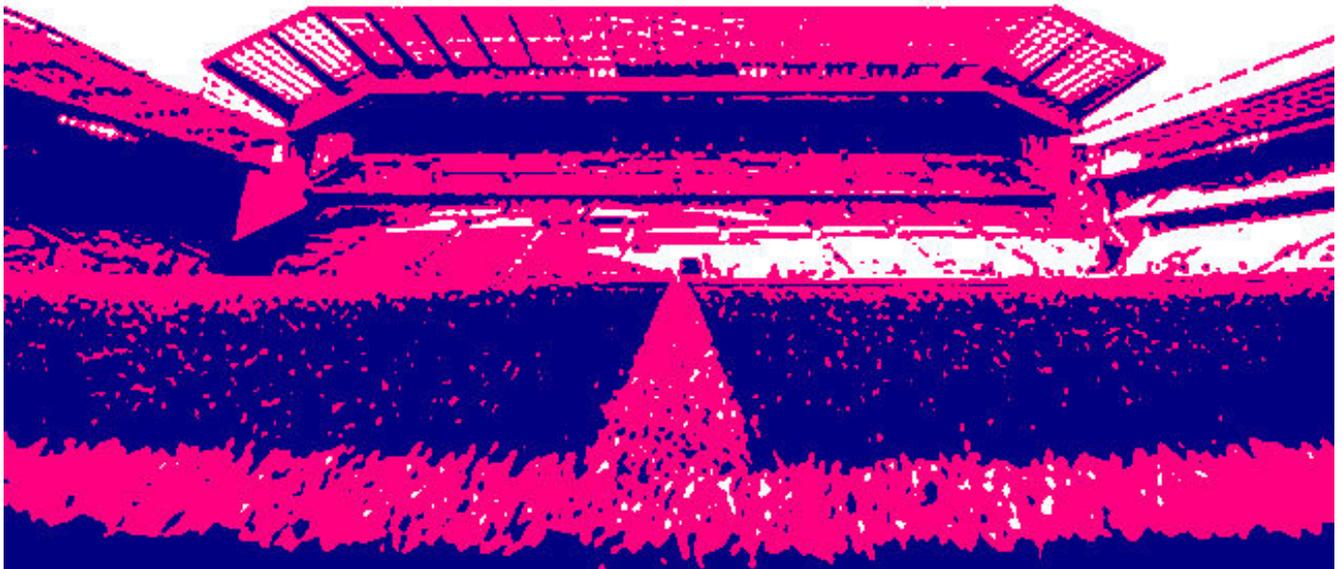


COVID-19: Where does the beautiful game go from here?

[Martin Cloake](#) Mar 30, 2020



All the norms have changed. The COVID-19 pandemic is the kind of all-encompassing event we used to read about in the history books or watch unfold in disaster films. It has the potential to fundamentally change everything. Few, if any, of us were prepared for it, and so we are struggling to make sense of a changed reality.

In such circumstances, we all re-evaluate what we think is important. Which is why many of the conversations about football since all this revealed its true enormity have been prefaced with the words "Football isn't important any more".

We're embarrassed to talk about a game when people are dying and when we don't know what kind of world we will be living in once the economy starts up again.

But as someone – there's some discussion about whether it was Pope John Paul II or Carlo Ancelotti, the two are easily confused – once observed: "Of all the unimportant things, football is the most important". So, perhaps incongruously, conversation about football continues in the midst of the crisis. Some of that conversation is of the nostalgic kind, providing a reminder of pleasures past and better times. People seem okay with that. But there's another type of conversation that is sometimes not as well received. The conversation about what happens next.

The unease about discussing how to, or even whether to, finish the current season, about how the whole circus restarts, is partly down to the seriousness of the current health emergency. But it is also fuelled by another source of unease – the one about the riches and self-importance of the modern game. The questions and doubts already harboured by many have been brought into sharper perspective by the global health crisis.

But let's remember that observation about football being the most important of the unimportant things. It's a neat formulation because of the sharp perspective it reveals. And it points us towards why it is important to be thinking about what happens next. In times of crisis, one factor that helps people get through is the thought that there will be

better times ahead.

At some stage, the pandemic will be brought under control. Activity will begin again and, further down the line, the sports industry will gear up once more. That is when the things that are now unimportant will be important again. And why some thought must be given to them now.

People involved in football are not health workers or delivery drivers or cleaners or supermarket workers or economists. They can't make a useful, direct contribution to combatting the crisis right now other than observing social distancing measures, helping to spread the public health message and supporting the more vulnerable members of their communities. That's not a judgement, it's a fact. Those of us not involved in the front-line effort need to focus on the things we can do best, the things that will be needed when the world starts up again. Because the people who value those things, who will want to embrace them as part of the return to normality, won't thank us if we haven't.

The clubs, the governing authorities and the players' union have been talking about what happens next. They are not doing so because they think football is more important than the crisis. They are doing it because they are responsible for football. The broadcasters are also involved. But so far little has been heard of any collective fans' view.

This is understandable. Fans are not fans full time. We have other more pressing priorities. And the situation is changing

fast, making the business of taking a position very difficult. But the fans' perspective is an important one and it needs to be part of the conversation. If it is not argued for, it will be swept aside and when the game eventually restarts, it will be even more disconnected from its audience.

Whether we like it or not, there are questions to be faced now. There are some very difficult problems to confront. New thinking will be required. And above all partnership will be needed. Genuine partnership. So having established that we are dealing with the most important of the unimportant things, let's have that discussion.

Football stopped mid-campaign. Steps 3 to 7 of the pyramid have declared the season null and void. So have Tiers 3 to 7 of the women's game – a move decided upon it seems with little or no consultation with the clubs or the fans. The option to null and void the Premier League remains. Doing so would require international agreement, although so would any solution. But to me, it seems a flawed option. The sense of unfinished business would not go away, and it's possible there could be legal challenges from clubs that feel they would miss out on a position they had earned.

It's easy to dismiss the 'unfinished business' argument as one that says who wins the league and gets relegated is more important than the life and death of tens of thousands of people. I don't think it is anything of the sort. Not stopping competition would have put football above all

else. Competition was rightly stopped, but restarting it when it is safe and possible to do so seems to me to be the right thing to do. Of course, the argument is that restarting a season after what could be a long break would make it a Trigger's Broom season – a reference to the character in Only Fools and Horses who had used the same broom for years but had replaced the head and handle many times. But given that the season is disrupted anyway, I think it's a less bad option than pretending the season never happened. And with less legal risk.

Completing the season raises the prospect of playing games behind closed doors. I don't think that is a viable solution, because it is impractical. If there is still a threat from COVID-19, there is a threat to the people who will be needed to stage a game. Those people will need to travel, and they will need to work in close proximity. Then there's the potential for fans to try to get to the games anyway. The Professional Footballers' Association has rightly expressed doubts about the BCD option because of the potential risk to its members. The simple fact is that if games are unsafe to play with fans present, they are unsafe to play with anyone present.

So, in my view, the season should be completed when it is safe and possible for games to be staged as normal. Taking that option means recognising that it could take some time, so I think the decision to cancel the 2020/21 season needs to be considered. That will free up time to complete this season and get the game back on track in future.

Of course, that is not without complication. Player contracts will need looking at, international agreement will be needed, and the severe financial implications will need mitigating. For many clubs, a season without income means they will cease to exist. So we need to find out whether the football industry is able to access any of the government support that will be needed for so many other sectors of our economy.

And, while it may be a counter-intuitive thought for many, that support might well be needed even at the top levels of a game commonly thought to be awash with cash.

Football clubs get their money from three main sources – commercial income, broadcasting fees, and fans on the gate.

Commercial income is likely to be severely squeezed after the economy has closed down for an extended period. The chances of avoiding a severe recession seem slim to non-existent. If the money from advertisers and sponsors is not there, it can't be magicked up, so for this one reason alone expectations of income will have to be greatly reduced. In short – no one will be able to make as much money any more.

What happens with broadcasting fees seems to be the key factor driving current discussions. The clubs are understandably terrified that the tvcos will sue for the return of part of the fee they paid for a product that is undelivered.

This would explain the rumoured frenzy to complete the season and to do so before a new one starts in August 2020. It would also explain why cancelling next season would not be universally embraced.

But everyone needs to be thinking longer term. The tvcos could sue for their money back. And in doing so they would drive many clubs out of existence and fundamentally reduce the value of the product they had paid for. Everyone is going to take a loss in the end, so what matters is being able to come out of a painful period with a viable commercial model. If everyone looks to take what they can get as the sport's economy disintegrates, it will at best damage recovery, at worst kill the sport off.

What is glaringly obvious is that football has allowed itself to be far too dependent on TV money. Because TV now has the ability to decide whether the sport lives or dies.

The fans, whose money at the gate counts in different degrees throughout the pyramid – and still does count even at the very top – could also ask for refunds if games are not played or moved. And this too could threaten the survival of many clubs. Very many of those individual fans will face hardship as the coming recession bites, and so they may be forced to choose between supporting themselves and the future of their club. In most cases, the clubs will lose. Unless they can strike a bargain with their fans.

This means clubs will need to be honest about their

financial situations, and lower their targets for income. Football clubs are valued institutions and people will do much to preserve them, but only if they feel they are not being exploited or taken for granted. Those lower-income targets will necessitate the kind of government support other industries will need.

No one is going to gain out of the situation we are now in. Players will need to take wage cuts, executive remuneration will need to go down, dividend payments must stop, lending arrangements between banks and clubs must be recalibrated, income projections must be reduced. Staff at clubs and broadcasters will feel the pinch. Fans, who will be squeezed in other areas of their life, may need to be prepared to lose some money in order for their clubs to survive. But for many of them, the choice will not be there.

All the norms are changed. Uncomfortable choices await. But of all the stakeholders in the game, fans are uniquely placed to see the bigger picture. The private businesses that are the clubs are wired to survive even at the expense of all competition – revealing the absurd contradiction of survival of the individual entity being placed at the heart of something that depends on competition with rivals, a collective endeavour by definition. The tvcos are businesses too, and they have other irons in the fire. They don't depend on football to the same extent football depends on them, and if cutting their losses means cutting football, they will do it without a second thought. As for the game's governing authorities – let's just say the folly of

conceding so much power to the privately-owned clubs is now becoming apparent.

Fans are partisan but recognise the value of the whole game. In a true partnership with the governing bodies, fan organisations could rebalance the power structure to put the long-term health of the game back in front of the short-term wellbeing of its constituent parts. And, if they were convinced they weren't being taken for a ride as they have been so many times before, they could work with their clubs to ensure they survive and thrive.

For any of this to happen, the fan perspective needs to be considered far more clearly and strongly than it is being. Football doesn't seem important now, but when it becomes important again – or even if it is to become important again – it needs to properly consider its fans, not expect them to take what they are given. If the current crisis reveals anything, it is that there is a value in looking ahead and mapping out contingencies. Unimportant things can become important very quickly.