have taken a battering over the past year. Steve Wagg examines the fate of Lester Piggot and David Pleat and considers the public and private morality of sportspeople. Gary Whannel relates how the World Athletics Championships are mounting a strong challenge to the supremacy of the Olympics. And John Williams assesses the new campaign against the terrace hooligans.

Top level sport long since ceased to be a social world in isolation. The popular press and broadcasting media saw to that. They turned it into a fairy land, inhabited by 'the famous'. This land is, in one sense, no more real than other airless, commercially-generated worlds that are home to *The Smurfs*, *The Gummi Bears* or *The Masters of the Universe*. But, in 'Sportland', as 1987 again proved, it is often the bad-dies, armed to their teeth with myths and double standards, that seem to win.

In May 1987, British first-class cricket opened up without the game's great folk hero, Ian Botham. Now, despite his bigheartedness, there are many things about Ian Botham that are difficult to like. But, when the cricket authorities banned him for six weeks, it was for admitting that he'd once smoked a marijuana cigarette. No matter that most MCC members, not to mention the red noses of Fleet Street, would experience more intoxication than this in their lunch hour, nor that England selector Fred Titmus had recently been prosecuted for drink-driving but was still free to play.

In September, *The Sun* claimed on its front page that Tottenham Hotspur manager David Pleat had, while still managing Luton Town, paid a young woman prostitute. Pleat kept a dignified silence but when *The Sun* later claimed that Pleat was kerbcrawling in London bent on similar transactions, Tottenham chair Irving Scholar showed his manager, one of football's more sensitive and thoughtful men, the door. Scholar remarked, enigmatically, that Spurs was a 'family club'.

Around the same time, ex-

champion jockey and now racehorse trainer Lester Piggot went to prison after pleading guilty to tax evasion. Piggot, according to racing people, had been 'very silly' and had paid the price of the 'insecurity' that had afflicted him since childhood. Meanwhile, ex-British Olympic athlete David Jenkins confessed in a California court to supplying illegal drugs to athletes. Morally distasteful though Jenkins' activities may have been, his case, and cases like it, reinforce myths: that drug-taking is abnormal in society; that the world of sport is separate from a 'real world' in which people strive to win at all costs; that most athletes don't take stimulants - or won't take them from now on. Unless and until societies adjust their current conviction that 'winning isn't the main thing, it's the only thing', there will be plenty of people to take Jenkins' place.

Robert Maxwell, I suppose, is unlikely to be one of them. But, in November 1987, Maxwell was the cause of some disquiet to the men who run the Football League. His effective control of three league clubs - Oxford United, Derby County and Watford - as well as a significant section of the sports press that chronicles these matters, exposed further the myth of open competition in a league long since dominated by wealthy, big-city clubs and brought home to it the realities of the world outside.

To conclude, the football results for the first day of the season 1987-8 might read: Maxwell City 1 Maxwell Wednesday 1 (Good away point for Wednesday, this); Maxwell Athletic 2 ... •



Women take to the track in world athletics

Inside Track

The final image the British media used to sum up the World Athletics Championships last year was the joy of Fatima Whitbread at her javelin victory. That Fatima should win was, despite her pre-Rome injury agonies, no great surprise, although it was, of course, a great achievement. The surprise was that she was the only British winner, and consequently, for the first time in more than a decade, our most successful athlete is female.

Not since Mary Peters won an Olympic gold in the pentathlon in 1972 has this been the case. This is all the more interesting because the success of Fatima Whitbread and Tessa Sander-

son in the javelin in recent years marks a distinct break with our traditional weakness in field events, at precisely the time when more women are involved in weight training and female muscularity is seen as less socially deviant.

But possibly a still more significant transformation that the championships are a sign of is the rapid developments in African athletics. Barring the steeplechase, African athletes won every race longer than 400m. Potentially the African success marks only the beginning of massive sporting advance by the Third World.

The World Athletics Championship is now felt to deserve the title 'world'. The Olympic Games was always felt to provide its premier sport, athletics, with a ready-made world championships, but this status



has been eroded by a succession of boycotts. If there is no boycott of the 1988 Olympics in Seoul it will be the first time in 16 years that the Olympics can claim to have brought all the world's athletes together. Unlike the Olympics, the World Athletics Championships are not burdened with layers of neo-pagan ritual and nationalistic pomp and ceremony. It is possible to view the events as primarily athletic contests rather than as a symbolic East v West confrontation, and this adds considerably to the pleasure.

Radio Times (Aug 29 1987) previewed the event with a cover featuring Fatima Whitbread and Daley Thompson, somewhat brutalised by the phrase: 'Enter the gladiators'. No killing was required, but they did both fulfil certain elements

of the myth of the sporting hero. If Fatima triumphed against adversity and injury, Daley won a different and unexpected triumph. Suffering from an injury that he refused to acknowledge beforehand, or blame afterwards, he nevertheless competed in all 10 events of that most gruelling of contests, the decathlon, when it would have been so easy to have gracefully withdrawn. Generous in defeat, the man often regarded as the ultimate competitor turned out, with pleasant irony, to be also a closet Olympian, valuing the taking part and the winning.

I know it's all a tv spectacle and cash reward. But in a world that offers as heroes in 1987 the likes of Richard Branson and Margaret Thatcher, I'm grateful to have Fatima and Daley around.'

Terror On The Terraces

A few weeks ago, around the time when 'Captain' Bob (Maxwell) was greedily collecting first division football clubs and the FA was agonising over the prospects of the Fosters Lager (previously FA) Cup for a mere £12m sponsorship, another 'football' story got rather less attention from the leader writers. At Swindon, in November, a 17-year-old Plymouth Argyle fan, an epileptic, died after being kicked about the head on the way to a game by a reported gang of 30 locals. The incident itself is fairly routine; only the outcome is unusual and it stirred a few of the nationals to make space for a couple of lines in the inside pages.

Football's overly masculine rituals were, in fact, remarkably *out* of the headlines in 87. Admittedly, a sober *Guardian* scribe did suggest the atmosphere at a recent match to be better suited to Beirut than grey Manchester. Apart from occasional excesses of this kind, the press fascination with the overplayed 'football fascists' stories, and the violence of *players*, soccer agro in Britain has not been making the news. English clubs and their journalist followers are eager, of course, to be accepted back into European competition after three years in exile. Discretion in such matters, therefore, is bound to be recommended.

This year's European championships, in West Germany, with England included, might test the resolve of the European authorities. *The Times'* recommendation that English excesses might be tempered if our fans were made to *book in advance* for the two-week tournament shows what little grasp the establishment has of the nature of the problems facing football and our towns and cities in the 1980s. Dealing constructively with the 'problem' of urban maleness and the aggressive national-

ism which such visits evoke goes way beyond football's limited scope, though the game itself reflects many of the macho preoccupations of the terraces.

On the domestic scene, 1987 was the year of the membership scheme and the away-fan ban. The former, a government brainwave, was imposed on clubs, most of whom remain reluctant to establish any real links with the fans whose support they crave. The aims and functions of 'membership' remain unclear. (It can hardly be expected to curb the hoolies). But the approach smacks of a familiar government tack: devolving responsibility for dealing with difficult social problems largely onto the *victims* of them.

The away-fan restriction at Luton, championed by local Tory MP and club chairman, David Evans, has been one of the populist crusades of the year. It is an issue on which the Left has remained noticeably silent. The largely Muslim community near the Luton ground seem in little doubt that limits on the travel of a few football fans is a small price to pay for their own release from Saturday racism and threat. Local shoppers don't seem to miss the rowdies either. Needless to say, most football fans outside Luton don't see it this way, but these are issues football ignores at its peril.

Notwithstanding the obvious local political interests involved, the Luton approach has major and worrying implications for civil liberties as well as highlighting just how unloved some local clubs are.

On a more unambiguously positive note, 'alternative' supporters' movements - noticeably the Football Supporters' Association and challenging and entertaining football fanzines - continue to grow in number and strength. The more progressive voices from the terraces are still weak but getting louder. (Even the occasional female voice is heard.) One day the clubs might find they have no alternative but to listen. •