

Phil Thornton: "Football is a gangster's game and it always has been"

Ten years after Phil Thornton's insightful cult book *Casuals*, Martin Cloake discusses with him how the state of football's counter-culture has changed.

By [Martin Cloake](#)

Phil Thornton's book Casuals is an insightful cult classic. Easily lost in the midst of waves of football counterculture tales – and fairy tales – that clogged up the sports section shelves when the book trade discovered there was money in selling vicarious thrills to wannabe geezers, Casuals was something apart. It was about a culture created independently and spontaneously, frequently ignored and misunderstood by media style gurus, but which drew on working class traditions of street nous and sharp dressing that date back to Victorian days and mixed with the music and hedonism and wanting to belong that go along with youth cults.

In the 10 years since the book first appeared, casual culture has been annexed by the mainstream, another

instant lifestyle available to buy. At the same time, a new generation of football fans is drawing on the casual attitude as part of a reaction to a perceived effort to take the soul out of the experience of watching football. On the tenth anniversary of its publication, the book itself was updated with new contributions from the likes of Kevin Sampson, Jay Montessori and Terry Farley looking at how the scene has evolved. I caught up with Thornton while researching an article on football's culture wars for [Thin White Line magazine](#) and asked him for his thoughts on current events.

What's your reading of the current developments in fan culture? How do they fit it with the historical line that you traced through *Casuals*?

The Nineties witnessed a real sea change in the way fans were treated. Post-Hillsborough and the Taylor Report the stadiums were transformed, not only the all-seater requirements but new stadiums built away from the old terraced estates and the advent of the Premiership totally transformed "home" supporting. The old casual firms felt alienated in their own grounds due to the influx of new fans and "shirter". You look at any game now and it's a sea of replica kits – that's something that never happened in any era before the Nineties. The whole fashion element of the fanbase has almost disappeared and the hardcore are now the away fans who always make more noise because they're grouped together.

It's only really for big cup games and the odd important European match that you get anything like the old atmospheres inside British grounds. Something as seemingly trivial as standing which really took off at Old Trafford in the 90s at European games was treated with fatwas from the clubs at first, but now I think they recognise that generating an atmosphere inside a ground can only be achieved with fans standing.

Obviously at Liverpool there's still some opposition because of what happened at Hillsborough but even at Anfield the standing led to perhaps the best atmosphere there – against Chelsea in the Champions League game – since the days of St Etienne.

“Safe standing” and “singing areas” seem almost laughable terms to those of us brought up in the rough and tumble of the Seventies and Eighties but the culture must change unless we want these soulless, sterile stadiums to continue pushing away vocal fans.

Is it possible for an independent fan culture to develop now, or has the whole thing already been co-opted?

As a trade union activist for 20 years, I've seen how the bosses co-opt militants by a combination of flattery and bribery. I was always against the likes of Manchester United's Shareholders United campaign as it fed into this myth that you could play the club and the big shareholders at their own game. You can't, it's a rigged game and

whether Magnier and McManus, or the Glazers have a genuine interest in football is irrelevant, they have a big chunk of dough to put down and it doesn't matter how they raised it. That's capitalism!

I think the clubs only get truly worried by direct action which is why I supported the ultra-style tactics of the Manchester Education Committee who took the fight to the Coolmore Mafia but were essentially being used as tools by Alex Ferguson to shore up his own position inside the club. Everyone gets used in the end.

Fan groups such as Spirit Of Shankly do a great job of representing fans' concerns and issues but they have no real power to influence club policy. Matchgoing fans play an ever decreasing role in any club's bottom line and you can see how the likes of J W Henry and the Glazers can't wait till the boring season is over and they can get on with the real business of far east tours and boosting revenue with huge sponsorship deals. As long as the TV money keeps rolling in then there's no real incentive to actually win competitions any more.

We've had the hooliporn industry – there are a plethora of books and label shops and companies pushing a look – and ideas of class identity have changed along with the economics of the game and the demographic of the crowd. How does all this affect terrace culture?

Hooliporn! I like that. I suppose I'm partly responsible for

this myself with *Casuals* although I still think that it's a book far more about working class culture in general than the aggro at matches. There has obviously been a lot of sentimental nostalgia by those of us who grew up on the terraces during the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties as "our" culture ended and we looked back on the good old bad old days.

Most of the stuff that's come out since has been wildly exaggerated and some of it is laughable. I liked Martin King's *Hoolifan* and Mickey Francis's *Guvnors* – two of the first hooligan memoirs – but they started a trend for anyone who'd ever had a fight to launch their own tedious account. For the younger kids, films such as *Green Street*, *The Football Factory* and *The Firm* have presented the past as a sea of Tacchini and Stanley knives with mass brawls on wasteground leading to hundreds of injuries. It was never like that of course but, then again, *The Gangs Of New York* was stylised and exaggerated.

I think the younger kids coming through now feel as if they've missed out on this golden era and are now trying to recreate it but the whole culture has changed so much in the past 30 years that it feels almost like karaoke posturing.

Where do you see currents such as STAND, supporter unions, Trusts and organisations such as Supporters Direct fitting in to all this? Does terrace culture have to be anti-establishment to be real, or have we changed the game more than we thought?

I organised a debate for a Liverpool literary festival, *Writing On The Wall*, last May entitled "Against Modern Football? Clubs, commerce and community". We had Man City fan and *Guardian* writer David Conn, Liverpool fan and *Daily Mirror* columnist Brian Reade and singer and Liverpool fan Peter Hooton all talking very passionately about the need for fans to reclaim the game from the corporations.

The Stand Against Modern Football movement has gone global or pan-European at least and I think there's definitely a growing resistance movement brewing as more and more fans become disillusioned with how the game is run but we're still dealing with the likes of the FA, UEFA and FIFA. These are administrative monoliths filled with incompetents and corrupt egotists. It makes me laugh when you get someone like Brian Barwick who talked a good game about working class fans and then appointed Prince William as the FA's president based on an alleged allegiance to Aston Villa and er, the fact that he's an aristocrat who they can pimp out to win juicy contracts, which is essentially the role of the royal family, to ho for big business. I don't need Prince fucking William telling me not to be racist when his family enriched themselves from raping Africa and India.

Will Greg Dyke really change anything? Will Platini or Blatter? These are careerists on massive salaries and perks and they pimp the game to any despot or torturer who pays the most. Blatter is obviously a monster and we all know it but there's too much money in the industry – and it is an industry not a game or a sport – for anyone to rock the boat.

Now the Russians are involved and Gazprom sponsor the Champions League, the circle from old industrialists in nineteenth century England starting clubs through to spivs controlling the game in the post war years to the oligarchs running the show is complete. It's a gangster's game and always has been.

What's your take on English and Scottish fans drawing on European Ultra traditions and activities?

It's all playacting really. I'm not a fan of these massive flags and mosaics myself. I think they smack of the circus. I yearn for the days of surreal, abusive flags and chants. The thing with the ultras in Italy and other countries is that the clubs support them, the clubs sponsor away travel and allow them to control their own gates whereas Celtic's Green Brigade get arrested in dawn raids by the bizzies. That's the difference, right there.

People can say the class system has gone till they're out of breath but the ruling class in this country treat the working class with utter contempt and hatred. We experienced that in football grounds and that eventually resulted in the Hillsborough cover up. The FA, supposedly socialist councils, the police, the coroners, the BBC, the papers, the Government, they ALL conspired to blame Liverpool fans for the death of 96 innocent people who simply wanted to watch a football game. That's the price we pay in the country for the class system and its not simply Bolshevik hyperbole, it's real and it happened and now we're finding

out just how deep this hatred ran.

In *Casuals* one of the fans you interviewed, Gareth Veck, said: "Casual culture sounds great, the nice trainers and all that, but it had this very dark side to it that people want to forget about now." The issue of violence is always used as a warning whenever people develop an independent attitude. What's your take on where violence fits in and whether we've let ourselves be defined by it too much, or flirted with it too much?

Gareth's a very insightful lad and I think what he was trying to say was that there WAS violence, a lot of violence associated with casuals or their forebears in the Sixties and Seventies because that was absolutely central to working class male culture, especially in England which is tribal and concentrated in many towns and cities within a close proximity. But this became fetishised in a way, it became almost a pose, you wear a Mille Miglia jacket and a pair of Adidas Stockholms and an Aquascutum scarf wrapped round your face and you BECOME a hoolie. You buy the T-shirt and you watch *Awaydays* and try to live a lifestyle that was never like that in the first place. I loved Kev Sampson's *Awaydays* book but no film could ever recapture those early scally days of 79 and translate it to an audience not yet born when 'plum mushies' were all the rage. It wasn't nice, it was brutal and often terrifying going to games in those days and kids need to recognise that.

What can you see happening in the next 10 years?

I think the top 20 or so clubs in Europe will consolidate their power over TV rights and have even more sway in the running of the game, and some of this may be beneficial as they will hold the likes of Blatter to account. As an internationalist, I predicted the end of international football years ago, not through any political movement but because the clubs won't pay £28m for a player only to lose him in a European Championship or World Cup match, never mind a friendly. Why would they? It's happening already with insurance clauses and managers not releasing players and players themselves withdrawing or retiring from international games.

I can't wait til a young player does it, not one at the end of their career. It may never happen as there aren't many political players out there although a few are keen on presenting themselves as such. It's difficult because we need another Paolo Sollier not another "red" Gary Neville.

The new edition of Casuals is available from [Milo books](#), priced [£7.99](#)