

IS THIS FOOTBALL THE FOOTBALL WE FELL IN LOVE WITH?

Is football becoming what it was never supposed to be? Is the sport turning into one for the elite? Are fans losing their voice to the commercial supers? This piece asks the difficult questions about the modern game.



‘You going to the match on Saturday?’ The question used to come up towards the end of the week as playground chat turned to thoughts of the weekend. Occasionally there

would be a game anticipated weeks in advance, and thoughts would turn early to plans to get in. Those plans would consist of little more than getting to the ground a bit earlier than usual to get near the front of the queue. Going to the game was never difficult. Football was always there if we wanted it. And if we didn't, there would be another time. The ease of access to the game played a significant, arguably the significant, part in its popularisation.

Football's grip on the popular imagination, and the embrace of the game by a mass population, has been written about very thoroughly. In the introduction to his 1968 masterpiece *The Football Man*, Arthur Hopcraft had this to say: "The point about football in Britain is that it is not just a sport people take to...it is inherent in the people. It is built into the urban psyche, as much a common experience to our children as are uncles and school. It is not a phenomenon; it is an everyday matter. The way we play the game, organise and reward it reflects the kind of community we are."

It is easy, when waxing lyrical about the cultural heft of the beautiful game, to forget quite how extraordinary the embrace of football has been. Imagine, if you can, that you are a historian at some time far in the future, examining British history from 1850–2000. One of the trends you pick up on is a folk pursuit that began to be codified and organised by a small group of relatively privileged school students and masters. From a raucous, freeform leisure pursuit is forged a game with a precise set of rules, and clubs are formed to compete under those rules. The sport

becomes more organised. In just over 50 years, 27 million people are going to see teams compete regularly. Ten years later that number is 40 million. Great gatherings of over 70,000 are not uncommon for a single game. Clubs become symbols of regional pride. The game is used by mass media to build audience. When the national teams play millions gather in private and public spaces to watch on TV. This small island is as obsessed by the sport as it is by the political and social issues of the day. Arguably more so. After 100 years the game in Britain stands on the verge of becoming one of the most successful global businesses.

A century is nothing in the grand sweep of history. But when you live the day-to-day of the present it can be difficult to judge quite how big and important something is. Organised football has been around for far less time than music, painting, literature, cooking, woodwork, housebuilding, engineering – far less time than most things. But football dominates to an extraordinary degree. Because, as Hopcraft says, it is inherent to the people.

But. Building shelter is inherent to the people. Finding and treating and eating food is inherent to the people. How did a game get to be, not just on a level, but to become considered more inherent? And how did it do so in such a short time? The answer is ease of access.

The people embraced football because it encouraged them to. It actively sought them out in great numbers and, having done so, it provided escape and hope and joy. Ease of

access meant that many people could attend regularly and share and pass on their experience. And in so doing they made football an integral part of life. Inherent to the people. But not just in a practical sense. Football inspired, it made us dream, it thrilled and excited us, it was a thing of beauty in what often were the grimmest of surroundings. And above all, it was easy to get to. It remained so for some time. But that has changed.

To fully understand why and how it is changing, we need to understand one of the great ironies of the modern game. And that is that the commercialisation that threatens to make the game an elite pursuit is actually the thing that originally stopped it becoming an elite pursuit. Charging spectators to watch teams meant teams could pay players to play. If players could not be paid, then the game could only be played by those who did not need paying. By definition, only an elite. That would inevitably have meant fewer players and fewer teams. But it would also have meant that the great mass of spectators were not able to see people like them. That was important for many reasons, but significantly because the example of someone like you succeeding is infinitely more attractive than the spectacle of someone who is nothing like you succeeding.

Commerce made football the people's game because it enabled the people to be part of it on and off the pitch. But those early commercial pioneers recognised what the modern game is in danger of forgetting – that attracting a community is more successful than attracting a lot of

individuals. As David Goldblatt observed in *The Game of our Lives*: "We go to the football together, and not just as a single unstructured mob, but as couples, families of all kinds in various cross-generational combinations, as well as in loose skeins of acquaintance and tight networks of friends."

Our ability to go to the game together is what made football inherent to the people. And our ability to go to the game together was based on ease of access. But, in the top levels of the game, ease of access is almost a folk memory. If you follow one of the top clubs now, you will almost certainly have to be a member of a club scheme or a season ticket holder to ensure regular access to home games. And at the very top clubs, even most season ticket holders cannot be guaranteed access to away games, cup semi-finals or finals. Tickets go on sale and sell out weeks and months before games are played. Having a conversation about going to the game on a Thursday and turning up on a Saturday is almost entirely a thing of the past.

And there's more. Games now are subject to late change. They could be moved for TV, or moved because of one or other club's progress in another competition. Saturday 3pm has become any one of six time slots between Friday and Monday evening if you follow a Premier League club. Research by supporters groups into the effect of TV fixture scheduling on Premier League fans found that season ticket holders buying a ticket to every home game their club played could expect 70% of those games to change from

what was announced when the fixtures came out at the start of the season. That's 13 out of 19 home games. Fans are paying up front for something they don't know they can watch. And a season ticket, once a sign of commitment rewarded with a discount for paying up front, is now a premium product with a price to match.

Booking trains becomes a matter of educated guesswork – and the later you leave booking, the more expensive the fare becomes. Train timings and the vagaries of the fixture list often mean a hotel stay is required – with room rates rising the closer to the date they are booked. Following your team regularly requires organisation and dedication – it takes up time and it costs. And getting tickets for the game is an issue. With the average away allocation in the Premier League around 2,800 tickets, supply is way short of demand, with some clubs having upwards of 20,000 to 30,000 season ticket holders. It's generally accepted that those that go to the most matches should have that loyalty rewarded by being able to have a better chance of getting those away tickets. But what this does is create an elite class of fan, able to attend matches because they are able to attend matches.

The alternative, an entirely random allocation of tickets, would not only be widely perceived as unfair, it would preclude any forward planning, thereby making access to those cheaper train fares and hotel rooms more expensive. Choose to drive and you find that's discouraged as modern stadiums are public transport destinations – part of an

attempt to get traffic off our overclogged roads.

Travel to away games in Europe and you can factor in getting treated worse than pretty much any other paying customer of a leisure pursuit. Policing that is suspicious at best, poor views, facilities for which the word 'basic' would be an overstatement. There's not much glamour about the Champions League experience for travelling fans.

The planning, the expense, the time and thought required – it's all a long way from deciding to turn up early if it's a big game. For the most dedicated fans, following your team home and away takes almost full-time commitment. For a growing number, even just getting to home games requires more time, effort and money than seems entirely sensible. Increasingly, fans are overstretching themselves. If you cut the number of games, if you give up your season ticket because times are tight, you are out of the equation. Demand is so high that others will take your place. According to figures gathered by the Premier League, 97% of available tickets are sold.

All this could be countered by saying that following your team is a choice. And like any choice, like any hobby, it requires money and time and effort, just like scuba diving or off-roading or collecting stamps. But none of those pursuits have ever been described as inherent to the people. Football is the successful business it is because of the devotion and passion it inspires. It was the ability to go to the game, and to do so regularly, that was and still largely is

a key element in making football so popular. The cold business analysis sees supply and demand as very simple. If demand is greater than supply, the price keeps going up until a natural equilibrium is reached. But what that fails to recognise is what drives demand. In football's case, as I've argued, demand was driven by ease of access. That's why the cliché about The People's Game endures.

I'm not arguing that football's bubble is about to burst any time soon. And I'm certainly not saying that what is happening is anything new. But the relationship between the people and the game is being fundamentally changed and it's been going on for long enough to warrant some serious examination of what that means for the future of the game. Slowly but surely, going to the football – certainly at the top levels of the game – is being turned into a specialist pursuit, something that takes more dedication than many are prepared or able to put in. One of the manifestations of that can be seen in the increasing age profile of many football crowds. I often say that when I started going to games in the 1970s, a lot of the people around me were my age, and they still are. That's partly because of rising prices. But it's also because the ease of access has largely gone. How many 17-year-olds in an era of instant delivery and with a huge variety of quality entertainment on offer want to spend time booking up going to a football match months ahead of the game?

For many who own football clubs, it doesn't matter what the long-term effect on the game is. They are there now, while

the times are good and the pickings bountiful and, like any good business person, they will move on once that begins to change. They can do that because there is no organisation that effectively protects the game; that is able to safeguard the treasure that is football for future generations. The FA gave up even the pretence of being that organisation years ago. The game comes second to the clubs – they are brands now – that play it. Clubs are all-powerful, and as businesses their job is to ensure they are more successful than all the competition. The fact that doing so might reduce the appeal of the competition itself is far too long-term a worry to be concerned about now. Long-term worries are not good business.

So what can be done? It's hard to see any change in direction coming without there being a body with the will and the ability to recognise and safeguard the future of the game that took such a grip on us. That body would have to successfully challenge the aggressive free-market nature of the modern football business, to reassert the primacy of the game over the clubs, to seek a better balance between short-term profit for the few and long-term benefit for the many. And here it is impossible not to remember Hopcraft's words: "The way we play the game, organise and reward it reflects the kind of community we are". These questions are important for football, but raise issues bigger than football.

I've no doubt some reading this will see it as not living in the real world, a mixture of romanticism and nostalgia for mythical better days. The football business is booming,

demand is huge, other businesses want to be associated with football because it is so popular. So, well, inherent to the people. But I'd argue that by restricting access to the game – and I mean the live spectacle, not the TV product – that deep connection that has made football what it is is being thrown away. The real value of the game is not being considered. If it becomes just another product, just another pursuit for a closed audience, it is no longer part of who we are.

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