

ALAN TOMLINSON

‘And did those feet...’: Introduction

The Adaptable Game

Football attracts some of the biggest media audiences in the world, for quadrennial spectacles such as the men’s FIFA World Cup, and annual showpieces such as the UEFA Champions League. The accumulative global audience, including the most casual and passing of viewers, for the South Africa 2010 World Cup was reported by FIFA to be 3.2 billion, 46.4 per cent of the world population; those catching longer chunks of action (20 minutes or more) numbered 2.2 billion, 530.9 million of whom watched the final, with those catching a minute or more of the final numbering 909.6 million (FIFA, 2011). The Champions League final between Barcelona and Manchester United in Rome in 2009 attracted a bigger global audience, 206 million, than that year’s Super Bowl. This global football business has spawned superstars and millionaires, and created a nouveau riche class of celebrity sportsmen willing to travel the world in response to the lucrative contract.

But however global the apex of the game has gone, football still preserves its local identity, fostering tribal loyalties and community attachments. One of the underlying appeals of sport is that it can prosper in local, regional, national, international and global contexts; and football, the world’s most popular sport, thrives at all of these levels. You can play for the local parks team, watch your city’s professional outfit, cheer on the national side, admire teams from across the world, and revel in the simplicity and accessibility of the game. There are many dimensions to football at all of these levels, but when you see Zinedine Zidane volley the winning goal in a European final, he does not appear as some form of special species. You could be him, if only you’d had that inspirational teacher, that patient coach, the time and the opening in life and on the pitch. Many sports offer the opportunity for this mix of ‘if only’ vicariousness and wish-fulfilment. Arguably, football

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allows this more than most other sports, and the secret to this is the game's fundamental simplicity, in conception and execution. Sport draws us into a form of what Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006) has called a state of being lost in 'focused intensity', as we are at one with the performer or competitor, willing him/her on, being him/her. The Zidane volley was not just the sublime skill of the supreme player producing the perfect response at a critical moment; it was a shared experience of the collection of individuals lucky enough to be there and so able to say 'I was there', each time with a smile of privileged contentment, as long as the memory lasts.

The Unjust Game

Football is a form of culture, made in and by the collective watching of the event, the follow-up argument and analysis, the folklore that is passed down from generations. It is soap opera on grass, providing main narratives, sidelines, unlikely diversions, wonderful arrays of character. And it can defy logic and all attempts at rational analysis, a great sporting arena for the David and Goliath giant-killing trope. The most admired and feared team might lose its nerve, superstition and fatalism outweighing resources and talent. More and more, in a time of instantly available statistical breakdowns of performance, match analysis on the spot, technological assistance and psychological preparation, top football professionals make excuses for defeat, blaming referees and officials, fixture schedules and international commitments.

But it is one of the glories in football to see 11 versus 11 in a sport rooted in low-scoring. When the World Cup went to the United States in 1994, some seriously suggested that the goals should be made bigger, to provide higher scores for the U.S. public in particular. Even FIFA, or more accurately the International Football Association Board established in 1885 to harmonize interpretation of rules for 'Home Nations' international games within the United Kingdom, and to this day still the institutional body in charge of the laws of the game, resisted this crass proposal. The magnificence of a 0–0 draw might bypass those indifferent to the game or concerned only with high-scoring high-five achievers; but the epic defence against opponents of clearly superior technical skill, the match-of-a-lifetime performance by the underdog's goalkeeper, can provide rivetingly tense spectacle. The best teams can lose on the day, and two such losses are etched in World Cup history: Hungary's defeat by West Germany at the Miracle of Berne in 1954 and Holland's defeat by West Germany in Munich 20 years later.

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The Simplest Game

A fundamental simplicity has fostered the transmission of the game across cultures and through time, so whatever style of play has been adopted or tactical innovation put in place, football has remained recognizable and familiar to its massive and culturally varied fan base. Go anywhere in the world with a ball and you won't be alone. Go into any bar with an opinion about football and you'll find a friend. On the streets, on the beach, anything will do. You don't need a pitch or any fancy kit. Two jumpers for goalposts and a pair of rolled-up gloves or an old coke can – anything will do. And that's the point.

The continuing attraction of football lies in the core features of what the pioneer John Charles Thring called 'the simplest game': football can be played at its highest level of excellence by a short and stocky figure such as Argentinean Diego Maradona, or by physically deformed Brazilian Garrincha, as well as by mercurial bad boys such as George Best. Its principles are simple, its equipment minimal, its dramas flowing and focused. We all know what it is: and yet we can all argue over Brazilian or Argentinean style, German pragmatics or French hubris, Italian ruthlessness or Dutch prima-donnism, Cameroonian indiscipline or English doggedness. It brings players of varied cultural backgrounds together in teams of global appeal, a metaphor for cosmopolitanism and cross-cultural harmony, yet it can still be a catalyst for local club loyalties and national passions. The simple game, the beautiful game, the bountiful game, feeds the diet of the fan worldwide. In international media markets, football may look to have reached peak after peak, yet still, 'final' frontiers are exceeded, and the saturation point that some commentators and analysts believe to have been reached continues to be stretched to new limits (Hamil and Chadwick, 2010).

The International Game

Football's first international match was a goalless Scotland-England encounter in 1872. It was in 1904, though, with the formation of the world governing body La Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), that a framework for truly international competition began to emerge (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998), though domestic football satisfied many national associations and it was not until 1930 that the first men's football World Cup was held, in Uruguay. The first international staged outside the British Isles was the United States-Canada match in 1885; the first in South America in 1901, between Uruguay and Argentina; South America also staged the

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first official international tournament, the inaugural Copa America, in 1916, the year which also saw the formation of the continent's confederation, CONMEBOL (Mason 1995; Miller and Crolley 2007). It was mid-Europe's Mitropa Cup, from 1927, that provided organized international competition for clubs; in the same year, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy and Switzerland played for the Dr Gero Cup, in a tournament conceived as a Europe, International and/or Nations Cup.

British associations had withdrawn from both the Amsterdam Olympics and FIFA in 1928, in relation to issues of Olympic eligibility and principles of amateurism. In the absence of the self-isolating British, the growth of world football assumed an increasingly all-embracing international profile. The European association, UEFA (Union Européennes de Football Association), was established in 1954, followed by other continental federations for Africa, Asia, the Central Americas/Caribbean and Oceania. The growth of the game worldwide – imported into many countries initially by military personnel, migrant international workers, educators and colonial elites from Britain – has been phenomenal, and football is widely recognised as the world's most popular game, in terms of both participation and the fan-base for the professional game. Conservative authorities and associations have held back the development of women's football at different historical points, and effective levels of sponsorship prove difficult to secure and sustain for the professional women's game. The dominant men's form, though, has become increasingly visible in the international spotlight.

The Ugly Game

Football needs fans and clearly many fans need football. At its best, sport spectatorship is a positive affirmation of community or of the collective passion of a population. At its worst, football provides a front for anti-social sentiment and prejudice (Merkel and Tokarski 1996), as in the case of football hooliganism involving fans of clubs and national sides. This emerged in British professional football crowds or groups of supporters in the late 1960s and became a serious social problem in the 1980s. It exploited the collective passion of the game and stimulated group-based forms of aggressive and sometimes violent behaviour, widely but by no means exclusively associated with young-adult, white working-class males.

Social psychological studies have stressed the ritualistic dimensions of football hooliganism and the career stages through which young hooligans pass in becoming inducted into the culture (Marsh et al. 1978). Sociological studies have emphasised the socio-economic context out of which hooligans

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emerge – the displaced generations, for instance, of de-industrializing areas and regions, for whom identification with the team in the aggressive hooligan fashion becomes an alternative source for the expression of manhood and a traditional tough form of masculinity. Eric Dunning and his colleagues in the Leicester School and researchers at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were the most prominent among these researchers (Dunning 1999; Dunning et al. 1986; Clarke 1973). Football hooliganism has been a genuinely threatening social issue, but it has also been the focus of moral panics in the media and the wider society, and, when its incidence and nature have been exaggerated, has fuelled deviance amplification. The image of a dart in a fan's eye can be reported by a tabloid newspaper with disgust; the following week, posed photographs of a corycat case are cynically generated by journalists.

Some of the most interesting more recent research on football hooliganism has focused on international hooligan groups of 'Ultras', for whom the badge of the extreme hooligan – whether at Accrington or in Rome – appears to accrue a sense of self-esteem not elsewhere available. There is a playful irony in the idea of the Accrington ultras, a few hundred diehards in a parochial corner of north-east Lancashire, in comparison to the proven violent and often politically motivated intents of their Italian counterparts (Magee et al., 2005; Martin 2011: 217–18). At its peak, the hooligan phenomenon combined sport with politics; in the late 1970s, right-wing activist Martin Webster of the National Front targeted hooligan thugs for recruitment, marking them out as patriotic robust Englishmen. And football supporting has provided an outlet for collective aggression that has drawn in the least likely of adherents: *Granta* editor Bill Buford wrote of the worryingly seductive nature of crowd membership when spending time *Among the Thugs*: 'I know of no excitement greater ... Being in a crowd. And – greater still – being in a crowd in an act of violence. Nothingness is what you find there. Nothingness in its beauty, its simplicity, its nihilistic purity' (Buford 1991: 195).

The Bountiful Game

Football's epithet 'The Beautiful Game' emerged as a response to the dazzling skills of the all-conquering Brazilian sides of the 1950s and 1960s, and the country's World Cup winners of 1994 and 2002. From 1992 a combination of the reformatting of the European Cup into the Champions League, the formation in England of the Premier League and a post-Cold War expanded UEFA provided a set of interrelated economic, political and cultural influences that reshaped the structure and the media profile of the

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game; beautiful the game might be, but bountiful it was, for many, becoming (Giulianotti 1999: chapter 5).

In Europe, the Bosman case opened up Europe's football labour market and accelerated international recruitment, and Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB and competing broadcast providers invested unprecedentedly high levels of money into the sport: in 1996, Murdoch recognised that sport was News International's 'battering ram' for the expansion of global pay television networks; and what he wanted he usually got, including increasing slices of the Champions League action. In turn, this enriched product has attracted investors from Russia, the Gulf States and North America to invest in football, though with uneven results.

The Commodified Game

In this complex and unpredictable intermingling of the local and the global, the indispensable sense of belonging that is pivotal to football supporting and fan culture can be threatened by the extreme commodification of the game: English film director Ken Loach raised this theme in his 2009 film *Looking for Eric*, which starred the Manchester United idol of the first half of the 1990s Eric Cantona, but also captured the disillusionment of United fans marginalized by the increasing cost of following the game: Loach observed that the 'idea of a group of people who club together is lost. The sense of identity is split between people who treat it as a club and those who treat it as an investment and a brand'.

This Football Companion takes the reader from the origins of the formal, organised modern form of football within the privileged educational institutions of the English elite, to a highly developed and globally marketed commodity for worldwide media audiences. It shows how South American prowess challenged English claims to be the masters of the game, and how mid-European football emerged from the Austro-Hungarian empire as a less remote challenge to western European pioneers. The ruthless use to which politics has been put in football is laid bare in an overview of the fascist politics of Mussolini that secured two World Cup triumphs for Italy in the 1930s, and the political populism of Silvio Berlusconi that blurred the boundaries between football leadership and political power. The long-standing Uruguayan and Brazilian contributions to the international growth of the game are traced here, and the continent of Africa provides a further example of the cultural and political significance of sport in the making or masking of national identity.

The Companion then takes the reader into the different elements of the contemporary game, looking at the emergence of the football manager or

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coach, women's football, fans and fan cultures, celebrity players and the extraordinary story of economic boom in the English Premier League and the current ascendancy of the Spanish style of play. And how have writers and commentators tracked, documented, made sense of these trends? The Companion reflects on the changing relationship between the football reporter and his – very definitely, this has been for the most part 'his' – subject and sources, and also the ways in which players' and fans' lives and experiences have generated a sub-genre of popular literature.

The critique in *Looking for Eric* of the changing ownership in and precarious financing of top-level football gave prominence to the voices of the fans. In a way, in celebrating the collective experience of generations of supporters, Loach's critique is located in the tradition of the English novelist J.B. Priestley, whose opening pages of the 1929 novel *The Good Companions* captured the community significance and expressive base of professional football in the north of England in the 1920s: your shilling for the match at Bruddersford United Association Football Club 'turned you into a critic ... a partisan ... a member of a new community' (Priestley, 1976). While such cultural commentators could be accused of slipping into nostalgic romanticization of the sport, if top-level professional football does lose its community base then its historical and cultural legacies will be seriously jeopardised.

Of course football cannot go back to the days of maximum wages for players and intimate neighbourly relations between players and their public, as in, say, Barnsley in the 1950s (Alister and Ward 1997). But the dramatic explosion of the game as marketed cultural product has changed things beyond the imagination of the middle of the last century. And if that community base is wholly eroded, the game will be handed over to the billionaires and speculators to whom club ownership or football events are a form of global marketing and branding, an experiment in asset-stripping, or a vainglorious self-aggrandizing ego trip.

In 1959, the then secretary of the Football Association, Sir Stanley Rous, wrote that 'unlike cricket or, say, golf, which are more leisurely sports, football has perhaps not lent itself particularly well to reflective writing' (Rous 1959: v). Sir Stanley would be astonished, and in equal part delighted, to see how football writing, research, commentary and analysis have developed during the intervening 60 years, facilitating the informed evaluation of the social, financial and political influences and forces that have reshaped the game both in his native country and in the international context that Rous went on to influence in his 13 years as president of FIFA.

We need a Football Companion like this to remind us where the game has come from and to provide informed examples of where it might be going. As the Qatar Foundation buys its way onto the front of the shirts of Barcelona

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FC, relegating UNICEF to players' sleeves; as Qatar enters its decade-long preparation to host the 2022 World Cup; and as £15-million-a-year-man Samuel Eto'o commutes thousands of miles from Moscow for home games for Anzhi Makhachkala (Dagestan), it is not mere nostalgia to talk of the collective walk to the match. My most recent spectator experiences bear this out.

In May 2011 my journey to Wembley Stadium was in a luxury coach from the Grosvenor House Hotel in Park Lane by Hyde Park to the red carpet of the VIP entrance at Wembley; I sat in front of cosmopolitan groups in hospitality boxes, their eyes on the menu as much as on Lionel Messi. In December 2011 I took 19 stops on London underground's District Line to Upton Park and walked past nail parlours and beauty salons, street markets and eyesore 1960s pubs, to West Ham United's Boleyn Ground, where I sat among away fans who baulked at the cost of a half-time pie. Barcelona dominated possession and showboated to an imperious European title. West Ham dominated possession, had 10 corners to visiting Burnley's one, and lost to two late headed goals. It was cold walking back along the high street to the Tube station, but the game had cost just £19, and so the spare change was there for a welcome in the Queen's Arms, and a chorus of 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles'; it was warmer inside Wembley back in May, but the sponsors' banquet halls were well policed and inaccessible to the grade 2 punter who'd paid only £250 for the ticket, and nobody was singing in the leather-seated luxury vehicle.

VIP coach or a walk among modern-day football companions? It's not mere nostalgia to talk about the walk to and from the match. It is a necessary prelude to debate about the core values of an extraordinarily resilient cultural phenomenon.

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PART ONE
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