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This edition of Soccer Review contains articles that straddle three themes – fans and their communities, some organisational dimensions of football and the development of young players. The first three contributions in this edition relate to the experiences and behaviour of fans and the attempts being made to strengthen club-community ties.

Article 1 is by Donna Woodhouse (Sheffield Hallum University). She provides a fans-eye-view of the travails of supporting Barnsley, a club that is never too far away from the shadow of the administrator’s axe. It also serves as a reminder of how dependent clubs such as Barnsley are on the loyalty of their supporters.

Article 2 is by Martin Johnes (Swansea University). He explores the issue of ‘anti-English chanting’ on the part of some Swansea fans. His findings indicate that the motives and meanings that underlie this abuse are many and varied. But perhaps of greater significance is that this hostility does not seem to find strong expression outside the football context.

Article 3 is an interview with Dave Edmundson of the Football League Trust, conducted by Gavin Mellor. Edmundson is committed to drawing upon the experiences he gained at Burnley with a view to building stronger ties between all league clubs and their local communities.

The first contribution to the organisational section, Article 4, offers a neat bridge from the previous section for it is a salutary reminder of the need for realism and the dangers of being engulfed by romanticism. Stephen Morrow’s (Stirling University) analysis of the rise and fall of Gretna testifies to the fact that while fans can indulge in a romantic approach to their clubs in terms of their interpretation of their pasts and aspirations for their futures, it is dangerous for the owners and boards of clubs to share these fantasies. Morrow traces the trajectory of Gretna, characterises it as an exercise in romanticism by the owner and highlights the failure to paid due heed to the implications of initial success.

Article 5 by Seamus Kelly (Dublin Institute of Technology) focuses on the uneasy alliance between the new owners and directors and managers of traditional persuasion. While there is ample scope for personality clashes fuelled by different views of how clubs should be run, the crucial element is that any league system has the inevitable consequence of ensuring that some clubs will not perform according to expectations. The resultant disappointment, often informed by unrealistic aspirations, ensures the perpetuation of a blame culture.

Article 6 is by Dominic Malcolm (Loughborough University). He returns to the issue of drugs, an area he wrote about in the first edition of the Singer & Friedlander Review (1997-98). Given the prevalence of recreational drugs in society at large, particularly among the younger age groups, that a substantial proportion of professional footballers indulge is hardly surprising. Regarding the prevalence of performance-enhancing drugs, in the context of the European game their usage appears to be greater than the nature of the sport might encourage us to anticipate and believe. It is also worthy of note that because the increasing demands made upon athletes by the World Anti-Doping Agency and the sports organisations that accept its writ - to inform them of their ‘whereabouts’ at all times – is being challenged in the courts. The Guardian has recently reported that Rafael Nadal has protested, claiming the rules amount to harassment (3rd February 2009). The central premise informing national and international anti-drugs policies of sporting bodies seems to be the principle of individual culpability and this results in the demonisation of individual athletes. Little consistent attempt is made to contextualise the behaviour and recognise that a complex range of pressures and facilitating agents are involved in encouraging recourse to performance-enhancing drugs. In football one of the pressures comes from the fact that all the football bodies – clubs, the leagues, the FAs, UEFA and FIFA - are eager to berate one another for over-playing players, while at the same time, trying to place even more calls upon their time. The result is recovery times are reduced and for the elite performers the close season is more or less a thing of the past.

Article 7 is an interview with Chris Powell of Leicester City, conducted by Patrick Murphy. Powell was recently presented with an award on the occasion of his 750 appearance of his career. Fittingly, the match in question was Leicester v Southend. Leicester is
his present club and Southend is the club where he came of age and first established himself as a professional footballer. The reception he received from both sets of fans testifies to the affection in which he is held in the game. However, the principal focus of this interview is on his position as chairman of the Professional Footballers’ Association. To be chairman of the PFA one has to be a current player and, at the age of 39, there can be few players who have had such a breadth of experience as Powell. He has suffered rejection as a junior at Crystal Palace, played for clubs in different leagues and finally won international honours at the age of 31.

Moving on to the final theme, the development of young footballers, there are few people who can claim to have invented a new occupation, but Alan Hodgkinson has done just that. As he relates in Article 8, after retiring from keeping goal for Sheffield United and England and after a brief spell as an assistant manager, he decided to become a specialist goalkeeping coach. In his career he has coached many of the top goalkeepers, among them Schmeichel, Goram and Southall. However, perhaps his most significant legacy is the occupation of specialist goalkeeping coach. It has become a standard requirement for the majority of professional clubs throughout the world. Indeed, some clubs employ a number of these specialists. So much so that the very idea that a goalkeeper’s needs can be met simply by joining in the same training sessions as the outside players now seems antediluvian. At the same time, the development of young goalkeepers remains a much-neglected aspect of youth coaching. In this country at least, even progressive coaching programmes for young players seem to pay little attention to the development of goalkeeping skills.

Article 9 is ostensibly about a club, but it’s a club that is run by Simon Clifford primarily as a vehicle for demonstrating the shortcomings of the prevailing system of youth development as compared with the strengths of his own system. This is the objective that drives Clifford, the owner of Garforth Town, Brazilian Soccer Schools and SOCATOTS. This year’s interview concentrates largely on Garforth Town’s present season. While the club seems to be heading for a mid-table finish, what comes across most strongly is Clifford’s supreme optimism. This is based on the confidence he has in SOCATOTS, with its focus on children from 6 months to five years, to produce a new type of player, one that is two-sided in every respect. He appreciates that these youngsters will take ten or more years to graduate from his soccer schools, but he is prepared to wait. After conducting this interview, Murphy visited a session of Clifford’s Leeds Soccer School and two sessions of a local SOCATOTS. It was these visits that gave rise to Article 10 ‘They don’t know their left foot from their right’. It is an attempt to probe and understand why it is that so many professional footballers go through their careers handicapped by one-footedness, as epitomised by the all too frequent observation – ‘it fell to his weaker foot’. As Murphy points out, in recent years this limitation has come to the fore at the highest levels of our national game with the dearth of quality left-footed players.
‘Joy and Woe’:
a season in the life of a Barnsley fan

Donna Woodhouse

I’m fond of telling myself, and others, that football actually isn’t that important, that we should be a little less obsessed with it. However, just as it’s claimed that you are never more than four feet away from a rat if you are standing in London, so it seems you are never more than one thought away from a, sometimes slightly tenuous link, to your team. Football has the ability to encroach into so many areas of our lives. Any good Barnsley fan will be able to tell you that we’ve won the FA Cup once, in 1912; it’s the year the Titanic sank. I didn’t see the Titanic smashing through the walls of the TARDIS when I was watching Dr. Who on Christmas Day 2007 as an omen for a fabulous Cup run, but now I take it as such. Coincidentally, I used to work in Stoke, birthplace of EJ Smith, Captain of the Titanic. Just before the start of the season, I was on holiday in Milan. Leaving my companion to happily spend some time shopping, I went to the San Siro. Our Italian stadium tour-guide had spent a year living in Sheffield. She’s a Spurs fan and her Spurs favourite? Keith Burkinshaw, born in Barnsley.

Last season, I attended the AFC Wimbledon v FC United of Manchester pre season friendly, the third most enjoyable game of the season. Meeting friends from all over the country, and even ones visiting from abroad, our group became larger as we got closer to Kingmeadow. The bar there was packed, and people spilled over into the car park, drinking and chatting. With our glasses full at 2.55pm, we welcomed the announcement that kick-off would be pushed back. The atmosphere was boisterous, and there was plenty of banter, but there was a conviviality I hadn’t felt at a game for years. After the game, there was more beer, more chat. I was able to experience an old match-day routine, one that has been partially abandoned because of the moving of fixture dates and kick-off times, by changing work patterns, and by the continuing surveillance of football fans, itself part of a broader increase in surveillance of public space (Lyon 2004) and the increasing privatisation of public space and the growth of quasi private spaces (Marx 1989). The two Clubs involved, born partly of a reaction to the commercialisation of elite football in England, attempt to provide a sense of community for their supporters. This word, ‘community,’ is so often lazily bandied around by politicians and the administrators of the game. It is a complex and contested term (see Brown 2008 and Blackshaw 2008), but although their supporters have myriad reasons for following their teams, and engaging in the running of the Clubs, there is an atmosphere when these two Clubs meet that is celebratory, without being triumphalist, warm, without tripping into nostalgia. The clubs are born of, and run by, people who ‘become the people we have been waiting for’ (Lawson 2006) trying to be the change they wish to see in football. However, as the clubs climb, they will have to answer more and more difficult questions about how they operate, and the answers they chose could impact on the ethos of their clubs, and the way that the world sees them.

The second most enjoyable game of the season was our FA Cup victory over Chelsea at Oakwell. There’s a line I’d never imagined myself typing. Our goal that day was scored by Odejaye. Lauded, for a while, as a hero as the result of his header, earlier in the season, he’d been on the receiving end of racial abuse from a Barnsley fan. When I heard the comment, I turned to identify the culprit so I could challenge them. Encouragingly, I didn’t have to move from my seat, or even shout across to him. As I turned, I saw that, to a man, the fans around him, had also turned and were looking at his disdainfully. The man put his head down, and didn’t utter a word for the rest of the game. He had been censured by his peers, more stingingly and effectively than pre-match score board messages about refraining from racist and abusive language. It would be naïve to think that racist epithets are no longer used at Oakwell, or other grounds, but this censure of a fan by other fans offers some hope that racist abuse in the stands is increasingly felt by supporters to be unacceptable.

Another stand out player that day was our goalkeeper. Later in the season, our goalkeeper was fined £1,000 for displaying an errant logo on his kit. That’s the kind of thing (contrast it to trifling fines issued, or a lack of action, with regards to incidents of racism) that makes fans seethe.

The most enjoyable match of the season was our FA Cup quarter-final at Anfield. Before the game, I’d gone to a pub and, again, the atmosphere was warm,
as I nodded to a few faces familiar from when I'd done work in the area some years ago. Their fans warned me that we were about to be given a lesson in football. It's appropriate at this point to mention that we beat Liverpool 2-1. I was grinning as I typed that. Isn't football fantastic? Expensive to attend, bafflingly administered, and imbued with an insularity and stubbornness that sees it fall far short of its potential off the pitch, but still capable of making even those who spend part of their lives critiquing it, grin.

Our cup run ended against Cardiff, the coincidence here being that the two clubs have Peter Ridsdale in common. Before we lost there, I'd already decided that I really don’t like Wembley. Torture to get to, once inside, I found myself in spaces that resemble transit lounges, cavernous, cold spaces, non-places (Auge 1995). The acoustics, in comparison to the Millennium Stadium, are poor; you know the opposition fans are making a tremendous racket, but so little of that noise finds its way to you. If getting to the venue was tortuous, escaping was torture cubed. A tube-line closure stymied some, whilst those of us on coaches took root in the car park, before edging slowly along local roads. My dislike of the new venue is not born of a nostalgia for the old Wembley; the towers never tugged at my heart strings the way that a glimpse of Oakwell through the houses does when I pass it on the train. It represents, to me, rather new build stadia at their very worst; utilitarian, awkward and difficult to warm to.

Back to the Championship. By accident, rather than design, I live a short mope from Sheffield Wednesday's ground, and last season, I watched us lose there, again, making it 24 years since we have won at Hillsborough. I haven’t checked that fact; I’m just going to believe one of my students who took great joy in sharing the snippet with me. It was an unnecessary reminder though, as a number of Wednesdayite friends had sent me texts containing the same fascinating piece of trivia. What a pleasant way to spend your birthday. This completed a Sheffield defeat double, as we’d also lost at Bramall Lane. Another coincidence; the museum at Sheffield United’s ground is home to a Barnsley 1912 Cup Winners medal. That is also the only FA Cup Final to have been played in Sheffield.

We had two standout players during the season of almost being relegated, and almost being FA Cup finalists, and this brought on a perennial problem for non-Premiership clubs. Every time our captain ran a game and scored a goal, we knew we were a little closer to losing him. Each time our goalkeeper kept a clean sheet, or kept the score respectable, we knew that the bargain we’d picked up was closer to being recommended by one of the Premier League scouts we saw in the stands. When he damaged his knee, we secured a ‘keeper on loan from West Brom. The loan Club wanted us to buy him; the problem was that, in much the same way you rustle up bibs for a game, promising to wash and return them in a few days, we didn’t actually want to shell out on a new number one – we just wanted to borrow the thing we needed.

We are, like so many other clubs, are hard pressed. This lead to us playing with the most cosmopolitan team I can remember, leading some to question whether the Club remains a ‘popular, civic organisations which represent people from
various urban communities' (Brown et al. 2006:9). One player on a free from Charleroi and one from Sparta Rotterdam, a loan signing from Sakaryaspor, snips from Cienciano and Lillestrom, and, slightly less exotic, frees from Wolves, Sheffield United and Leicester, and two loans from Derby. In contrast to this mix, the Club crest, previously variously an oak leaf and a well, an image of our mascot, and a Yorkshire rose, is now the coat of arms of the town. A glass blower and a miner represent now almost dead local industries, and they stand above the motto ‘judge us by our actions’. Football is drenched in symbols (Cohen 1985), and this symbol of a geographical community is now the new emblem of the Club. Unfortunately, the actions that lead us to the badge we find ourselves with today are less than noble.

The Local Authority intervened during a period when we entered administration and narrowly avoided relegation. After controversy at Leeds, Peter Ridsdale, promising to learn from the mistakes he had made there, acquired both the Club and Barnsley Holdings which owned our ground, Oakwell, our academy and surrounding land. Ridsdale made the purchase from Peter Doyle, ex-Mayor of the town. Doyle had previously ‘saved’ the club, before it was expected to be wound-up. In a complex deal, Ridsdale sold Barnsley Holdings to the local council and Barnsley fan, Patrick Cryne, who was chief executive of a former sponsor. This was after a failed sale attempt to a California-based property developer. We were genuinely afraid that our club might disappear, that the purchases were really about property development on the land adjacent to the stadium, fears which prompted suspicion of Doyle. Why Cryne’s offer to save the club soon was rejected aroused further suspicion, as did the involvement of the Sterling Consortium, whose loan to Doyle was high interest, and who had been involved in dealings previously with Chesterfield FC. Doyle’s promise that we would be a people’s club was, simply, disbelieved by many fans, the temporary owner unhelpfully dubbing people he saw as agitators, as ‘slime that crawls under bricks’ (http://soccernet.espn.go.com/). It’s been claimed that businesses which are perceived as trustworthy are relatively protected from downturns in trade and from public criticism (Fombrun, Gardberg and Barnett 2000). Although the club could not be accused of profligacy, we found ourselves in a volatile market created, in part, by the demise of ITV Digital, with an imploding transfer market, which left clubs with well-paid players on lengthy contracts negotiated before the financial crisis. Secrecy and rumours of dodgy dealing meant that that trust between fans and those running the club was largely absent, and criticism and suspicion rife.

We’d been from Premiership glory to almost being wound-up (the unsentimental administrators saying that if a buyer could not be found, then the Club would be succeeded by a supermarket or retail park) and there is still uncertainty in the offering. Cryne, Barnsley born, a life-long fan, and a leading investor in the club, is a local boy made good, who worked his way through sixth-form, earning money by delivering coal, before going to university. He made his money in software and his company was worth more than £1 billion at its peak. But, after stepping down as chair, the company had to restate its accounts and issued three profit warnings. There has also been disquiet about his disposal of £13m worth of shares in June 2004. If we lose Cryne’s backing, then the Oakwell Retail Park is back on the agenda.

Blake said ‘Man was made for Joy and Woe; and when this we rightly know Thro’ the World we safely go.’ We can see in our own clubs many of the continuing joys football brings, and many of the issues that beset it. Having to sell good young players to pay the bills, some of those bills the result of over ambition; undignified tapping up and jostling around the transfer window; an increase in the loaning of players; declining home gates and away trips which are a lottery in terms of prices, as clubs categorise games to inflate gave revenues. Even our sponsors, the local building society, which once revelled in the title ‘The Barnsley Permanent’, has been bought by a larger rival! Last season was the almost perfect encapsulation of the joy and woe that a season can bring. In the League, we narrowly avoided relegation. The Cup was a different story with victory over Chelsea at Oakwell, followed by a quarter-final win at Anfield. I’m extraordinarily continued...
lucky in that I only have to work one Saturday and one Sunday per year. Sod’s Law dictated that on these days we would play Chelsea and Liverpool. Some nifty rescheduling of duties meant that after a quick change at work, I was able to make kick off at Oakwell. A kind friend covered my shift so that I could travel to Anfield. The same student who had taken such delight in Wednesday beating Barnsley was the first to congratulate me after each Cup game. The Cup run made the town smile. Travelling back to Sheffield the day after the Liverpool game, people in the shopping precinct were variously chuckling, hugging, still wobbling slightly from the excesses of the night before, talking and how the players were out on the town with them, and talking about Wembley. It was glorious, the kind of memory that allows you to keep faith in the elite game when you might reasonably despair of it.

Joy and woe are tricky things to measure. As an occasional matchday attender, did our league performances cause me less angst, and the Cup run bring more elation than was the case for my nephew, a season ticket holder, who never misses an away game? The football ‘community’ is, in fact, not one community at all. Brown et al (2006) identify communities linked to the game which are; residential, business, supporter and communities of disadvantage. Even within this sub-category of ‘supporter’, why and how we support varies massively; support can be an incredibly intimate thing and, whilst we may share in the community of the stands, the how and why of how we live our support is complex and subject to change (Brown 2006). For some, being a fan is about escapism, the game a place where the drudgery of the everyday is forgotten. Other fans respond to crisis at their clubs, gathering support for players, managers and boards under fire, or rebelling against their clubs to establish new clubs or to influence the shape of the current one, committing astonishing amounts of time and energy to their cause. For many, being a fan may also be a way of establishing and maintaining networks of friendship (Wellman 1979), either by attending games, or by joining the burgeoning world of Internet football ‘communities’. In an age when our sense of community may well be less rooted in geography, being a football fan provides the opportunity for people who have moved away from ‘home’ to maintain a link with their birth place, or a link with a family affiliation to a club. Being a supporter may provide some of us with a sense of warmth, a sense of belonging to a community, even if that community was only ever imagined (Anderson 1991).

At the end of the season, one of my nephews said that the Cup run was a bonus, but that the real prize was not being relegated. I didn’t tell him that I would have taken relegation and a points-deduction on the chin, in exchange for the FA Cup. The Cup is still magical you see, just like Dr. Who - heroes, villains, reinvention and timelessness. We are still able to make our own meaning from the game. I still try to play. Having started out as a striker, I’ve slowly worked my way back through midfield to defence and now keep goal. It used to be about winning; now it’s about the sociability. The meaning of the game can change radically for people, but football still says something to us. Sometimes it screams and infuriates, but it also continues to whisper sweet nothings, to make promises, and this means that we keep on loving it.

References
Lawson, Neal. Tuesday November 21, 2006 The Guardian
Martin Johnes

Contrary to many popular perceptions, Welsh sporting culture is not dominated by Rugby Union. Football has a long history of widespread support within Wales that is at least equal to the rugby’s following at every level below international matches. Yet Wales’s small size means that large English clubs employ its best soccer players and three of its four full-time professional clubs compete in the English league structure. This ensures opposition clubs of sufficient quality to attract audiences large enough to sustain a professional club. This competition has enabled football to become an arena where ideas of Welshness can be played out.

This article explores the manifestations of anti-Englishness and their relationship with conceptions of local and national identities at Swansea City in the past ten years. Since the club moved to the all-seated Liberty Stadium in 2005, the issue of anti-Englishness amongst supporters has ebbed. In the new environment of the Liberty those fans who like to sing and chant have been distributed around the stadium and, as at most all-seated stadia, the atmosphere is generally less hostile and less vocal than it was at the club’s former ground, the Vetch Field. However, in online discussions amongst fans and at the club’s away games, the occurrence of anti-English songs, chants and talk remains a regular occurrence.

A large variety of anti-English chants are associated with the club. Some are simply antagonistic (such as ‘England’s full of sh*t’), while others directly align a passion for Swansea/Wales with a dislike of England (‘We are the England haters – Swansea!’ or ‘We’ll never be mastered by no English bastard, Wales, Wales, Wales’). Taken at face value, such chants would suggest that, for some supporters, the sense of difference to England is both profound and extreme. This is all the more significant given that there is little evidence of any active tension between the Welsh and the large number of English immigrants that have come to Wales since the growth of the coal industry at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, twenty percent of the population of Wales was born in England. Probably thanks in part to such movements of people, sporting contests against England were initially imbued with a friendly rather than hostile rivalry. The growth of anti-Englishness in Welsh sport seems to date from the 1960s, when wider Welsh nationalism itself took on a more overt, confident and even confrontational character. This decade also saw the emergence of a more aggressive and younger fan culture in soccer. Football chants have to be analysed within the context of this culture, but they still intersect with and draw upon wider understandings of community and social relations. As such, an analysis of football culture offers an important opportunity to penetrate popular notions of nationality, particularly amongst the young working-class men who are responsible for much of the chanting at football matches. Such groups are often dislocated from both political discourses of nationhood and academic studies of nationalism.

There is far from universal agreement amongst Swansea fans about what type of chanting is acceptable. Pro-Swansea chants (such as ‘I’m Swansea ‘till I die’) are widely sung, but cruder songs attacking England or Cardiff receive less vocal support. There is no clear hierarchy of which ‘anti’ songs are acceptable. For some fans attacking Cardiff is irrelevant and betrays a common Welsh identity, a Welsh identity that may or may not involve ‘hating’ England. Yet, for others, Cardiff is fair game for taunting while attacking England is tantamount to ‘racism’. With the growth of the internet in the late 1990s, the question of which songs and chants constituted legitimate expressions of support for the club began to be debated in public. This paper thus draws upon what might be termed a web-based ethnography, centred on www.scfc.co.uk, a well-established independent website run and written by fans of the club. Its guestbook offers Swansea fans (and anyone else who feels inclined to contribute) an opportunity to debate any issue related to the club. By October 2004, the website had received over two million hits. The guestbook was moderated, but messages were only checked for relevance. There was no bar on what opinions could be espoused, although ‘inappropriate’ words were sometimes blanked out and there was an appeal for moderate language. All the quotes in this article are taken from this website (and for clarity some corrections have made to punctuation and typing errors).

continued...
On the SCFC website, the definition of Welshness as something oppositional to England was sometimes very keenly felt by fans and rooted in personal experience, as one supporter living in England pointed out:

I have worked in London for 10 years now and have had to endure sheep-sh**ing, leek-crunching, coal-chomping, sister-worrying, in-breeding, close-harmony singing, rugby-playing, chip-eating, lavabread munching, "does Wales have a football team then?", "Not even good at rugby anymore are you?" etc. etc. jokes and generalisations on a constant basis. … For those of you who have not had the pleasure of living in this bastion of ill-founded sporting smugness and arrogance let me be your education and your guide. You can never read, watch or listen to anything before, during or after an England footy game, even if it is against a Maltese fifth division B team without constant references to 1966, Bobby Moore, blah blah f***ing blah! … [I]t is with great satisfaction then that to misquote that famous poem, every away game "There is a corner of an English football ground that for 90 minutes is forever Wales" and I take great pleasure in singing "England's full of s**t", "Argentina", "You can stick your chariot up your a**e", "We hate England, and we.." and anything else that springs to mind cos if their pathetic mute fans had anything like our passion then they'd be singing it back to us!!

Yet such heartfelt anti-Englishness was perhaps unusual. Others were more grounded in their experiences of the English:

I have now lived in England for the last 10 years – that's over a third of my life. I don't have anything generally against the Saes (Welsh for 'English') but … ever since my student days, I have regularly had “Ah yes, stupid Welsh bloke, sheepsh**ger, you all eat coal don’t you! Do you have electricity yet back in (cue badly done accent) Thu Vaaleeeys?”.

Doesn’t bother me in the slightest, I’ve grown very used to it!

Of course, such abuse is not the experience of every exile. Nor should it be suggested that the majority of anti-English chants came from Welsh people living in England. They continue to be heard at every Swansea game, home and away, and form a key component of how some vocal Swansea fans define themselves. Yet, no matter how ingrained such chants are in Swansea’s fan culture, they were not without their critics and sometimes they were interpreted pejoratively as nationalistic or even racist. The following quote is typical of the online attacks on anti-English abuse at Swansea:

Yesterday afternoon, a few minutes before the start of the Kidderminster game Kevin Johns [club half-time compère] made an admirable and obviously heartfelt plea to kick racism out of football. Ten minutes into the game after a bad tackle on Britton [Swansea midfielder] a large section of spectators on the west end of the north bank started their usual abhorrent chant of ‘you dirty English bastard’ aimed at the offending player. I would like to take the club to task over this. Was anyone ejected or even warned over this racist chant or is the club’s mealy-mouthed attitude to this problem to continue. I believe the club have let the fans down on this issue. Week after week we hear strong words against racism but absolutely no action.

For some the issue was simple: ‘racism is racism’; for others it could even have political consequences:

Someone commented on here the other day that the anti-England abuse is way too much fun to want to stop. I’m sure that most KKK members feel that way about lynchings. Abusing someone on the grounds of race, nationality, gender, religion or sexual preference is the cornerstone of an ideology that my parents generation fought a six year war to eradicate. I know that there are regulars on here that feel that several of us over-react to the whole issue. Sorry, but I can see the path that starts with relatively lightweight abuse of OUR neighbouring country and ends with extermination camps.

Other fans’ comparison of the anti-English chanting with more conventionally racist manifestations was that it was ‘certainly not so serious, but just as inane and embarrassing’.
For other supporters, anti-English chants were legitimised by the fact that ‘English fans come to the Vetch and give as good as they get’. One fan argued: ‘we will pack in winding up the opposition when their fans quit the sheep-shaggers routine and the racist insults to us’. The most common defences of the chanting located it within the attraction and ‘fun’ of the game: ‘Just keep the noise up, irrespective of what the chant is. It’s the noise that spurs the team on not the wording of that noise’. Thus the defences of the anti-English chanting were a defence of a football culture which celebrates rivalries and employs them to intimidate the opposition. One fan argued, ‘in general as long as the north bank is loud and the opposition are intimidated by it I couldn’t care less if we sang the oompah lumpah song’. Another pointed out, ‘Banter is banter and should be viewed as such, anyone who gets really offended by this should just accept it as territorial bravado, or take earmuffs to the game’.

This oppositional fan culture is rooted in a specific form of ‘tough’ masculine solidarity and identity. One fan argued, ‘Footy is about rivalry, noise, togetherness and the last bastion of most real domains. If it frightens you or you disagree, sing your wimpish songs elsewhere’. Even those who did not find the chants particularly tasteful still felt they were inevitably engrained in the game’s culture: ‘there is little point of expecting a football crowd to be politically correct. They never were and never will be. So if you can’t cope with standing shoulder to shoulder with some ignorant racist bastard, don’t go to the Vetch or any other ground in the league’.

Such traditional terrace culture is widely believed to be in retreat in the upper echelons of the game. Thus, for some fans, the right to chant derogatory comments is an essential part of defending the last bastion of what soccer ‘should be’ in the face of the commercial onslaught of the Premierships:

Why do some people want to turn football into a game watched by corporate freeloaders, where the only noise you hear is a polite round of applause whenever a goal is scored -no matter who scored it. I’ve been to premiership grounds and there is a total lack of atmosphere as true supporters are priced out of the game. I much prefer grounds with an atmosphere. Quite frankly I enjoy chanting derogatory comments about Cardiff, I feel I have the right to question the decisions made by officials and yes, give abuse to players. If I think calling Damon Searle a scummer helps my team win then I’ll do so. If anything else it is a great stress reliever.

Some fans attacking the anti-English chanting were told that if ‘you … don’t like it join the Premier league mate’.

The logic and effect of the anti-English chants is sometimes interpreted as problematic because of the nationality of the Swansea players. Although the club has always had local players, the majority of its team and management have frequently been English. This raises the possibility that the chants might have a negative impact on Swansea’s English players.

I know these chants are supposed to be aimed at the opposing fans, but what exactly do the people who take part in these think that the English players who make up the majority of
OUR team think? How does it make them feel? They are not deaf and insensitive. Why should they stay with the club and have to listen to that sort of abuse week in week out? Would you want to play in front of fans who are just as offensive to you and your country as they are to players in the opposition team? They don’t suddenly become Welsh when they sign for Swansea City and they don’t leave their own pride at the Severn Bridge tollbooths.

Within the context of soccer culture, there is nothing illogical about fans attacking the opposition’s English players whilst celebrating their own. This is not so much about the conditional acceptance of players, but the oppositional nature of football. Indeed, in the eyes of most fans the players do become ‘Welsh’ once they join Swansea. This awarding of honorary Welshness has a long history in the game and is rooted in the club’s identity being more important than any individual player.

As with so many chants, the actual target of anti-English chanting was not anyone on the pitch, but the opposing fans. This is demonstrated by the way that some Swansea fans utilised the chants aimed consistently at them to bait the opposition. Thus, Swansea fans sang ‘One nil to the sheep-shaggers’ and ‘We shag ‘em, you eat ‘em’. Indeed, when Chester City, a club on the England-Wales border, played Swansea (or indeed when they played other English teams) their fans were taunted by the opposing supporters with chants of ‘Sheep-shagger’ and ‘You’re Welsh and you know are’. Thus, Swansea fan can use the very insults aimed at them to declare a pride in their own identity or to insult the opposition. This was evident at the 2002 Football Association of Wales Premier Cup final between Cardiff City and Swansea City, a match where anger was vented at comments made by the Cardiff chairman that his club represented the whole of Wales. During the match a section of the 1,500 Swansea fans present chanted, ‘England, England’. This suggests that, for these fans, their antipathy towards Cardiff was stronger than, and thus transcended, their sense of Welsh national identity. However, other Swansea fans didn’t welcome this chant and, when they were repeated the following season at a match against the north-Welsh club Wrexham, there were arguments in the crowd. A Wrexham fan commented, ‘the chanting was bang out of order … In fact the only funny part of the whole incident was seeing the Swans fans arguing among themselves with sensible fans shouting down those chanting England and joining Wrexham with a Wales chant. One fan asked why don’t ‘the idiots who fly England flags just **** off instead? It makes us look stupid singing anti-England songs when some t*sser is flying an England flag’.

The adoption of England chants and Welsh insults by Swansea fans also points to the fact that anti-England chants were generally not intended literally: ‘If I really thought England was that “full of sh*t”, I wouldn’t be living here, would it? Doesn’t stop me from singing the song - for the sole reason that it winds up the opposing team and fans’. Just as fans who sing ‘If you are a Cardiff fan surrender or you die’ would surely not actually kill a Cardiff fan, there is little to suggest that ‘We hate England’ is an articulation of a genuine feeling. It is rather intended as a direct expression of the specific sporting rivalries that underpin fan culture. Such chants clearly draw upon wider social relations and, more specifically, male working-class subcultures in which verbal banter and ‘wind-ups’ are central. Yet, the intention underlying such chants is neither an indication of how they are received nor necessarily a defence against accusations of racism.

More conventionally racist chants are often defended by claims that they are part of a terrace culture that picks upon any unusual feature in opposing players and fans and then uses it to ‘wind them up’ and affect their game. An early anti-racism campaign dropped ‘Respect all Fans’ from its slogan because it failed to distinguish between racism and the ritualistic abuse of fans that is embedded in soccer culture. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between what constitutes racism and defending one’s right to sing and wind up the opposition, as one English Swansea fan acknowledged:

Anti-English chants are perfectly valid in my book. Most of them are quite amusing and they get banter going between the supporters which is good. Where we have to be very careful is in saying ‘just keep up the noise – doesn’t matter.
what you chant etc’. That’s a dangerous green light to the large number of racists and the easily-led that Swansea have as regular supporters. Technically I guess, some of the anti-English stuff could be regarded as racist, but I don’t really think so. However, ANYBODY chanting racist filth from a Swansea City standpoint deserves everything they get (which unfortunately these days means virtually nothing and probably a pat on the back from their colleagues) and must not (even inadvertently) be excused.

This somewhat confused attempt to draw a clear line between anti-English chanting and racism was common. As one fan maintained, anti-English chanting ‘is not the same as the sort of jungle-chanting, banana-throwing racism that is really worth expressing your abhorrence at’. Similarly, one fan who took English friends to game, said:

None of them mind the anti-English stuff at all. They take it on the chin and I have even spotted them joining in on the odd occasion … it’s ridiculous to take it seriously as real racism, which is pernicious and an evil - and in its nature a far different issue than mocking our oppressors, which is just a bit of fun. Please don’t devalue a genuine issue by lumping it together with less serious matters. Blimey, we won’t be allowed to dislike our Cardiff foe next!

A similar contrast made between anti-Englishness and racism ended with ‘before anyone starts accusing me of double standards, do the football fans of a small nation winding up those of its much larger, overbearing neighbour warrant the intervention of the UN? I think not’.

Although rooted in soccer culture, the identities and prejudices expressed, however playfully, in soccer chants still need to be understood – as stated earlier – in relation to wider social relations. As we have seen, some exiles justified the chants by their experience of living in England. For others, the chants could not be constituted as racism because of their understanding of England as the dominant nation within the UK, and, historically, beyond:

Racism? Don’t make me laugh. The English are hardly an oppressed ethnic minority are they?

On the contrary they’ve spent the last 500 years raping, pillaging and suppressing their way around the globe and once they’d finished their wham-bam-thank-you-maam routine it was off home leaving the unfortunate country usually bankrupt…Wales is a perfect example. Why do you think so many of us have to work hundreds of miles away eh?

According to this logic, anti-Englishness was the oppressed striking back at the oppressor. However, whereas traditional racism could foster real forms of discrimination outside the soccer ground, the anti-English chants were usually intended as a soccer-only gesture: ‘I am not in any way advocating the idea of fostering Anglophobic over-indulgence … but do GET A GRIP. Are we all going to sing anti-English chants, then go on the rampage burning every cross of St George we can find following the final whistle? No’.

In the defining mythologies of the two nations, the Welsh and the English may have once constituted distinct racial groups. However, the mass population movements between the two countries (and elsewhere) over the course of the twentieth century have diluted the idea to such an extent that it is both worthless and excluding to regard the nations as being based upon Celtic and Anglo-Saxon races. It is more inclusive, politically sensible and historically accurate to view the two nations as cultural constructs rather than racial entities. Wales is an imagined community, not a ‘Celtic’ nation.

Yet race remains a stubbornly resilient concept in football and in wider society. Whilst it is generally accepted in the scientific community that ‘races’ are ideological and cultural constructs that have no biological or scientific validity, it is clear from...
the evidence above that some Swansea fans still regard ‘the English’ as a race, which in turn fuels arguments about whether anti-Englishness can be regarded as ‘racist’ (as opposed to, for instance, nationalist). Such arguments can, however, be viewed as essentially academic, especially when compared with more conventional racism unless there is evidence of a sustained and persistent ideology of discrimination in Wales based upon imagined or constructed ideas of ‘the English race’. It is notable that the police do include English-Welsh animosities in racially motivated crime statistics, and there have certainly been controversies that the English minority in parts of rural Wales suffers both institutional and casual racism, particularly in terms of housing. This is often justified by arguments that, while English people may be in a minority, English culture is not and it is threatening the way of life and language of rural Wales. In the Swansea region, where Welsh is the language of a minority, such tensions are less apparent. However, in 2000, the Swansea Bay Racial Equality Council said it was receiving more complaints of racism from English people than Pakistanis, Bangladeshis or Afro-Caribbeans. It maintained racism could take place against white minority ethnic groups (such as English people) and that it was on the upturn since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales. The council drew attention to a Swansea bar that had offered free drinks every time a foreign team scored against England during Euro 2000. The owners had claimed that the promotion was intended to be light-hearted, but it was withdrawn after complaints from English customers.

Whatever the realities of anti-English discrimination in Wales, some soccer fans argue, as we have seen, that anti-English chanting is neither intended literally nor against an oppressed minority. Nor would it seem for the majority of Swansea fans studied for this paper that any sense of anti-Englishness is politicized. Indeed, it is notable that there is little evidence of any widespread support in the Swansea area for Welsh independence or a truly federal United Kingdom. Plaid Cymru do not dominate politics at any level in Swansea City’s catchment area. There is no evidence that soccer fans are more likely to vote for Plaid Cymru than the rest of the population, and, of course, anti-Englishness is not necessarily the same as support for Welsh independence, but it is surely not unreasonable to suggest that any widespread sense of political resentment of England would manifest itself in votes for Plaid Cymru. Thus the lack of any significant politicised sympathy in the area for Welsh nationalism further suggests that for some at least anti-Englishness is either specific to soccer or buried beneath the pragmatic advantages of remaining within the UK political and economic system.

Rather than being viewed as a manifestation of a racist anti-Englishness or a political Welsh nationalism, based on the evidence presented here it is may be better to view chants about hating England as expressions of a less specific Welsh identity. Constructing national identities in opposition to an ‘other’ is perhaps particularly important for Welsh groups that do not speak Welsh and who are often consequently labelled as somehow not properly Welsh. When confronted with questions about their identity, there is often a sense of defensiveness about their nationality amongst non-Welsh-speaking Welsh people in industrial areas like Swansea. Supporting a Welsh club that plays in an English competition further raises such questions of identity, particularly when soccer politics threatens that status and the proliferation and saturation television coverage of the Premiership means English clubs have large followings in Wales. Thus the anti-English chants can be understood as deliberate expressions of a sense of Welshness and difference to England in the face of the wider complexities of Wales’s status as a distinct nation. In line with soccer fan culture, they take a seemingly aggressive but – some fans would claim – ultimately playful form.

Racial or nationalistic attitudes in football are no different than in wider society. Both the banal and overt racist comments aimed at black players and Asian communities do not generally draw upon racial hatreds or far-right ideologies, but more subtle and common prejudices. Yet, however much such attitudes draw upon wider social attitudes, as has been shown above, they also need to be understood within the context of soccer fan culture, a culture that is centred on oppositions. Thus, despite drawing upon wider prejudices, racist or nationalistic jibes are not necessarily construed as such by their
perpetrators but rather as culturally acceptable weapons to attack opposition fans or players. Any element of ‘difference’ is used as something to bate the opposition, be it colour, nationality or even weight or hair colour. This is not to argue that those doing the chanting do not hold views that can (or indeed should) be characterized as racist or nationalistic, but merely that a clear intention to be racist or generally offensive may be absent.

With this in mind, it can be argued that anti-English chants, which enjoy far more currency than conventionally racist chants, are employed primarily by Swansea fans as a means of ritually attacking opposing fans and team. Like the anti-Welsh taunts sung at Swansea fans, it is most probable they are not intended as literal expressions of identity and sentiment. They are banal rather than political expressions of identity and even the most aggressive anti-English assertions of fans need to be understood in this context. Beyond soccer, there are limited anti-English manifestations in the Swansea region, but they are neither political nor ideological; there is nothing to suggest that ‘we are the England haters’ is anything like a meaningful reflection of local social relations. Wales-England differences are real and felt, but they rarely translate into structural, persistent discrimination. It is for this reason that many fans are happy to sing what, on the surface, appear to be crude expressions of ethnic hatred, confident that they are not being racist. Instead, anti-English songs are seen as an expression of Swansea City FC’s local and national identity and part of the accepted banter of being a soccer fan. In this light, there is nothing contradictory about the same Swansea fans who proclaim their Welshness and anti-Englishness also declaring a (playful) hatred of Wales’s capital city.

A football club is a symbol of wider identity and community for its fans, but there is not a consensus over what that community means. Within fan culture it is misleading to talk of universal attitudes or behaviours. What is acceptable to one fan is not to another. The whole concept of what actually constitutes legitimate expressions of support is contested amongst Swansea supporters. Thus some fans could complain about ‘bigoted intolerant filth, whilst others reacted against “right-on” posturing’. Like all identities, Welshness and the identity of being a Swansea fan are neither singular nor static. They are constantly being debated and reshaped, often with reference to the English ‘other’. The relationship with this ‘other’ is complicated by wider ideas and debates surrounding conventional racism. Here there is more agreement about what constitutes unacceptable behaviour and articulation. But the parallels between the nature of the articulation of anti-Englishness and conventional racism are uncomfortably there for many to see, in both soccer and wider society. This brings to the fore, not only online, but also in discussions on the terraces and in pubs, debates about the meaning of identity of Swansea City FC, and by implication the city, wider region and nation. While such ideas of identity are widely embedded in other cultural practices, their contestation is not always so readily apparent, meaning the study of football has a relevance far beyond the game itself.

Notes
1. A site sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Science, Office of Biological and Environmental Research, Human Genome Program contains the following statement: ‘DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans. While different genes for physical traits such as skin and hair color can be identified between individuals, no consistent patterns of genes across the human genome exist to distinguish one race from another. There also is no genetic basis for divisions of human ethnicity. People who have lived in the same geographic region for many generations may have some alleles in common (One member of a pair or series of genes that occupy a specific position on a specific chromosome), but no allele will be found in all members of one population and in no members of any other, (Minorities and Genomics: Issues of Race).
Setting the Agenda in football and community: interview with Dave Edmundson, General Manager of the Football League Trust

Interview conducted by Gavin Mellor

Introduction

With the demise of the national Football in the Community programme in 2007, the Football League quickly realised that its clubs’ community schemes could soon be in danger of lacking the strategic guidance and support previously provided by the Footballer’s Further Education and Vocational Training Society (FFE&VTS) (the former managers of the national programme). Rather than trying to replicate the work of FFE&VTS, however, the League adopted a more ambitious plan: to create a Football League Trust (FLT). This would be a body that would not only oversee and support the ‘traditional’, sometimes peripheral community activities of football clubs. Rather, it would seek to set a new agenda that would bring community concerns into the very hearts of Football League clubs.

In the latter half of 2007, Dave Edmundson was appointed as the first General Manager of the FLT. Formerly Chief Executive at Burnley FC, he has a long-term interest in football’s relationships with communities and an ambition to make the FLT the national leader in community and youth development. I interviewed him at the Football League’s offices in December 2008 to discuss his career trajectory, his experiences with Burnley FC and the challenge of establishing a new national organisation.

To set the scene for the interview, Dave Edmundson shared the following story with me:

I think this encapsulates what the football club in the community means. When I was at Burnley Football Club we were going bust and I started the 500-Miles campaign. The idea was to get 500 people to give us £500 to raise half a million pounds, which in Burnley was difficult. After Christmas, I was in the boardroom – we’d lost to somebody, I can’t remember who – and the word went out that the manager wanted to see the Chief Executive. And a silence went around because if you were summoned to see Stan [Ternent – the manager at Burnley at the time] it was never good news. So I walked up the tunnel, heart in mouth, into the manager’s office and it was a different Stan Ternent to normal. He just looked at me and he gave me this letter and a bag of two pence and ten pence pieces. The letter read, and I quote, ‘Dear Stan, I’ve given this money from what I’ve got left from Christmas. I know it’s not much but I hope it helps the club. My Daddy and Granddad have been life-long supporters and now I am and always will be. I could not think what it would be like on a Saturday without Burnley. I am a season ticket holder in the Bob Lord Stand – it used to be my Granddad’s seat. I am 9 years old. Love, Jessica’. You can’t put that in a box can you? You can’t articulate that to public sector officials. That is just the essence of what the game means to people and how powerful it is.

The Interview

GM: I understand you were originally a schoolteacher.

DE: Yes I was. I was a teacher of physical education for 22 years at the Derby School in Bury, and then I went to Queen Elizabeth’s in Blackburn as Director of Physical Education. I finished there in 1996. But I’d always done a lot of freelance broadcasting as well. It started because when I was teaching in Blackburn I was always invited to sportsman’s dinners and a producer from Radio Lancashire got talking to me. He said, ‘I need somebody to do rugby in the winter for me, and I can’t find anyone to do it’. So I said, ‘I’ll do rugby for you’ despite the fact I’d played about one game in my life. So in September in the first week of the rugby season I went with Radio Lancashire to Orrell versus Exeter and when the game started I thought, ‘now then, which one’s Orrell and which one’s Exeter?’ And that’s how it started, so I became
rugby union correspondent for Radio Lancashire. But after that I started a magazine programme on cricket called Cricket Extra, because that’s my sport really and I’d played to a reasonable standard. After that, I suppose my name started to get about in cricket circles and I began to cover Lancashire County Cricket Club and became quite well known there. And then I got on to network radio, on to Radio 2, and eventually became the northern correspondent for the new limited overs cricket league in about 1990. So me and David Lloyd were in the north, and Mark Saggers and Colin Cowdrey were in the south and eventually we all moved over to Radio 5. What all this meant was that I was in and out of Lancashire (County Cricket Club) a lot in those days and when the job of Cricket Secretary came up I applied and got it. So I left teaching and moved into professional sport with Lancashire County Cricket Club and worked there until 2002. I then did a bit of my own consultancy for a while with a company in Preston called Advance Performance and they embedded a guy called Mike Forde with Bolton Wanderers and he was a big influence on Sam Allardyce.

GM: So is that how you first got involved in football?

DE: Well, I had also graduated to doing football commentary at Radio Lancashire. I did Blackburn’s games during their league-winning season and I also did Burnley’s games. The last game I did at Burnley was when they were playing Sheffield Wednesday at the end of one season when Wednesday has already been relegated. Burnley were 0-2 down after 10 minutes, and things were so bad that Stan Ternent made a tactical substitution after 11 minutes! Anyway, the long and short of it is that Burnley lost 2-7 to a relegated club and as the 7th goal went in fans started to throw their season tickets on the pitch. After the match in the press conference, I asked Stan ‘what do you think of the fans who were throwing their season tickets on to the pitch, and what can you say to the fans about renewing their season tickets’, and Stan replied ‘I couldn’t care less about the fans and I don’t care about season tickets’. I was appointed as Chief Executive of Burnley after a couple of interviews in October 2003, reaping the benefits of my question to Stan the previous summer! The club had budgeted for 11,000 season tickets because that’s what they generally got. But because of what Stan had said 3,000 season ticket holders had disappeared into the ether and we didn’t know who they were because the club didn’t have a CRM system or any way of following up. So we were immediately faced with a £600,000 hole in the budget. So in some ways, it was that crisis that made me first think about how we could re-connect the club with its fan-base. And I think it’s important to mention that during the period I’d been involved in writing a history of the Lancashire Cricket League – right back to the 1800s – and in looking at that I’d realised how important cricket - and football - clubs were in the community and the role of the church in football, the boys clubs and the temperance movement. It seemed to me that all of that had been lost.

GM: So you started to concern yourself with the issue of community as soon as you got to Burnley?

DE: Yes, because when I arrived the club had this disgruntled fan base and the town was in a terrible state because the industries had gone, coal mining had finished and cotton had finished. And out of coal, cotton and football only football was left and I quickly realised this. One of the first things we did was go to the local authority and tell them that ‘the football club’s going bust here’, and they said ‘what do you want us to do about it?’ And I said, ‘well, it says on the wall here that you look after all the people in your town and all the people in your town are connected to this football club and its history’. And I thought, ‘blimey, we even need to re-educate these guys about the value of the football club’. So that’s what I did.

I remember going out on the lottery with the club because we’d always done a lottery and generally it brought in about £250,000 a year. So I went out on to the estates of Burnley with the lottery agents. The first bit of advice I got was ‘don’t come in a suit because if you knock on the door in a suit, they’ll think you’re CID’. So I went out one January night in 2004, and you could see the deprived circumstances that these people were living in. But time and again people would say ‘ah, it’s for the club. What do you want, a pound? Hang on a minute, I’ll just find one’. And these were people that wouldn’t have any ability to pay for a ticket but it was still their club and they still wanted to contribute to it. So that’s what I continued...
wanted to get people to understand, that the club still mattered to people and that if we could harness that good will we'd have a better chance of surviving.

GM: So was your sense that a breakdown of sorts had happened between the club and the people of the town, but that a residual good will was there waiting to be unlocked?

DE: There was certainly a feeling that Burnley Football Club had disconnected from its fans, and that wasn’t necessarily in recent times but actually in more successful times when a kind of pomposity emerged along with the autocracy of people like Bob Lord. The club hierarchy had become the equivalent of the old Aldermen, the town elders, and there was an attitude that the fans would always come – that there was no need to worry about it. And more latterly they didn’t seem to understand that because of increased leisure opportunities you actually had to sell the football club and work through the football club to help the regeneration of the town and the community. And that’s where the idea of the 500-Miles campaign came from and it did engender a spirit amongst the town because there was real fear that the club was going to the wall.

It was interesting as well because the possibility of the club going bust certainly galvanised the local authority. I remember somebody in the club saying at the time ‘this club’s been going for 120 years and only in the last twelve months have we started talking to the local authority’ but more to the point, it was the first time they had spoken to us. I think they realised they could lose something important. I almost – well actually I did – I spoke to Pendle (local authority) and said ‘if we relocated, would you be interested in us coming to Pendle?’ And the response I got basically said they would have knocked down the town hall to have Burnley Football Club up there. But for so long Burnley Borough Council just didn’t see it. I can remember them bringing out this big brochure on how they wanted to re-position the town as part of its regeneration. And it said Burnley was basically a dormitory town and it talked about the links to Manchester. It called it the Jewel of the Pennines and talked about the Ribble Valley and the great parks. But where was the mention of the football club?

With the advent of the Football in the Community schemes at clubs like Burnley, we got a lot of accolades for what we did – including from the local authority. We were doing work to dispel hooliganism and promote the value of football – giving kids something to do other than chucking bricks – and it worked. And that’s what we’ve started to take forward with the Football League Trust. But even with that work going on, I still think the local authorities in Burnley saw the football club as something that was really just a sponge for money because of the players’ wages. I don’t think the advent of the Premier League in the 1990s helped too much in that regard.

GM: So how did you go about changing the culture both within the club – which you said was relatively locked off – and within the local authority?

DE: The really practical thing we did internally was to appoint Dean Ramsdale who was in charge of the community programme to the Senior Management Team. He became a very integral person in the unification of the club and the community programme which eventually led to the launch of Burnley Football Club Community Sports Trust. So the two sections became embedded with one another, and that’s what we’ve gone on to promote within the Football League Trust.

But the other things is you just have to keep banging away at people, getting out there to see them and promoting the value of the club. In a lot of those meetings I’d say ‘OK, Burnley is supposed to be this downtrodden place where the young people have got no ambition and no horizons. Well, you just listen every summer when the season is about to start and the chatter in the town is ‘are we going to do better than last season, are we going to sign somebody?’’ So I used to say ‘don’t tell me that there’s no ambition in this town. Use this icon you’ve got to get people moving’. I also used to say that we should use more of the club’s history; that we needed to get local people to understand that we were a great club and that we could get there again. That’s why we set up the 1882 lounge and put around it a montage of black and white photographs that started with the pub where the club began as Burnley Rovers right round to Ian Wright when he came to the club. There were also photographs of when we won the League...
and more importantly pictures of when we played Hamburg in the Quarter Finals of the European Cup. Those are the reminders of where the football club’s been and what it’s represented and we wanted the town’s people to carry that ambition with them.

**GM:** When you were still involved at Burnley, would you say your implicit understanding of the importance of football clubs to towns and communities was shared by other Chief Executives who you came into contact with?

**DE:** Originally no. I remember being at a Championship meeting and there was talk of new revenue ideas, new commercial ideas. And I remember saying, ‘well we need to look at involving community departments a bit more’. And there was a kind of coolness in the room – the attitude seemed to be, ‘well what about winning on the field – that’s what will drive revenues’. Anyway, I didn’t pursue it but I have said publically – I said it at the Chairmen’s AGM where I was asked to do a presentation – ‘it isn’t only about winning on the field’. I say that because you can have the most successful team on the field, you can win 20 games on the trot, but if you’ve not connected and made sure you’ve got a fan base – that you’ve got something to sustain the club into the future – then you’ve got nothing. I used to say at Burnley ‘we’re only guardians of this football club. It’s been here for 120 years and hopefully it’ll be here for 120 more. All we’re doing is helping it pass through the times we’re in charge’. Since I’ve got to the Football League Trust the message I’ve been saying to Chief Executives and commercial managers is ‘the links you have with communities will drive direct revenues into the clubs’ because people are realising this now. Take the example of sponsorship. Corporate sponsors now want to know where their money is going, and loads of them are being more corporately responsible within their communities. So if that can be helped by their support for what the football club is doing locally that it’s going to work a lot better.

All of this relates to what the Football League’s now about which is ‘real football for real fans’. What we need I think are daughters taking mothers to games, we need to keep people engaged and interested all week so they will want to go to games on a Saturday. We need to re-generate and protect that culture of people supporting their football clubs as part of the heritage of the towns that they live in. And it should just be matter-of-fact; it should be just what people do. It’s like Christmas. Families get together at Christmas and it should be the same with football clubs. It’s the responsibility of football clubs from the top down to understand this and make sure they look after the future.

I’ve started to tell people that this isn’t really about football. This is about the football club as the hub, as the driver of community. In the old days people were connected to the church or were connected to a school or whatever. But now people say ‘we live in a neighbourhood, but it’s not a neighbourhood. I don’t know my neighbours’. So the football club must be seen as something that can re-create and re-connect those people with a fundamental focus. The family togetherness that people used to share, that shared ambition, that’s what football clubs have got to promote. In fact that’s what the community programmes do. They work with people to provide...
the resources and the inspiration to enable them to engage with the communities they live in. The rub off for football is that if we do this, we’ll make clubs so central to their communities that their futures will be secure.

This was the approach I took when we [Burnley FC] got the money out of LEGI – the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative. We got £23.5m into Pennine Lancashire from the government – and that bid was led on football - it became known as the Football Bid. Out of that, Blackburn [Rovers] and Burnley [Football Club] got £1m capital-spend to build Enterprise Centres. Recently I was asked to go down to Walsall to speak about this and the developments they wanted to make with their stadium. And I was asked, ‘how do we go about this?’ So I said you’ve got to start with you Local Area Agreement. And interestingly one of things their agreements said was that it was a priority to work in a certain postcode which just happens to be the area where the club draws most of its fans from. So I said to them, ‘you’ll be connecting with more people there than almost any other institution and that could help you get your stadium plans going’.

In more general terms, I think there’s had to be an opening of eyes from clubs as to the opportunities that are out there, and from the authorities less of a head in the sand mentality about what football clubs might be able to deliver. Our basic advice to clubs now is ‘get out there, meet with the PCT [Primary Care Trust] and find out what their priorities are. If it’s reducing teenage pregnancy, tell them you’ll help them achieve their targets and get out there and deliver it for them’. And the PCT might say ‘well, how are you going to do that?’ And the clubs need to say ‘The club track suit is the key, the kids will listen and engage with us because this is somebody from the football club telling them this, rather than the local authority’. To me, this is the blindingly obvious but it’s not going to happen unless people go out and make the case.

One example I often give comes from Charlton Athletic, and it’s funny because it comes from a meeting there with some leaders in community football and the Department of Health. The civil servant that was there wasn’t necessarily convinced, but Charlton told him about a particular problem that Greenwich [local authority] had had with getting older people to take their flu injections. Anyway, they stuck Darren Bent on the front page of the local paper having a flu jab and 24 hours later you could hardly get one in the entire borough.

GM: What was it about the proposed job at the Football League Trust which convinced you to leave Burnley?

DE: I was asked to come to a meeting here with Andy Williamson [Chief Operating Officer at the Football League] – I was asked to talk to him about community – and I took along the report that you guys had written for the Football Foundation [Football and its Communities] I said to him ‘this is what it’s all about’ and I spent an hour taking him through the report and explaining to him the importance of community to the long-term future of the game. The next thing was in March 2007 I was asked to sit on a working party on community. But in August I got a phone call from one of the people organising the working group who said ‘you know the working party? We’re going to set a trust up and we want you to do it’. So I said ‘really? What’s involved?’ So they explained a bit about the role and within 24-hours I’d decided I wanted to do it. So through August and September we sorted the package and I started work properly in October 2007.

GM: Did you feel you’d taken the work at Burnley as far as you could?

DE: Well, there was unfinished business with the stadium and the Enterprise Centre wasn’t up and running, but when Brendan Flood [Director at Burnley FC] came in and put a lot of money into the club in 2006 I knew he wanted more of a hands’ on role – quite rightly too because it was his money at stake. So that’s when my role changed a bit anyway and it was agreed that I would focus on the stadium. So there was unfinished business but I wasn’t sorry to get away from some of the nitty-gritty of the football club. I always felt I had a vision for the football club, and I wanted Burnley to be a national example of excellence. Now when you get the chance to move into the Football League Trust you can do that on a bigger scale and I am passionately committed to making the Trust the national leader in community
and youth development. More than anything, we’ve got the network to do it. We’ve got 72 clubs out there, spread around the country and nationally we’ve got an exceptionally strong brand.

GM: Now you’re wearing a different hat, what’s your view on how clubs across the leagues are engaging with community issues?

DE: Oh, the change over the last year has been massive. In the next week we’ll be announcing the first raft of clubs who have achieved Bronze status in terms of their community provision (the FLT has instituted a three-tier system – Bronze, Silver and Gold - to grade the development of clubs’ community work). Now if I’d walked into most clubs 12 months ago and said ‘that’s what you’re going to have to do to get to the Bronze standard’ most of them couldn’t have done it. But they’ve all grasped it brilliantly and now the momentum is there for clubs to reach the Silver standard and eventually Gold. Alongside that, the way that the clubs are now starting to understand how to build partnerships, how to leverage funding, it’s incredible. I cannot speak too highly of how the community programmes and the clubs themselves have stepped up. The turning point for me was at our conference earlier in the year and the support that I got from the Chairmen and Chief Executives in the room was tremendous. We’ve never looked back from there.

GM: Has the birth of the Football League Trust brought some much needed focus to the issue of community?

DE: What we’ve been able to do is to set the basic starting point – an understanding of what’s needed in terms of a strategic approach – and from there they can get out and form strategic partnerships.

GM: So what’s the vision for the next five years?

DE: Well, it’s a story I’ve told a few times but it relates to Gary Newlove, the Warrington father who was kicked to death. I remember a report on the ITN News one night and the reporter was going out on to the streets of this normal English town – you know, not a town that’s especially deprived - and the reporter stopped to talk to this group of young lads and one of them said to him ‘what are you doing here? Do you want to be the next Gary Newlove?’ And I thought, ‘where have we got to? Where is this breakdown in values that our parents and grandparents had going to end?’ And I thought well what we as the Trust have got to do is ensure that by 2014 we can send that same reporter back on to the streets of Warrington. But this time instead of asking the bloke if he wants to be kicked to death, the kids should be planning their street football or their next basketball tournament because we’ve up-skilled them as coaches and they’re contributing positively to the estates they live on. It would be brilliant to be able to say that that’s what we’ve achieved – that we’ve been able to take the fear out of the eyes of young people and take the fear out of the eyes of older people and we’ve been able to contribute to reintroducing respect into communities.

[This interview was conducted at the Football League’s offices in Preston on 28th November 2008]
Stephen Morrow

On the 3rd of November 2008, Brooks Mileson, the former owner of Gretna Football Club passed away after a long battle against illness. Better known for centuries as a haven for eloping English lovers seeking to wed in defiance of their parents and English law, in recent years, fairy tale romance in Gretna has centred not on fleeing lovers but on the attempts of this English businessman to live his dream through a Scottish football club.

Formed in 1946, Gretna FC spent much of its early history playing in the Carlisle & District League, but played more recently in the English Unibond League until it was admitted to the Scottish Football League in season 2002-03. The club has tried unsuccessfully to join the Scottish Football League on previous occasions in 1993 and 1999. Its then Secretary, Ron MacGregor, described its desire for admission as being motivated by ‘a combination of football and commercial development’. Looking back, while Gretna was highly successful in its football development, the root of its problems was its inability to develop commercially. Indeed the club's geographical position, coupled with the economics of football in the lower leagues of Scotland, leaves the question how realistic such a development model could ever have been realised.

Senior professional league football in Scotland is divided between two separate leagues, the Scottish Premier League (SPL) – the top division of 12 clubs - and the Scottish Football League (SFL) – three divisions of 10 clubs each. While there is promotion and relegation between the SPL and the SFL, the SPL is an independent organisation, and has been since its inception in 1997-98. The stated purpose of the SPL breakaway was to increase competitiveness of the top division of Scottish football and improve the performance of Scottish clubs in European football. It was clear, however, that an important motivation for the breakaway was to concentrate a much higher proportion of the broadcasting and sponsorship income amongst the clubs in this new smaller elite division. Previously, income had been more equally divided between the clubs in all 4 Scottish divisions. The net effect of this has been to remove the prospect of any significant television broadcasting income for SFL clubs, except when they are drawn against SPL clubs in televised CIS or Scottish Cup matches.

Hence the financial situation and outlook for clubs in the Scottish Football League is markedly different from that of SPL clubs, never mind any comparison with clubs playing in more lucrative leagues like the FA Premier League or the Championship. With no television deals and very limited sponsorship, gate receipts remain the key source of income. For Gretna, its projected turnover for its first season in the SFL was only £250,000, a figure that is unsurprising when one considers its attendance records (see Table 1).

Table 1 Average home attendance – Gretna

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Division 3</th>
<th>Division 2</th>
<th>Division 1</th>
<th>SPL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
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<td>2007/08</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1000</td>
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<td>3000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this financial and operating context, it is understandable that the emergence of a wealthy businessman, interested in buying into the club was well received. And while nothing in sport is guaranteed, a serious financial investment in the lower reaches of Scottish professional football brings with it a good prospect of delivering football success. So it proved with Gretna. An estimated investment of £8m by Brooks Mileson ensured the club’s football development. Gretna’s approach was to expand by winning football matches: an approach which it achieved with great success. In its six seasons in senior football in Scotland Gretna became the first British club to achieve three successive promotions, culminating in gaining a place in the SPL in season 2007-08. Among other achievements it amassed a record number of points in a season - 98 points out of maximum 108 in season 2004-05 in Division 3 - as well as reaching a Scottish Cup Final in season 2006-07 and participating in the UEFA Cup.

But Mileson’s involvement with Gretna was always about more than football. In season 2002-03, prior to his investing in the club, at his first meeting with its then manager, Rowan Alexander, Milesen handed Alexander a cheque for £20,000 as a contribution to the club’s Skillseeker programme (McColl, 2008).

Subsequently, what underpinned his investment was Milesen’s desire that the club must contribute to its community; that it must give something back to the town. One example of this was his decision to commit somewhere in the region of £200,000 pa to developing a community programme for the club, involving, for example, free coaching in all of the region’s schools. Another was investing in education programmes for his young players to provide them with a security net should they not make it in football. As the club’s former manager, Davie Irons, observed after Milesen’s death: ‘he gave so much to so many people in Gretna and the surrounding area - and I don’t just mean financially’ (Chiesa, 2008).

Arguably, however, it was Gretna’s success on the field of play which contributed most to its downfall, with the club’s infrastructure and commercial development unable to keep pace with its football development. Put simply, Gretna was an example of over-trading; its sporting performance accelerating too far ahead of its business potential. While it was an exciting adventure and certainly generated interest in Scottish football, particularly in the lower leagues, with limited attendances and no history of community support, the club was wholly dependent on its rich benefactor. As long as Milesen was willing and able to...
fund the club, then there was an opportunity for the

dream to be sustained. But what was not prioritized

was any consideration on how to put in place a

sustainable football business.

From this perspective, the club’s success in reaching

the SPL was the critical point in the business cycle.

With its Raydale Park stadium not close to being

compliant with the SPL’s requirements, the club was

obliged to play its home SPL matches at Motherwell,

with inevitable financial implications both in terms

of income via attendances – Motherwell is 75 miles

from Gretna – and expenditure via rental costs.

Focusing on attendances the club’s support base was

immature. As Table 2 demonstrates its attendances

over the period of its successful progression through

the leagues were not markedly different from the

average for those leagues. But requiring supporters

to make a round trip of 150 miles to watch the club’s

home games was always going to be challenging,

particularly given the nature of the club’s supporter

base. Moreover, dilution of the novelty value

associated with the club - a club which after all had

now been in the Scottish Cup Final and secured a

place in the UEFA Cup - coupled with the risk of

poor on-field results in a much more competitive

SPL meant that it was not difficult to predict that the

club would quickly experience a substantial fall in

attendances and a decline in interest.

While the financial details of the ground-sharing

agreement were never disclosed, when Gretna went

into administration, the list of creditors indicated that

Motherwell was owed £44,000. But it has been

reported that the rental was on a match-by-match

basis. Given this, a more relevant indication of the

likely drain on the club’s resources is the fact that the

last SPL ground share agreement between Inverness

Caledonian Thistle and Aberdeen, in season 2004-05

cost ICT approximately £35,000 per match. It is

interesting to wonder what might have happened if

the club’s first season in the SPL had seen home

games being played in Gretna, providing a great boost

and focus for the club and the area as well as adding

some interest to the SPL as a whole. That said, it

is challenging to provide an economic rationale for

building a 6,000-seat football stadium in a town with

a population of 2,075.

The club was put into administration in March 2008

after Mileson took ill and apparently withdrew his

financial support. While it looked at one stage as if

it would go out of business during the season, thus

impacting upon the integrity of the SPL and possibly

threatening its future commercial appeal, support

from the SPL enabled Gretna to fulfil its fixtures. At

the end of season 2007-08, all of the club’s staff

were made redundant and the club was initially

relegated to the Third Division as a consequence of

its inability to guarantee fulfilment of its 2008-09

fixtures. Still unable to find a buyer, the club was then

placed into liquidation in June 2008 and resigned

its place in the SFL, being replaced by nearby Annan

Athletic.

On the first Saturday after Brooks Mileson’s untimely

death, two new East of Scotland league clubs came

together on Saturday 8 November 2008 in the

Both teams observe a minute’s silence in memory of Brooks Mileson

BBC Football Focus covering the Image Printers Club between The University of Stirling and Gretna (2008)
Both clubs were new to this semi-professional league, a league that lies below the Scottish Football League. One was the newly formed University of Stirling side, including a number of the University’s football scholars; the other was Gretna (2008), the club which had risen out of the ashes of Gretna. In the end, Gretna (2008) prevailed 3-1 after extra time in front of a crowd of about 100, and a camera crew from the BBC’s Football Focus was there to mark the passing of Mileson (see photographs). In the same month the previous year Gretna had enjoyed home SPL matches against both the Edinburgh clubs, losing 1-0 to Hibernian and drawing 1-1 with Heart of Midlothian. The contrast between the two seasons emphatically demonstrates Gretna’s rise and fall. Its story over the last few years has at times been romantic, thrilling and surprising. While it was inevitable that the dream had to come to an end, what ultimately brought it down was its disregard for business and financial planning. Unfortunately, while many aspects of Gretna’s tale are unique, that criticism does not set it apart from many other Scottish clubs in recent decades.

References
Introduction

The growing influence of directors and owners of professional football clubs is currently attracting considerable media attention. Recent developments at a number of Premier League clubs have highlighted the increasing tendency for owners and directors to intervene in matters that have traditionally been perceived to be the prerogative of managers in Britain. In particular, these concerns have focused on their growing involvement in player transfer policies and decisions. A number of Premiership clubs have moved towards a more European-style of management. Within this European-style management structure, it is common practice for owners and directors of football, to sign and release players without much input from the manager. However, the role of the soccer manager in Britain has remained remarkably resistant to its professionalisation (Kelly, 2008), and considerable hostility exists towards this European-style of management.

In Soccer Review 2006 I explored the relationship between managers, players and agents. In 2000, Roy Keane noted how professional football was full of 'bluffers and bull-shitters' and how players screwed managers, managers screwed players, and were in turn screwed by directors. This article will examine the relationship between managers and owners/directors of professional football clubs. It will explore this theme by focusing on the hostility and distrust that commonly informs this relationship. From the standpoint of managers this hostility and distrust partially emanates from concerns they have about the motives of owners and directors, their perceived lack of football knowledge, and, crucially, their interference in issues traditionally held to fall within the manager's domain. However, before addressing these issues, I will briefly examine the ownership structure of professional football clubs.

Ownership and Structure of Football Clubs

While the business people who involved themselves in clubs up to the 1960s and 1970s tended to be locally based, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed an influx of out-of-town owners. At the higher levels of the game successful executives in national and multinational companies increasingly came to replace locally based directors and chairmen. Following English football's first stock market flotation in 1983, there emerged a 'new' breed of entrepreneurial director and owner (King, 1999; Russell, 1997). Moreover, over the last decade a significant number of elite football clubs have come under foreign ownership. Both these trends have been accompanied by a growing lack of transparency concerning the ownership structure of clubs. This relative absence of transparency often intertwines with other issues. For example, accusations of fraud have been levelled at senior club officials (Emery & Weed, 2006), conflicting elements within director-owners objectives and functions have been highlighted (McMaster, 1997; Allera & Nobay, 1966) and, in addition, misconduct and self-interest in the boardroom, illegal payments by directors (Mason, 1980, Russell, 1997) and corruption at boardroom level (Green, 2002) have been identified.

The influx of new owners is having huge implications for both the role and tenure of the football manager. Quite often, new owners appoint prestigious and, in some cases, popular managers to appease both supporters and boards. While doubts exist as to whether these new owners have sufficient experience to run football clubs, it is their intervention in the managers' traditional role that generates more concern. Alan Curbishley has recently noted that, quite often, overseas owners have unrealistic expectations and a lack of empathy for the role of the manager.

Hostility towards Directors and Owners

It is important to acknowledge that hostility between players and club owners has existed since the birth of professional football. Much of this was a reflection of the prevailing class system where players were regarded as socially inferior 'servants' and directors saw themselves and were often viewed by the players as the 'masters'. Traditionally, the status divisions in professional football have been sharply drawn between directors and players. For example, managers excluded directors from the dressing room, while directors excluded players from the director's
box. In recent times Brian Clough made no secret of his contempt for directors and chairman, considering them little more than a nuisance. Sir Alex Ferguson’s acrimonious relationship with the Manchester United chairman, Martin Edwards, has been well publicised. In the season 2008/2009 boardroom upheaval and poisoned relationships between owners and managers has attracted unprecedented media attention.

A number of academic studies have identified the football illiteracy of directors and their lack of any previous playing experience (Pawson, 1973; Carter, 2006; Wagg, 1984; Green, 2002). Much of the conflict that informs the relationships between managers and owner/directors emanates from these two sources, their lack of playing experience and knowledge of the game. These were recurring themes in the interviews I conducted with managers. One established manager, with experience in the Scottish Premier League, was summoned to a board meeting to be questioned on new signings, team selection and the team’s recent poor form. He described it as follows:

I went to this board meeting once. I knew what it was about. But anyway, I answered all the questions. One director asked me ‘why xxxx wasn’t playing’, and I said ‘he was injured’. Then one fella asked me, ‘why did all the corners at the xxxx match end up at the back post’. And I said to myself, ‘what the fuck, is this guy for real’. So I said, ‘well we had practiced that in training because they had conceded a few goals recently in those areas’. And he asked me another stupid question and I went, fuck this. This is what you’re dealing with, you know, crazy stuff. They hadn’t a fucking clue.

A former Championship League manager stated that ‘directors haven’t a clue about football and they’re trying to have some sort of say in the team as well’. Another manager recognised the importance of trying to generate some level of rapport with owners and directors. He said:

Like I wouldn’t have much time for them (Directors). But the first thing is to try and get them on your side. I know some managers who have gone into clubs and obviously you are playing shite, because your on the bottom of the table, so there’s something wrong, but that’s not the right way either. Now don’t get me wrong we ended up doing all right, like we stayed up and that was the main thing and built from there. But there was a bunch of them (Directors) there and they were always looking to question what I was doing and how I was doing it and maybe get rid of me.

Similarly, another manager noted that ‘some chairman would be OK, but the majority of them would be a nightmare to deal with’. Finally, an experienced Irish Premier League manager, in describing the pressures of management, was also quite dismissive of chairmen and board members.

The main bulk of pressure comes from yourself. You don’t listen to the fans too much. You certainly don’t listen to the media too much. And with all due respect to some of the chairmen and boardrooms which I’ve

continued...
worked for, you wouldn’t be listening to them too much either.

Thus, a recurring theme from managers concerned owners and directors lack of playing experience and knowledge of the game. However, manager’s knowledge of the game emanates from previous playing experience and there exists a mistaken assumption on the part of managers that previous playing experience is sufficient preparation for entry into management (Kelly, 2008). A number of studies (Carter, 2006; Perry, 2000; Penn, 2002) have drawn attention to the fact that few managers have any preparatory training for club management or managerial expertise outside football itself. Moreover, despite the provision of formal management training courses by the English FA, PFA and League Managers Association, few managers have undertaken them. In addition, Penn (2002: 44) noted how ‘it is not even necessary to have a formal coaching qualification to manage an English club’ and those who manage professional clubs outside the Premier League are still not required to hold any formal qualifications. Moreover, it has only been since 2003 that there has been a requirement for anyone who aspires to manage a club in the English Premier League to hold the Professional Licence of the Union of European Football Association (UEFA). Quite often managers possess no formal qualifications and, in the Premier League, dispensations may have to be obtained from the League’s governing body, prior to their appointment. However, this domination of playing experience over managerial experience is not universal. For example, Murphy, (1998:7) noted how in Germany, ‘aspiring managers have to undergo apprenticeships before they can manage a club in the Bundesliga. In addition, managers must have at least 2 years experience in the lower leagues.

**Intervention in the Manager’s Role**

As we have seen, a recurring theme from those managers interviewed concerned director’s lack of knowledge in football matters, but the principal bone of contention is when directors and owners intervene in matters held to fall within the manager’s jurisdiction. While directors and owners are responsible for running the club’s affairs, the part played by directors and owners depends very much upon the individuals involved and the club structure. For example, at some clubs their role may involve such issues as sponsorship issues or ground improvements etc. They may play a dormant role after appointing a manager and it is generally the case that the owners/directors have not intruded upon the manager’s traditional field of operations.

Perry (2000) has examined the role of the contemporary soccer manager. In addition, over the last few years, numerous commentators have observed that the overall powers and role of Premier League managers, in contrast to managers at lower league clubs, have become more narrowly defined. For example, a number of Premier League clubs have moved towards a more European-style of management. This, in general, has resulted in the manager’s responsibilities being curtailed and limited to controlling team affairs, while responsibilities for youth development and scouting have, in some cases, been allocated to other people, such as general managers or directors of football. This director of football structure is common practice throughout Europe, where players are signed and released, without much input from the manager. However, for this system to be effective clear lines of communication and close links need to be established between the director of football and the first team coach; otherwise it can prove to be a recipe for considerable hostility and conflict. The importation of this management structure has faced considerable resistance from more traditionally minded managers in the UK who have always deemed player trading to be a central aspect of their role. Unsurprisingly, a recurring theme from all managers interviewed concerned their desire for total control over team affairs. This includes issues such as evaluating the squad, signing or releasing players, team selection etc. In addition, several managers described how they would insist that control over team affairs be stipulated in their contract. The following experienced manager offered a description that could have been replicated by all the managers interviewed:

**Interviewer:** When you got the job, did you have a contract?

**Manager:** Yeah, I should have brought you the
contract, from England. It’s a standard nine-page contract.

**Interviewer:** Were your responsibilities and duties outlined in this contract?

**Manager:** Not really. Well it’s pretty straightforward, there’s nothing to them [contract]. Sure they mean fuck all anyway. But I also insisted on all footballing duties, I would always insist on that.

In October 2008, Harry Redknapp was offered the managers job at Tottenham Hotspur. He accepted the position, following assurances from the chairman that he would have total control over the club’s transfer policies. Similarly, a recurring theme in all of the interviews with managers concerned their desire to control all matters pertaining to the playing side of things. One manager stated, ‘I wouldn’t want too much input from directors’ while another manager gave his views on chairmen, and what he saw as their interference in his role. Another manager in the English championship described how his chairman attempted to elicit information from players behind his back. He said:

**Manager:** Well the thing about it is and you have these chairmen, who have loads of money, and as soon as they invest their money in football they become experts. You know, chairmen, when they put money in. Like my experiences at xxxx. I met the chairman here and he went and bought the club, and suddenly he knew more than Alex Ferguson, ah he knew everything, he knew more than me.

**Interviewer:** And was he involved in any footballing matters?

**Manager:** Oh big time, that’s how it all came about, that’s how the breakdown came about. The thing about it was, like at half time you would come into the dressing room, and he would be sitting there, and I’d have to say, ‘can I have a little bit of privacy please’. So he would leave, but he would leave the dressing room door open and he would be listening in.

**Interviewer:** Seriously?

**Manager:** Yeah, and he would go behind your back. Like if a player was not playing [in the first team], he would be pulling them, and he would sit down and chat to them and try and find out what’s going on, and why their not in the team. He would be calling me a fucking eejit, and would be saying to the player that he should be in the team. Like he would just undermine you, and would try to find out what’s going on in the background. But yeah, like stuff like that, yeah chairmen are definitely the ones to watch.

Another manager, facing a relegation battle with three games remaining in the season, described how the team was three-nil down with a crucial match coming up the following week. Following his decision to substitute three of his best players early in first half, he said that the chairman abused him while the game was still in progress. He said:

After 30 minutes we were three nil down. So I took off my three best players off, xxxx, xxxx and a fellow called xxxx, so I took them off. Well the next thing, I got lambasted … the chairman came down from the stand, shouting and screaming ‘what the fuck are you doing? We were three nil down and you took off our best players, what the fuck’. And I went, ‘I know, because we are playing xxxx next week and we are going to win, I was resting them’. He never even thought of next week. But anyway, we won the game the following week.

There is also evidence from interviews with players of the power that directors tend to exercise. One former English Premiership player described the influence directors and owners have on team affairs. He said:

That’s the thing, you have no control over it, and your career and your life are in the hands of managers and chairmen. The chairman has a big input in picking the team and whoever he wants in the club, the manager’s just the puppet.

However, there is one possible reason why directors and owners have felt compelled to assume greater involvement in transfer dealings. It is worth noting manager’s alleged involvement in illegal and under the
counter payments (Taylor & Ward, 1995). In addition, numerous accusations concerning bungs, bribes and misappropriation of funds have been aimed at managers. In particular, following a series of high profile and damaging scandals surrounding transfer dealings in the 1990s, football manager’s involvement in transfer dealings came under increased scrutiny. As a result, FIFA introduced a licensing system in a bid to regulate and control transfer dealings. It is argued, from the standpoint of directors and owners, distrustful attitudes towards managers may be fuelled by such concerns. This may be one reason why some clubs have delegated responsibility for player trading to directors of football.

Perhaps a number of lessons can be learned from the Dutch approach to club management. Murphy (2002) noted how, when someone is offered the job of first team coach, he is informed of the conditions under which he will be required to work. These include criteria by which his performance is judged. These pertain to issues such as the size and quality of the squad, the emphasis placed on youth development and the resources available for purchasing players. Following this, if the coach does not think that he can achieve the success required by the club under the specific conditions, he should decline the job. More importantly, in Holland - in contrast to the UK - the relationship between the first team coach and director of football is a close one, characterised by discussion and negotiation. The crucial thing seems to be that it is the director that appoints the coach. In England when owners/directors have ventured to experiment with this system, a manager has already been in place when a director has been brought in over his head. One of the principal aims of the Dutch approach is to ensure that the staff are able to focus on their strengths and, if the coach leaves or is dismissed, the broader managerial set-up remains in tact. But, of course, the traditional and prevailing football culture in Britain is different. Players who become managers are products of a system that treats the manager as the boss, as the governor or ‘gaffer’.

Conclusion

It is argued that relationships between managers and boardrooms are not working and the high managerial turnover is a reflection of boardroom incompetence at football clubs. Green (2002) apportions blame to ‘club chairman and directors with itchy fingers on triggers who constantly make the wrong managerial appointments, pander to pressure from fans and frequently apply standards that would be unacceptable in other forms of business’. While the practice of many owners and directors is disturbing, it is evident that greater accountability needs to inform their recruitment and appointment strategies. The Football Task Force made recommendations that the Football Association of England introduce a ‘fit and proper person’ test, which would apply to shareholders, directors, or employees of football clubs. It is interesting to note the initial response from clubs was to reject this proposal, denying the need for any new rules and regulations. But clearly football needs stability, not only in the dugout, but also in the director’s box.

There is currently a debate in English football as to whether or not a European-style management structure that incorporates a director of football, will work in the English game. On one hand such a structure would, considering the high turnover of managers, ensure continuity in player trading. But central to the success of this structure is the existence of both trust and clear lines of communication between directors of football and managers. More traditional managers, such as Alan Curbishley and Harry Redknapp, oppose these developments. They view with consternation the emerging tendency at clubs such as Newcastle, Tottenham and West Ham for the manager’s role to be circumscribed and limited to the task of coaching and picking the team. They
defend the right of the manager to wield total control over player trading and, in common with many other managers they see the new administrative structure as signalling the demise of the art of old-style football management. Which direction football will move in only time will tell.

References
Dominic Malcolm

Writing 11 years ago in Soccer Review’s predecessor, The Singer and Friedlander Football Review (1997-1998), I argued that compared to other sports, and compared to other European countries, English football had a relatively clean bill of health in relation to drugs. I noted that despite an extensive drug testing programme there had been few positive drugs tests in English football, and that what drug use there was appeared to be recreational rather than performance-enhancing. Indeed, I went so far as to say that, ‘there are grounds for thinking that football will never have the [drugs] problems witnessed in other sports’.

In comparison to athletics, cycling or weightlifting where strength and stamina are central, the physical demands of football are far more within reach of the average person. Premiership footballers typically run about 10,000 metres during a match and, whilst this is no ‘walk in the park’, most of us could more easily see ourselves running alongside Steven Gerard in the Merseyside derby than cycling 2,000 miles in 20 days alongside Carlos Sastre in next year’s Tour de France. In short, I was of the view that football, being a game based largely on the skill of the participants, was unlikely to ever have the same problem with drugs of certain other sports.

Looking back it seems that someone, up there, was listening. Not God, but close; FIFA President Sepp Blatter. Writing in FIFA Magazine in 2004 Blatter made a similar point, arguing that, ‘footballers have absolutely nothing to gain from taking drugs because – in contrast to other sports – they need a vast array of qualities and skills to succeed in the game, such as strength, endurance, speed, intelligence, tactical understanding and ball control’. Both he and FIFA’s Chief Medical Officer, Jiri Dvorak, have pointed towards the low frequency of positive drugs tests in football, and in major international football tournaments in particular, as an indication that performance-enhancing drugs are rarely used by footballers. Indeed, the FIFA World Cup at which only Diego Maradonna and Scotland’s Willie Johnstone have ‘tested positive’, stands in sharp contrast to the regularity with which competitors have tested positive at the Olympic Games.

Writing in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, members of FIFA’s Doping Control and Medical Committees have suggested that there are a number of possible reasons for these favourable test results:

1. ‘The stringent drug-testing programme occurs during the entire football season in most countries’.

2. ‘Football players worldwide understand that prohibited substances in sport will neither improve their physical fitness nor their football specific skills and hence are reluctant to use agents that are not effective and subject to possible sanction’.

3. ‘On-going education campaigns by FIFA for doctors, administrators and players have encouraged a drug-free culture in football’.

A fourth possible explanation, though one which is quickly dismissed as ‘unlikely’, is that football’s drug testing programme is ‘insufficient to detect drug use’.

I am still convinced by some of my earlier argument. What sociologists call the ‘structural properties’ of a sport – that is to say, its rules, tactical conventions,
and ideas about how the game should be played – mean that those who play Association Football will never need performance-enhancing drugs to bulk up to 300lb like their counterparts in American Football. But, like many people, I have also become more cynical with age. In making these arguments FIFA’s administrators are simply behaving like their counterparts in other sports, who, Yesalis et al. argue, ‘have tended to deny that a major doping problem exists … or have at least downplayed its magnitude’. In fact I now think that there is considerable evidence to suggest that football does not have a drug-free culture, that some players and administrators feel that there are significant advantages to be had by using pharmaceutical aids to boost performance, and that there have been severe limitations to the drug-testing programme in football. The point of this article is that football administrators are at best complacent about what, David Mottram, a leading author on performance-enhancing drugs, has described as ‘perhaps the biggest challenge facing sport today’. Perhaps my earlier article was an expression of this complacency?

**Does football have a drug-free culture?**

There can be few people who genuinely believe that footballers are strangers to drug use. Marc Bosnich and Adrian Mutu, both formerly of Chelsea, are perhaps the highest profile footballers to have been found guilty of using drugs, but there have been many others whom the press have implicated in, or have tested positive for, recreational drug use, most recently two unnamed youth players whose punishments for testing positive for cocaine came to light in October 2008. Indeed, a survey of members of the Professional Footballers Association conducted in 2003 found that 45% of players personally knew other players who had taken drugs like cocaine and marijuana. It might be thought that given the vast discrepancies in wealth, the identified players might be disproportionately concentrated at the highest levels of the game. However, the survey results belie such a view. Twice as many players in what was the Third Division knew players at their current club who used recreational drugs, than did players at Premiership clubs.

None of this indicates that drug taking in football is particularly rife. We are, of course, talking about the segment of the population (relatively wealthy males between 16 and 40) who are most likely to come across drugs. How many actors or musicians would answer yes to this question? Likewise, how many city traders and how many lawyers or MPs for that matter? The point is not that this shows guilt, just that we have to recognize that these men are part of a youth culture which is not likely to have a particularly conservative attitude towards drugs. It is, therefore, probably naïve to think that FIFA’s education programmes have somehow successfully fostered a ‘drug-free’ culture in the sport.

**Do players and coaches think that players need help to boost performance?**

Having said that the role of skill, vision, etc., in football offsets some of the more extreme physical demands which we see in other sports, it is clear that both players and coaches feel that they do stand to gain an advantage from using performance-enhancing drugs. Here the distinction between legal and illegal substances is less significant than player motivation. So, for instance, the aforementioned survey of English professional footballers found that 58% of players used vitamin pills, 37% used creatine and 24% used protein powders. Players such as Emmanuel Petit, Marc Overmars and Gianluca Vialli have, at various times, stated that leading players are using performance-enhancing drugs to cope with the increasing number of matches and the related physical demands on players. Zinedine Zidane is amongst other members of the game’s elite who have talked about their own use of creatine and, indeed, FIFA’s Chief Medical Officer, Jiri Dvorak, has stated that FIFA’s Medical Committee is aware that creatine is ‘widely used’ by footballers in Italy, France, Portugal and Spain. England’s absence from this list might be interpreted as indicating that the level in the cited countries is higher than the 37% finding in the English survey mentioned above. Dvorak has further said that he was struck by ‘how much medication is used at FIFA tournaments’. Clearly there are many in the game looking to gain a pharmaceutical advantage.

But in addition to this data, evidence from various European countries suggests that a rather more sinister, planned and systematic, use of performance-enhancing drugs exists in football. Arsene Wenger, for

continued...
instance, has suggested that Arsenal’s own testing system has indicated that some of the players his club have bought in recent years had been doped at their previous clubs. After speaking to the players concerned, Wenger concluded that it is possible that some of these players have been given injections and medicines without being fully aware of what they contained. In an unrelated case, two former Marseille players have stated that during the 1990s club chairman, Bernard Tapie, instructed the squad to take performance-enhancing drugs before big matches. Marcel Desailly has talked about taking tablets ‘several’ times. Despite not knowing what the pills were, he remembers that the box of tablets contained the warning: ‘This medicine, above a certain dose, can be considered as a doping substance for high-level sportsmen’. Marcel Edelie similarly confessed that he had agreed to take an illicit substance prior to the 1993 Champions League Final that made him feel ‘different during the game’. Moreover, he argued that performance-enhancing drug use occurred in all but one of the clubs for which he had played, and that all Marseilles’ players, with the exception of Rudi Voller, ‘took a series of injections’.

Two former Spartak Moscow players, Vladislav Vashchuyk and Maxim Demenko have also spoken of their participation in a club-sponsored doping programme. Demenko recalled that ‘small white pills were given to first team players before each game’, and Vashchuyk said that doctors often used a drip to administer banned drugs. Records from the East German state-sponsored doping regime show that footballers, like other athletes, were ‘required’ to use drugs in order to compete successfully against other nations.

Perhaps the most significant body of evidence, however, comes from Italy. It was initiated by AS Roma manager, Zdenek Zeman’s statement that Italian football needed to ‘come out of the pharmacy’ (L’Espresso Magazine). As a result the game was subject to an investigation led by Public Attorney of Turin, Raffaele Guarinielo. A raid on the Juventus premises revealed that the club held 281 different pharmaceutical substances. The club, it transpired, had prescribed certain drugs to whole groups of players; particular an anti-depressant called Samyr, a creatine-based drug used for heart conditions called Neoton, and a painkiller and anti-inflammatory drug called Voltaren that 32 players received on a regular basis. The inquiry heard that the drugs were not used to treat isolated or occasional injuries; but rather, that the pharmaceutical programme was, ‘planned, continuous and substantial’. Most damningly, analysis of Juventus’s own blood testing programme led a leading haematologist, Giuseppe d’Onofrio, to say that it was ‘very probable’ that seven players had taken small doses of erythropoietin (EPO) and that he was ‘practically certain’ that two other players had used EPO to overcome bouts of anemia.

In 2002, Dr. Michel D’Hooghe, chairman of FIFA’s medical commission, argued that players across Europe were using EPO, human growth hormone and anabolic steroids. He further claimed that ‘high profile stars’ had started to employ their own medical specialists and that doctors known to have been active in administering performance-enhancing drugs in cycling and endurance skiing were ‘suddenly appear[ing] around football clubs all over Europe’. Such concerns appeared well founded when, in 2006, Le Monde claimed to have seen documents which indicated that leading Spanish clubs had employed the services of Eufemiano Fuentes who, at that time, was being investigated for his involvement in cycling-related doping offences.

Players, therefore, have publicly talked about how the demands of the game lead them to hunt out whatever help they can and we have evidence from a range of European countries that clubs may be complicit in this. Football, it would seem, is not isolated from the wider trends affecting sport in the way that Blatter
has claimed. Just as in cycling, athletics, etc., in football it also seems that some elite participants (and their coaches) believe that players need help to boost performance. To say that footballers have ‘nothing to gain’ from performance-enhancing drugs seems more like a PR exercise than an honest and critical appraisal of the situation.

Football’s testing regime: stringent or flawed?

In the region of 23,000 tests per year are conducted worldwide on behalf of FIFA. Of these, around 1.5% are positive compared to an average of over 2% for international sports in general. Also in comparison with other sports, a greater proportion of positive tests in football relate to recreational as opposed to performance-enhancing drugs.

Yet despite such numbers and expense, FIFA has been one of the more aberrant sports governing bodies in the international community, standing alongside cycling’s UCI as the World Anti-Doping Association’s (WADA) ‘sternest critic’. According to doping policy expert Barrie Houlihan, FIFA has continually resisted WADA’s attempts to standardize doping procedures and penalties across sports and across national boundaries and insisted on individual case management and flexibility when imposing sanctions. Consequently, many of the punishments imposed have been lenient compared to other sports, and defenses have been accepted (e.g. Croatian Ivica Olic at the Euro 2004 tournament) from footballers that would not have been upheld in sports which complied more fully with WADA’s strict liability rules (under which the athlete is solely responsible for traces of drugs within their system). Whilst arguments between WADA and FIFA have subsided, as recently as 2006 WADA President Dick Pound cited cycling and ‘some elements within FIFA’ as the problematic governing bodies in international sport.

The English situation is similar. The FA also prides itself on the number of tests conducted every year, which now exceeds 1,500. From this testing programme, Billy Turley (goalkeeper for Rushden and Diamonds) is the only British player and Abel Xavier the only Premiership player to have been punished for using performance-enhancing drugs. Either there is very little use of such substances or the testing programme is inadequate.

Certainly the programme appears to have only a limited deterrent effect, for the professional game in England is so large and there are so many levels to be covered, that testing is widely distributed. The survey of PFA members indicated that only about a third of professional footballers are likely to be tested during the course of a season, and that a substantial majority (60%) not unreasonably felt that they were unlikely to be tested in the next 12 months. These perceptions are in line with the views of ex-Liverpool manager, Gerard Houllier, who formed the impression that testers only visited individual clubs two or three times a year. This compares with other sports in the UK, where, or instance, a Sports Council survey (1996) found that the Sports Council had tested 77% of elite track and field athletes and 37% had been tested by other agencies in the previous year.

Similar lessons about the effectiveness of the testing programme can be learnt from English football’s biggest drugs controversy when Rio Ferdinand failed to make himself available to testers at Manchester United’s training ground in October 2003. Ferdinand claimed that, due to the stress of moving house, he had forgotten to provide a sample. At this time it seems that there was no requirement for testers to accompany footballers until they provided a sample. Rather, testers acted through club medical officers who then presented players for testing. Such an arrangement is unusual in sport, for research such as the Dubin Inquiry which was held in Canada after Ben Johnson tested positive at the Seoul Olympics, has indicated that medical staff can help drug using athletes to use this window of opportunity to avoid testing positive (e.g., through the administration of a masking drug or the catheterization of ‘clean’ urine).

In addition to testing being sporadic, and club’s acting as a buffer between players and testers, it is clear that clubs have had their own testing programmes. These might be entirely innocent, a simple check on a player’s health, but such tests are frowned upon in sport because research has shown that these were the very means by which communist bloc countries, and East Germany in particular, sheltered their athletes from doping controls at international
events. That the football authorities are themselves concerned is demonstrated by the fact that the FA has reprimanded both Chelsea and Arsenal for their illegal in-house testing of players in the course of the last few years.

There are signs that drug testing in football is gradually falling into line. Whereas only eight of the 380 Premiership matches in 2000–01 were subject to doping controls, now two players are tested after every league match. UK Sport, in conjunction with the FA, will also be picking 30 top flight players to be checked five times a year in addition to routine testing programme. Perhaps most significantly, however, footballers will also be required to provide ‘whereabouts’ information, so that they can be tested away from the club and at no, or minimal, notice. This regulation requires athletes to inform the testing authorities of where they will be for 1 hour every day. It was for an infringement of these rules that Christine Ohuruogu was banned from athletics. Subsequently, there has been much controversy about this policy, and most recently Alex Ferguson has voiced his criticism about its implementation in football, with its globalized and highly mobile work force. Whether an unreasonable infringement on player liberty or a necessary inconvenience to ensure the integrity of sport, football is finally coming into line with international drug testing protocols.

In writing this I am not suggesting that football be pilloried for its history and treatment of drug use in the sport. Football’s administrators do, of course, have a duty to protect the game’s image and the players’ ability to earn a living. But whilst official announcements may not always reflect the deeper concerns that administrators have over these issues, it is important that policy-makers do not begin to believe their own hype. To take a shortsighted view of drugs in sport has the potential to restrict the effectiveness of, and the deterrent posed by, anti-doping programmes. To believe that the lack of positive tests is akin to a clean sport is simply foolhardy. After all, no East German female track and field athlete ever tested positive for performance enhancing drugs and we now know that that sports regime had the most systematic, centralized and many would say inhumane doping programme the sports world has ever seen.

As stated earlier, the prevailing premise informing drug-testing procedures – according to WADO’s strict liability rules - is that in the event of a positive test, it is the individual who is held responsible unless he or she can prove otherwise. It could be argued that furnishing such proof is more difficult in the context of team sports, such as football, where the participants come under the continuous supervision of their club’s medical regime. It is clear from the Italian evidence that many footballers have been unaware of the nature of the drugs that were being prescribed to them. It is, of course, entirely possible that a footballer could deliberately and consciously seek to boost his/her performance by means of illegal drugs. However, any drug-testing regime in a sport like football that failed to take adequate account of the discrepancy in knowledge between the players and the medical personnel at their clubs could be judged to be unfair and perhaps leave itself open to legal challenge.
Riding Two Horses: An interview with Chris Powell, Chairman of the Professional Footballers’ Association and Leicester City

Interview conducted by Patrick Murphy

Biography: Chris Powell started his career as a trainee with Crystal Palace in 1986 at the age of 16. He had a period on loan to Aldershot, before securing a free transfer to Southend in 1990. In 1996 he was transferred to Derby and then on to Charlton in 1998. He won five caps for England, his first in 2001 at the advanced age of 31. He has been chairman of the PFA since November 2005 and, at the age of 39 he is now playing for Leicester City.

PM: Let me begin by asking you something about your background before you became a professional footballer? Were there any influences in your life that might have disposed you favourably to unionism?

CP: None whatsoever. My parents are from Jamaica. I lost my dad 14 years ago, but my mum is still going strong and loving her football. She’s now retired and loves tennis and to travel. Neither of my parents had a union background. My mum worked for Unilever. She has been a great influence on me. The fact that I’m still playing at 39 is down to the fact that I work hard, always try to do my best and don’t get above myself. I owe these values to my mother. Now, as a father myself, I’m trying to pass these standards on to my own kids, for example, treating people the way that you like to treated. I was first made aware of the PFA when I became a trainee in 1986. Garry O’Reilly, the Palace PFA rep at the club, felt all the players should be involved with the PFA and that they should all be enrolled in what is now the old pension scheme. At 16 years of age I didn’t take a lot of interest in the PFA. At that time I simply wanted to learn my trade and become a good professional.

PM: Your path has not been the normal one to the top of professional football. You’ve experienced the broad range of conditions that the game has to offer. Can you take me through these experiences and indicate the kinds of lessons that you’ve derived from them?

CP: At Crystal Palace I was a local boy and sometimes there can be extra pressure on local lads to come through. I manage to play for the first team when I was 18. Things were looking rosy and I was anticipating a long career at Palace. But it didn’t pan out like that. I was itching to play, but I now realise that I wasn’t quite ready. As a local lad more people know you and they are assuming that you will establish yourself in the team. I had to swallow my pride. I went to Aldershot on loan and thoroughly enjoyed it there, but unfortunately, the club went out of business. I ended up signing for Southend. It involved moving down two leagues. Nevertheless, I viewed it as a chance to get my career off the ground. Under such circumstances it’s easy to fall into the trap of not applying yourself properly. Many youngsters lose their way at this stage. David Webb was the manager and a bit of a sergeant major, but he was just the type of manager I needed at that point in my career. The club didn’t have much money. It didn’t have a training ground. Nevertheless, we got promotion and I admit to thinking ‘at last I’m on my way’. But then a number of my team-mates moved on. While I was talked about, I still never got my move. I was there for just under-six years and so really I could have settled for Southend for life. Yet
I still had higher ambitions and there was a lot of media talk linking me to West Ham and Manchester City. In the event, I ended up going to Derby. It was a club in the same league as Southend, but they were top of the division and so I decided to take the plunge and move to the East Midlands for the first time. It was a calculated risk. My manager was Jim Smith, an old-school manager and a very likable man. Initially, I struggled. I found it tough. I was living away from London for the first time. Living on my own in a hotel for six months. Jim Smith kept faith with me and I started to blossom in a new wingback role. I got married and settled down in the area. It was brilliant. I was player of the year and I loved the area. We were promoted to the Premier League, but much to my surprise, Jim sold me to Charlton. I think the Derby fans were shocked as well. To his great credit, Jim later said publicly that selling me was a mistake, one driven by the need to raise some money. Anyway I found myself back in London.

PM: So you seem to have had no choice. Your existing club wanted to sell you and there was a club that wanted to buy you. While I'm aware that such procedures are commonplace in football, it's worth noting that these transactions are not part of the average person's working life. Except in the case of take-overs, a company doesn't sell its employees to another company. Didn't you have any say over this move?

CP: I did make it clear that I didn't want to leave and I certainly wasn't making waves, but I was left in no doubt that, if I refused, I would not be playing for the first team. So I accepted the move and it proved to be a good one for me. While we were relegated from the Premier League at the end of the season, we managed to come straight back up as champions and then maintain our Premier League status for the next five or six years. After that I went on loan to West Ham. We won the play-off final, but I was out of contract. While I was willing to stay with them, Charlton came back in for me and so I signed for Alan Pardue. After a year I moved on to Watford, but it didn't work out. So I ended up signing for Charlton for the third time. However, at the end of that year and for the first time in 22 years I didn't have a club in the pre-season. Nevertheless, I kept myself fit and got a call from Nigel Pearson. As a result, here I am in the East Midlands again. So I think it's fair to say that my career has seen its ups and downs.

PM: Given the range of clubs for which you've played, you must have come across wide variations in the conduct of employers. Without naming names, can you offer a few examples of how owners and managers have handled players that has helped to re-enforce your belief in the need for the PFA?

CP: The players are in a business in which they are quite expendable. It's in the nature of the game that there will be players who play regularly and are part of a team and squad and there will be players that will be put to one side and some of these don't receive the respect due to them. They are at a club as players, so their obligation is to keep good time, behave correctly, train diligently, work hard. Given that a player maintains these standards, it's reasonable to expect that and managers should still show him respect. It has to be a two-way relationship. However, when you feel uninvolved, it's easy to not try your hardest and if the manager or coaches detect a lack of commitment, they may push a player even further out into the cold. But there are also players who conduct themselves in a disciplined and correct way and are still treated badly. We have had cases where players have been excluded from the main training group. For example, if that group reports at 10.30 am for training, an excluded player may be told to turn up at 2.00 or 4.00 pm and train on his own. In my view, this sort of ostracising treatment is disgraceful. In such cases the union has acted as a buffer and a mediator.

PM: I have heard of managers imposing arduous treatment regimes on injured players in order to make their lives as inconvenient as possible. It's as if they don't believe players when they report themselves injured.

CP: Yes, in my experience that has happened, but thankfully managers these days are becoming more enlightened. My present manager appreciates that it's about the group. While the success of the club is tied to the first eleven winning on Saturday, in the course of the season, injuries, suspensions and loss of form will ensure that other members of the squad will also
be called into action. So you need everybody to pull together. It's when respect is mutual between players and managers and coaches that a club moves in the right direction. Thankfully, the union doesn't deal with these kinds of issues everyday, but from time to time they do arise.

**PM:** Presumably, you started out as a PFA representative?

**CP:** Yes, the first time was at Charlton.

**PM:** Is it correct to say that one of the players acts as the PFA's representative at every club?

**CP:** Yes.

**PM:** You can say that categorically?

**CP:** Absolutely.

**PM:** Given that there aren't that many active trade unionists in the population at large, I find that quite surprising that a player at each club will always be found will to take this responsibility. How do you get to be the rep?

**CP:** The players at the club tend to select a player that is quite senior, a player that has got the respect of the other players. He's got to be a player that understands what the union is about. If a rep left a club, the manager might ask who wants to take over and if nobody steps forward, a senior player might be asked to fill the role and the PFA are informed of the change. The rep has to understand the small role he performs in the operation of the union. I say small role, but it is still an important one. He constitutes the main link between the players and the main body, to its officers in London and Manchester. The various officers of the union are assigned a number of clubs and they have instant mobile phone contact with the representatives at their assigned clubs. Representatives are the conduits through which the players receive information. They are the first port of call for players who might, for example, decide that they want to enrol on a course and want a grant form. Gordon realises that the reps are performing a crucial task for the PFA in making sure that the players have a voice at every club. But, at the same time, he appreciates that our primary obligation is as footballers.

**PM:** What was your route to becoming chairman of the PFA?

**CP:** I was proposed for membership of the PFA's management committee at an AGM. The management committee is the players' body and its members, including its chairman, have to be current players. The committee is representative of players from all four leagues. This is important in order to gain an overview of what's going on in football, from Arsenal to Accrington Stanley.

**PM:** Changing tack, it's often the case that individual players act in ways that are detrimental to the interests of their team-mates. Do PFA representatives get involved in these kinds of situations and, if so, what is best practice?

**CP:** They do if such problems arise. Sadly, however, some players see their agent as their first port of call. If a club rep is in any doubt, his best course of action is to contact head office to ask for advice or, perhaps, representation if a player is in deep water. For example, a player may be asked to appear before the manager, the chairman and the chief executive. Of course, every case has to be dealt with on its merits, but if someone from head-office is required, he will definitely be there.

**PM:** Unionism is based on collective solidarity, but there can't be many unions with a membership that experiences such wide income differentials and divergent working conditions. It straddles the multi-millionaires of the Premier League to those in the lower divisions with average incomes and little job security. I suppose that show business is rather like that with a minority enjoying great wealth and the majority spending considerable periods unemployed. Nevertheless, how have you, as a PFA official, addressed this wide variation circumstances?

**CP:** I think we realise what an unusual position we are in, both as a business and a union. With the explosion that's accompanied the emergence of the Premier League and the influx of TV money, the union has had to move with the times. We, as a union, recognise that we have to re-educate players, because, when they retire, the majority of them will not have the luxury of being able to say: 'I'll never have to work again'. So we haven't just tied our flag
to the Premier League. The union has to represent every player. Also, it’s important to add that players are members of the PFA for life. When a player retires from the game he retains his membership of the PFA. We don’t turn our back on players who have contributed to the conditions we enjoy today. For example, there are players who retired in the 1950 and 60s that might need hip operations. The PFA looks after them. I just find this so impressive. In the time that Gordon Taylor has been our chief executive he has achieved an enormous amount and with due respect to his predecessors, it is his leadership that has made the PFA the force it is today. The union is saying to its members we will re-educate you whenever you leave the game and we will look after your medical needs. If you want to stay in the game then we will assist you. Above all, we try to impress upon players the need to think, not just about today, but about tomorrow and their longer-term futures. While they may not publicly acknowledge it, the FA, the Premier League and the Football League need us. I think they realise that we are the voice of the players.

PM: How far down the league structure does membership of the union go? Does it extend to the Conference?

CP: No. However, we do have members playing in the Conference because they joined the union when they were playing at the higher level. So they can be full members. We don’t kick them out of the union just because they have experienced relegation. It’s also the case that if a player joins a Conference club, without having played for a Premier League or Football League club, he can become an associate member of the PFA. This entitles him to certain benefits, but not the full range. And this year the England’s women’s team have come under the PFA banner. This must be a positive step for women’s football.

PM: I recall that when Mark McGee resigned as Leicester City’s manager after a few months because he had received a better offer from Wolves. He responded to the subsequent criticism by arguing that loyalty in football was just for the fans. While he’s primary motive was to justify his own move, it seems to me that there was more than a grain of truth in this statement. Football is a business and an occupation. Increasingly owners want to turn a profit and managers and players want to do the best for themselves and their families. Kissing the badge seems to be not so much an expression of loyalty, more an affectation. What are your observations?

CP: That’s a difficult question. I started to play because I loved the game and even at the age of 39 I still do. I would say that all players become involved in the game because they have the same commitment. You’re being paid to do something you would probably do for nothing. Nevertheless, it has to be recognised that the one club player is now a rarity. We see clubs experiencing an increasing turnover of players. Often under the influence of their agents, many players are increasingly aware that they can move on. This is now the nature of the beast. Yet fans display a hundred percent loyalty to their clubs. They keep digging deep, keep travelling and keep supporting their team, whether they’re winning or losing. Without the fans you don’t have a professional game. They want to see the players – whether they’re at the club for one year or ten years – wearing their shirt with pride. In my view, there are many players who have been at a club for only a year, but because they have put their heart and soul into their performances, they have come to be highly regarded by the fans. They may move on after a year, but you have to remember they often do so reluctantly and under pressure to move for various external and internal reasons. In many cases it’s because the manager thinks they are expendable. Whatever the papers say, it’s not always about greed. Of course, I’m not denying that there are cases where players move on for more money,
but there can be a multitude of reasons why players change clubs.

PM: You are now the chairman of the PFA. It’s a post that requires the incumbent be a player. How were you appointed?

CP: As I said, I was a member of the management committee and when Warren Barton retired as chairman, Gordon approached me and asked me if I would take-over. I was very happy to accept the opportunity and I’m very pleased I did.

PM: What are your duties?

CP: Well, I’m the figurehead of the players. I’m still on the management committee and we meet every two to three months, usually in Manchester, but sometimes in London. Gordon is in attendance. We will discuss all current matters relating to the players.

PM: Do you have to do much public speaking?

CP: A little. I have to do my chairman’s speech at the PFA awards dinner.

PM: Have you undertaken any media courses?

CP: No. I’ve just picked it up over the years. I’ve learnt how to deal with journalists on the job. Being chairman carries some kudos, but it also brings responsibility. I have to attend many functions, such as the Prince’s Trust, anti-racism gatherings, community visits. At times I have to speak about the PFA and the players. When I represent the union on such occasions I am very aware of the responsibility I bear. I have found myself in so many amazing situations since I’ve been chairman. Meeting Princes and Prime Ministers is a long, long way from Aldershot. But I mustn’t forget that Aldershot played a part in my football journey.

PM: What does the future hold for Chris Powell? You’re respected in the game as a ‘good professional’. Presumably, you could if you wished move in the direction of coaching and management or, perhaps you might get the opportunity to continue with your PFA work in some capacity or another. What are your preferences? Do they just depend upon the offers that come along or are you predisposed to favour one career path rather than another?

CP: Well, the immediately future for me is Leicester City. At the same time, while you’ve got to play as long as you can, you’ve also got to have an eye on the future. I’m busy doing my A license at the moment. This is as a natural progression for any player wanting to become a coach or a manager. And I feel that I am capable of moving in that direction. At the same time, I’ve also discovered that I have a certain capacity for administration. I have quite a caring side to me. I care about the game and how players are treated. So there are two possible avenues that I might go along.

PM: Do you favour one future career path over the other?

CP: No and at this stage I don’t think it’s in my interests to settle on one or the other. Playing football is still my priority. As long as furthering my coaching ambitions and continuing with my PFA work doesn’t detract from the playing side, I’m happy to develop both paths. If I finish at the end of this season – although I’ve been saying that for the past five years – then maybe I will have to make a decision.

PM: If, by chance, at some time in the future you did find yourself in management, you are bound to be constrained to take decisions that you might have opposed when wearing your PFA hat, how will you handle such situations? This isn’t intended to make a critical point. It’s simply to recognise the realities of this new situation. So, how will you reconcile these new priorities with your previous standpoint?

CP: I knew you were going to raise this point. And I would say to you that a good manager should look after his players, but at the same time, he should try to ensure a satisfactory outcome for the club, the players and himself. To achieve this you have to bring all these elements together. Even as a manager, if a player has a problem, I would always recommend that he talked to the union because I know what the union can do for a player. But, of course, at the same time, I don’t want to come across as naïve. I fully appreciate that management is bound to bring with it testing issues.

PM: For example, just as you were told that there wasn’t a place for you at Crystal Palace when you were a youngster, you’re going to have to do the same to other young, aspiring players.
CP: Agreed, but I think that there are ways of doing it. If a young player isn't going to make it at your club or there's no longer a place for a more senior player in your plans, you've got to do your best to find an alternative opportunity for him in the game.

PM: This isn't meant critically because many people would regard it as an admirable trait, but I suspect that, given your general disposition, you like to have friendly relations with people in general and your work colleagues in particular. My impression is that you prefer to avoid conflict.

CP: You're right, but I appreciate that life doesn't always make that possible. As a manager you're going to have players who for various reasons are upset and you've got to learn to handle these situations. There's no doubt a manager has to make harsh decisions. But I think that my capacity to handle such issues will come with experience.

[Interview conducted at Belvoir Drive, Leicester City's training ground, on the 27th November 2008].
First of a Kind: An interview with Alan Hodgkinson MBE, the first specialist goal-keeping coach

Interview conducted by Patrick Murphy

Biography: In 1953 Alan Hodgkinson moved from Worksop Town to Sheffield United. He went on to make six hundred and seventy-five first-team appearance for the club before his retirement in 1971. In addition, he won five full caps for England in the period 1957-62, was a reserve member of England’s squad for the World Cup Finals of 1958 and a travelling member for the 1962 Finals in Chile. In 2008 he was awarded the MBE for services to football.

From player to coach

PM: You ended your playing career in 1971. At this juncture, how did you view the future?

AH: By the time my playing career had come to an end I’d obtained all my coaching qualifications. I was offered and accepted the job of reserve team manager/coach at Sheffield United. I’d always been interested in coaching and during my playing days I used to go into schools to coach the kids.

PM: Were these coaching qualifications specialist goalkeeping ones or just general ones?

AH: They were just general qualifications. At this time goalkeepers didn’t receive any special attention. Anyway, I stayed at Sheffield United for three years and left when Gerry Summers offered me the post of assistant manager at Gillingham, a Third Division club. We did well for six years and I enjoyed it. Nevertheless, as is the way in football, the inevitable happened. We just missed out on promotion two years running and so we were dismissed. For the first time, I found myself out of work. However, while I’d been at Gillingham, the FA, principally Charlie Hughes and Alan Wade, had invited me to run some goalkeeping courses and this was new territory. Nobody had ever done this before. Incidentally, at this time, I also suggested to the FA that they appoint a goalkeeping coach for the England team. Anyway, as a result of these experiences, when I found myself unemployed, I decided to set myself up as a specialist coach for goalkeepers. I wrote to all the clubs in the Football League and within days I was inundated with replies from clubs wanting me to do one or two days a week. The scale of the response was quite a shock to me. There just weren’t enough days in the week for me to accept all the requests. In order to handle the workload I had to move from Gillingham to the Midlands and, as my reputation grew, the bigger clubs and the top goalkeepers wanted my services.

PM: Given the absence of specialist goalkeeper coaches in your early days, what sort of coaching did you receive?

AH: None. I was self-taught and self-motivated. I’m not a big guy – five foot, nine inches. Part of my motivation came from a promise I made to my mother when I was a young lad that one day I would play for England. In those days all the players would just do things like run around the pitch. It quickly became apparent to me that because I was small for a goalkeeper, I would have to develop great agility and technique and also become a good decision-maker. The ground of Sheffield United was also used for cricket and I used the heavy roller for the cricket pitch in the same way as cricketers use the cradle for catching practice. In the afternoon I would throw the ball at the roller and it would come off at unexpected angles. It helped to teach me the importance of concentration and anticipation. All the great footballers I have ever seen, whether they be goalkeepers or out-field players, had and have excellent technique and that’s what I used to focus upon, developing my technique.

Career take-off

AH: In the 1980s I coached at a number of clubs, among them Sheffield Wednesday, Oldham, Watford, Aston Villa, Leicester City, Port Vale and Manchester City. In this period I also had some involvement with the England squad, working with Peter Shilton. However, in 1986, the Scottish FA appointed Andy Roxburgh as their international manager. On the back of having done a goalkeeping course for him, he invited me to coach the Scottish goalkeepers.

PM: This must have been something of a challenge because, as I recall, in this period, Scottish goalkeepers were the butt of humour south of the border.

AH: Yes, this was particularly the case on a television show fronted by Ian St John and Jimmy Grieves.

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Given this state of affairs I reasoned that the only way was up. So I took the job and, in fact, I did it for seventeen years. This period covered some two hundred international matches, including the World Cup Finals in 1990 and 1998 and two European Nations Championships in Sweden 1992 and England in 1996.

With this demand for my services, at the beginning of the 1990s I decided to concentrate my club activities on Manchester United and, later, I also took on Everton. During my time at Manchester United Sir Alex sent me to Denmark to make an assessment of Peter Schmeichel. My report was positive. I said that while he wasn’t the finished article, if United secured his services, he would help ensure that they won the Championship. And, of course, we went on to enjoy great success in the 1990s. So in this period I was working with Peter Schmeichel at United and Neville Southall at Everton. Then Glasgow Rangers asked me to work for them on a full-time basis, but, rather than do this, I opted give up working at Everton and spread myself between Manchester United and Rangers where I worked with Andy Goram.

However, when I reached my mid-sixties I decided to reduce my workload and concentrate on clubs within the vicinity of my home in the midlands and over these passed few years I’ve been coaching at Coventry City, Rushden and Diamonds and Oxford United.

PM: You’ve coached many of the top goalkeepers of the last three decades. What have you tried to add to their performance?

AH: Whichever goalkeeper I’ve worked with, whether it be: Schmeichel, Goram, Southall, Shilton or James or less talented keepers, I’ve always tried to improve their technique. By way of example, take Neville Southall. He was an excellent goalkeeper. Nevertheless, in my view, he used to go to ground too early, thereby make himself less of a barrier. So, I set about teaching him to stay up. If you stay big, you play big. You transfer the pressure to the attacker. By the way, I also told him to smarten himself up, to look less like a sack of potatoes and more like a goalkeeper. To his great credit he took what I said on board and really worked at it and for that he deserves respect.

PM: How long were you on your own as a goalkeeper coach?

AH: Over an extended period I was running courses for aspiring goalkeeper coaches and, after a few years of me being the only one in the field, other goalkeepers, such as Bob Wilson, Joe Corrigan, Peter Bonetti and Mike Kelly took it up.

PM: And now one can find specialist goalkeeper coaches all over the world.

AH: Over my post-playing career I’ve run courses for FIFA and UEFA and worked in many countries, including America and Canada.

Approach to coaching

PM: If someone coaches at a number of clubs at the same time can this give rise to issues of loyalty and affiliation?

AH: I was working for Manchester United and
Everton in 1995 when they both appeared in the FA Cup Final. Both clubs accepted me because of my strict adherence to confidentiality. I always kept my activities at different clubs strictly demarcated. When I ran courses for goalkeeper coaches, I always emphasised the importance of keeping the affairs of a club absolutely private. In any case, most of the top clubs have one goalkeeping coach for their squad of goalkeepers so the situation doesn’t arise.

**PM:** In your view is there enough for a goal-keeping coach to do at one club?

**AH:** Without doubt. You’re not only working with the senior keepers, but also with the one’s in the academies. In fact some of the top clubs also have goalkeeping coaches solely attached to their academies.

**PM:** Can you give me some understanding of the kind of attributes that you try to develop or instil in goalkeepers in your charge.

**AH:** For me the overarching principle is quality in two senses, firstly, in the sense that I demand quality in all dimensions of performance and, secondly, the letters of the word itself can be used to convey the various elements of sound goalkeeping. The ‘Q’ stands for ‘quick’, the ‘U’ for ‘upstanding’, the ‘A’ for agile, the ‘L’ for ‘learn from your mistakes’, the ‘I’ for instinctive, the ‘T’ for ‘technique’ and, finally, the ‘Y’ stands for ‘yell to organise’. However, it’s important to add that I don’t just coach, I also teach, that is to say, in addition to coaching them in particular techniques, I also try to provide them with an overview of the goalkeeping art, teach them the underlying principles.

**PM:** Do you also take responsibility for the fitness of the goalkeepers in your charge?

**AH:** Certainly. The type of fitness programme suitable for goalkeepers is different to the ones engaged in by out-field players. I have a biometrics programme that places the emphasis on agility and speed work and I also have different programmes for goalkeepers depending upon their size.

**PM:** At what age is it appropriate to start coaching youngsters as goalkeepers?

**AH:** I would say as long as youngsters are committed to being goalkeepers you can teach them technique as young as nine and ten. A lad has to want to be a goalkeeper and not an out-field player. He has to be dedicated to becoming a goalkeeper. Unfortunately, there’s a relative absence of specialist coaches for goalkeepers at the junior level. From a very early age you have to impress upon them the how important it is to develop a high level of concentration, the need to be positive and to avoid indecision. Once a goalie has made up his mind, he must carry it through. A major problem with junior football in this country as far as goalkeeping is concerned is the fact that youngsters have to play with full-sized goals. This places goalkeepers in an impossible situation. It is surely soul-destroying for young goalkeepers to play under these conditions. I just wonder how many young keepers have been demoralised by this experience?

**PM:** How would you set about convincing someone of the importance of the goalkeeper to a team?

**AH:** If you’ve got a consistent goalie you’re in with a chance of winning things. If a team has a goalkeeper that makes a bad mistake, say, every six games, then, over this period it may be that the team will win a couple and draw a couple. It’s likely that such a team will be involved in a series of relegation struggles. A goalkeeper that costs his team one game in nine is not a bad goalie and his team will be quite successful. But what I’m looking for is a goalkeeper who only makes a mistake every fifteen games and above. This standard means that I only allowed my goalkeepers three indifferent games in the course of a season. With a goalkeeper like this a team will really start to win leagues and cups. Even at the level I’m working at now - Oxford United in the Conference - I’m still looking for my goalkeeper to have twenty-three clean sheets in a season. If this can be achieved we will win the league.

**Goal-keeping issues**

**PM:** I concede that my memory may be playing tricks on me, but when I was a youngster watching football in the 1950’s my impression was that a greater number of goal-keepers were carried off injured than is the case today. How would you compare your playing days with the present in this regard?

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AH: I agree with you and it’s an interesting question. It was said in those days that you had to be mad to be a goalkeeper. Coaches and managers use to instruct their forwards to get stuck into the goalkeeper early on. Give him a whack to put him off. Goalkeepers are more protected these days, but being a goalkeeper is still a dangerous occupation. They are still required to dive at the feet of on-rushing forwards. That having been said, in my playing days, goalkeepers had to be physically strong because they could be charged whereas nowadays goalkeepers are much more protected, perhaps, on occasions, over protected.

PM: This brings me to what many football supporters view as a rather un-edifying spectacle – the penalty area melee – the rushing around, the shirt pulling, the blocking-off etc. I agree that goalkeepers receive far more protection than was the case in your playing days, but I cannot recall the kind of antics that are now a common feature of penalty areas. What are your observations?

AH: I agree. Coaches have developed far more elaborate tactics for defending and attacking corners and free kicks. During my playing days, when Leeds won and corner, I can recall Jackie Charlton being the first guy to stand at the near post and, thereby impede the goalkeeper. But tactics have developed since then with players running in every direction and it’s not only difficult for goalies, it’s also difficult for referees as well.

PM: Let’s now touch upon a number of other prevalent goal-keeping issues. It seems to me that while that are many keepers that are good shot-stoppers, an almost generic weakness is the relative inability to collect crosses. Is this simply because it is the most difficult of the techniques at which to be competent?

AH: The central elements in goalkeeping are decision-making and concentration. Throughout the leagues goalkeepers are particularly vulnerable when they have to decide whether or not to come for a cross. No goalkeepers are infallible. Petr Cech had a wonderful two years at Chelsea. Come the European Nations Championships he fumbled a cross and his side were knocked out of the competition. Very often it’s the apparently easily handled shot or cross that catches goalkeepers out. They lose concentration. They allow their confidence to over-ride their concentration.

PM: In your playing days you didn’t have to be adept at kicking with both feet under pressure. However, the change in the back-pass rule means that this is a technique that goalkeepers have to try to master. Giving that this rule wasn’t in vogue during your career, have you found this technique more difficult coach?

AH: No. I can’t say I’ve had a problem with it because I’ve always been adaptable. Nowadays the goalkeeper has got to be more a part of the team. He’s got to be more aware of situations and be capable of being more of an out-field player. Whereas, at one time, it was simply a question of kicking the ball up field as far as you could, today goalkeepers have to learn to pass, kick with both feet, intercept through balls and even be able to head the ball.

PM: A similar question can be asked about the changes in ball technology? I don’t want to suggest for one moment that the ball used during your playing career made a goalkeeper’s life relatively easy. If it was saturated the ball could be akin to kicking, heading and catching a cannonball. However, that having been said, modern balls do have the capacity to swerve and deviate in flight and, I’ve also heard it claimed, they move through the air faster. What is your view?

AH: There’s no doubt about it. But in my youth things were not even as sophisticated as your question suggests. Youngsters didn’t have footballs. We had to make do. For example, when a pig was slaughtered I would try to get hold of the pig’s bladder. I dried it out, blew it up and put dubbing on it and this made it go rock-hard. Of course, in recent decades the development of ball technology has had an enormous impact because it’s been accompanied by the development of new techniques for striking the ball and this has made a massive difference to the problems faced by goalkeepers. They have to be acutely aware of the movement of the ball in the air and the possibility that it may change direction late in its flight. Having said this, sometimes the claim that ‘the ball swerved’ can be an excuse. For example, when a goalie is beaten by a shot from,
say, thirty-five yards, I always asked myself could his anticipation have been better, could he have been quicker on his feet and shown more agility. When goalkeepers I coach at senior and junior levels see goals being scored live and on television I ask them to reflect upon what, if anything, they could have done to improve their chances of saving it. I'm not asking them to be critical of the beaten keeper, but simply to ask themselves, with the great benefit of hindsight, to reflect on whether the keeper could have done more. We need to get young, aspiring goalkeepers to think in this way.

PM: Some goalkeepers seem reluctant to issue instructions to their defence. In your view how important is it that goalkeepers are vocal and take responsibility for organising the back-line and the defence as a whole at dead-ball situations?

AH: It's vitally important. Goalkeepers should play a crucial part in the defending third of the pitch. His focus should be principally on the back three or four, whatever system is being played. He has to organise the defence when facing corner kicks and free kicks. And, there's no doubt that given the personality of some goalkeepers you have to encourage them to be more assertive. I'm afraid 'nice' goalkeepers don't win you anything. A successful goalkeeper has to be aggressively dominating in the six and eighteen-yard boxes.

PM: Let me ask you a question that arises out of my frustration of watching numerous penalty shoot-outs. Goalkeepers seem to dive to their right or left in their attempt to anticipate the taker's intentions. However, from my observations there's a fair chance that on most occasions at least two of the penalty-takers will hit the ball straight down the goalkeeper's throat. If he stood still and saved two penalties the chances are his team would be victorious. What is your approach?

AH: The advice I give my goalkeepers if they have to face a penalty shoot-out and, it's based on my extensive video library of penalty shoot-outs. Every team has a penalty-taker and usually a reserve one in case the main one's not available. Given that they're specialists, you make an effort to save their attempts by trying to anticipate which side they opt for. The other three players nominated to take a penalty are very often reluctant. They're not used to pressure of this kind. Therefore, they are much more inclined to hit the ball straight down the middle or, at least, hit the ball in such a way as to require a relatively straightforward save. But time and again, I see goalkeepers in this situation diving this way and that way and the ball goes sailing straight down the middle. Some players even try to chip the keeper. If he stood still he could save these attempts with his head.

PM: Televised goalkeeping mistakes are often shown numerous times, particularly if they are made at the highest levels of the game. Given the importance of self-confidence, for a goalkeeper to be subjected to that level of scrutiny must be very difficult to endure and come to terms with.

AH: Goalkeepers are the Aunt Sallies of football. When other players make mistakes, these are rarely subject to the same type of criticism as those made about goalkeeping errors. After making a mistake I see many goalkeepers sitting on the ground, bemoaning their lot and feeling self-pity. I always urge my goalkeepers to get up immediately, fetch the ball from the net and kick it back to the centre-circle. In continued...
done so they will be signalling that the mistake is behind them and they’re ready to start afresh. I would never have let my fullback retrieve the ball from the net. That was my job. That’s the advice I give to my goalkeepers. That’s how I try to prepare them for handling mistakes.

PM: So you want them to learn the lessons the experience has to offer, but to put the mistake behind them.

AH: A goalkeeper can’t allow himself to be running an action-replay of the incident through their head. He has to get on with the game.

PM: If there hadn’t been television footage of the incident when Robinson was wrong-footed by a divot and if it hadn’t been re-shown so many times perhaps his confidence wouldn’t have been so dented as it clearly has been.

AH: That may be the case. Nevertheless, it is also the case that the concentration powers of an international goalkeeper should be at such a level as to take account of the unexpected. Had he been fully focused he could have coped with it. His mistake was not being fully behind the ball and not keeping his eye fully trained on the ball. I appreciate that the media can be very cruel when mistakes like this occur, but I’m still of the view that the best way to deal with it is to fetch the ball out of the net, kick it up field and start again by setting yourself the target of keeping a clean sheet for the rest of the game. They have got to expect and accept that they are going to get stick from the media. No goalkeeper has been given more stick than David James, ‘Calamity James’ as they dubbed him. But, to his credit, he’s had the strength of character to bounce back.

The state of goalkeeping in England

PM: How do you view the present state of goalkeeping in this country? In particular, how do you view the situation at the top levels?

AH: As an Englishman I’m unhappy about the fact that there aren’t enough English goalkeepers playing at the highest level. This finds expression in the fact that there are so many overseas goalkeepers in our Premier League and, even in the lower leagues, and also that, at the age of thirty-eight, David James is our national goalkeeper. He’s a wonderful keeper and credit to him, but the fact that he is still number one has a great deal to tell us about the current state of goalkeeping in this country. During my playing days there were as many as twelve goalkeepers in the First Division who could have played for England. So it was a highly competitive situation. Today I’m not sure that there are even five goalkeepers in the Premier League qualified to play for England, let alone in the running for the England squad.

The roots of the problem lie in our neglect of the development of young keepers. While the establishment of the Academies and Schools of Excellence is all well and good, I still don’t think enough is being done to develop goalkeepers in this country. Even those who oversee the development programmes for young players never seem to focus on goalkeepers. They only talk about out-field players. The goalkeeper is one of the most important members of any team. If you’ve got a good goalkeeper you’re in with a chance and, yet, the focus never seems to be on the development of young goalkeepers. The notion that a coach whose own experience is as an out-field player is in a position to provide quality coaching for goalkeepers is a nonsense. The neglect of goalkeeper coaching is for me a big disappointment. So the whole goalkeeping set-up needs to be radically re-assessed.

PM: Of all the goalkeepers you’ve worked with who would feature in your top three.

AH: I would have to say Peter Schmeichel, Andy Goram and Peter Shilton. The great goalkeepers hardly miss game. I played for Sheffield United for nineteen seasons and only missed fourteen games. A top keeper misses very few games. Of course, some keepers are just unlucky with injuries, but it’s also the case that when goalkeepers remain free from injury for long periods this is a strong indication of their quality, their mastery of technique.

Looking back

PM: What does the fact that there are now more giant goalkeepers in football have to tell us about the nature of the modern game?

AH: Nowadays managers tend to go for
with a physical presence. If I’m sent to assess a goalkeeper this is the quality I’m looking for. There are smaller goalkeepers at lower levels of the game, but at the highest level, managers are looking for big guys. Having said this, I had the privilege of working with both Schmeichel, who was a very big guy, and Andy Goram at Rangers, who was small guy. But they were both wonderful keepers. Having worked closely with both of them, I can say that the only thing that Schmeichel had over Goram was his physical presence.

PM: I’m sure that you recall the Newcastle and Rangers goalkeeper Ronnie Simpson. He was a man of small and slim stature. Nevertheless, he was an excellent keeper. Would he get a look-in today?

AH: No. I’m afraid he wouldn’t. The game is so competitive now. Coaches watch the opposition with a view to identifying weakness and they would take measures to exploit his small stature. But returning to the goalkeeping situation with England, apart from David James, all the big goalkeepers playing in the Premier League are foreigners. While Kirkland has considerable potential, he’s suffered from a whole series of injuries.

PM: You’re five foot nine inches. If you were sent to look at a goalkeeper and he turned out to be your height, what would you think?

AH: No. I concede that I’d be looking for someone bigger. Managers seem to want a big goalie, but that doesn’t mean to say that big goalies are always the best goalies. As I said earlier, I have to compensate for the different weaknesses of bigger and smaller keepers by employing different training programmes. For bigger goalkeepers I have to work on improving their speed and agility.

PM: While you acknowledge that the demand is for big goalkeepers, do you actually agree with it.

AH: Yes. I don’t live in the past. I embrace the modern-day approach to goalkeeping.

PM: Finally, how do you compare the satisfaction you derived from playing club and international football with the satisfaction of being a goal-keeping coach?

AH: When I look back it’s been a great journey for me as a player and a coach. I’ve derived great satisfaction from both careers. Being a footballer is a wonderful and privileged occupation. To have played for a professional club and also to have represented my country gives me enormous pride and satisfaction. It provided me with a sense of fulfilment. Nevertheless, being a specialist goalkeeping coach with the opportunity to work with so many wonderful goalkeepers and managers has also given me immense and equal satisfaction. An additional source of satisfaction comes from reflecting upon the number of goalkeepers that I have coached and trained who have themselves gone on to become goalkeeper coaches themselves. Being awarded the MBE for services to football is for me the icing on the cake. Having said all that, I’m still active in football some fifty-six years after the start of my career, coaching at Oxford, and I still think I have a contribution to make.

(Interview conducted in Dunchurch on 24th September 2008).
Interview conducted by Patrick Murphy

**PM:** When I interviewed you last year you had decided to take some time out from the management of Garforth Town in order to devote more time to the other dimensions of your operation. You said that this break might be as long as eighteen months, but in the event, it was only six months. What was the thinking behind this earlier than planned return?

**SC:** In the first season that I managed the club, the 2004-05 season, I almost came in by default. The then manager Jimmy Martin lost the first two games and resigned. I hadn't intended to manage the club as early as this, but I had little choice. Anyway we won promotion. Then, the following season, I joined Sir Clive Woodward at Southampton, a stay that lasted two months eleven days. I took over as manager again for the 2006-07 season. While we got off to a bad start, we still secured promotion. In the 2007-08 season I first of all made sure that the club was safe from relegation and then I took some time out to concentrate on the development of SOCATOTS and the soccer schools. The feasibility of my plans for Garforth Town depend on the effective operation of these other areas. Fortunately, my oversight of these other areas have been made easier because I've now got a great administrator in Mark Rasche. My decision to take a break from management of the club was also triggered by a growing appreciation that my style of management is pretty intense and players can only take it for so long. Again, when new players are brought in, it takes them some time to understand my methods and buy into them. So the decision to resume the management of Garforth this season was really with a view to preparing for and making a push for promotion next season. I did say publicly that we could win promotion this year, but privately I wasn't really convinced. I now appreciate that if I come in cold every year then we are always going to get off to a bad start. For example, we got off to a bad start this season. In fact we were lying seventeenth until the beginning or middle of October, but on the basis of our form since then we would be lying in fourth or fifth place. Therefore, I view this season as preparation for next one and, consequently, my approach has been more relaxed, less intense.

**PM:** A glance at the league table indicates that Garforth are a team that places the emphasis on attack. They don't seem to have too much trouble scoring goals, but as is often the way, attacking teams also tend to concede more goals. I've got no problem with this approach as a philosophy. However, it's always a question of balance, as Ossie Ardiles found at Spurs in the early 1990s. Observations please.

**SC:** In fact we could have scored even more goals, given the chances we create. We have had so many games that we have dominated and lost.

**PM:** For a period this can be down to luck, but if a pattern emerges over a longer period it may require an explanation.

**SC:** The reason we are conceding so many goals is because we have lost players at the back. Before the season started, we lost Richard Carrick, our centre-half. He is a student at Northumbria University. They play in the league where I started off with Garforth - Northern Counties Division 1, but they are now paying some of their players and they offered him £5,000 for the season. We can't match that sort of money. I also lost Milton Turner and Carl Sprat. Turner went to Dubai and Sprat was the best goalkeeper we have had at the club in my time. He had previously been with Manchester United. So we've had some major changes at the back. It has really been a case of make-do and mend. Many people in non-league football say that you've got to have a black book that lists likely recruits, but this has never been my way of working. In this respect, I'm not part of the non-league scene. I just brought in a couple of players I knew to fill-in at the back. We began the season with the reserve keeper, but after seven or eight games I brought in another keeper who began with five clean sheets. Prior to that we'd only kept one clean sheet.
So, in spite of these disruptions, we have got better month-on-month.

PM: I’m wondering whether it might be something more deep seated. Your approach to football isn’t conservative. You like to see flair and imagination. That’s probably what attracted you to Brazilian football and futebol de salão in the first place. But perhaps by putting too much emphasis of skill and an attacking mentality, this method of development might neglect the defensive dimension.

SC: You can say that, but in the two seasons in which I was the manager for the season we had the best defensive records in our divisions and we were also the second highest scorers. So I think we usually strike the right balance between defence and attack. This season we are about the same up front in terms of goals, but the problem has come from disruption at the back.

PM: But are you not trying to produce all-round skill, total footballers and not such player predisposed to have an attacking mentality? Is not their preference to attack rather then defend?

SC: Well I ask my defenders to prioritise defence. I’m pretty strict and I make my requirements very clear. If someone is playing at the back I don’t want him going on 30 or 40-yard dribbles. Having said this, I have been more relaxed this year and been more willing to let them enjoy themselves. I hope that they’re learning from their own mistakes. I haven’t been as strict on some issues and when we have lost I haven’t gone home in a depressed mood.

PM: This suggests that you feel the six months away from Garforth has benefitted you. You appear to have mellowed.

SC: I think so. I haven’t gone into a rant and shouted at anyone after a game, although the one exception was when we lost to Wakefield on Boxing Day. The less critical approach that I have adopted may have given some of the players a false sense of security because, while I haven’t been so intense, I have been watching and planning and assessing their performances. We have a chief scout now and I’ve provided him with an identikit of the physical and technical characteristics of the players that I’m looking for. He looks at our national soccer squads that now go up to seventeen and eighteen years of age and also young players with other clubs.

PM: Presumably, at a certain point you have to make an assessment of where a player will be better able to fulfil his potential. Do you think that there is, to use your term, an identikit player for each position?

SC: Definitely. For example, in our present league, if a central defender hasn’t got height and pace he’s going to struggle. There aren’t many teams in this league that don’t have two six-foot plus strikers. So yes, I have to make an assessment of their physical capabilities as much as anything else. Young players often come to me and they have views on what their best position is, but I make my own appraisal.

PM: At the moment you have a mixture of players who have graduated from your soccer schools and player who have come up the conventional route. Can some of the players brought in from the outside be a bad infl uence on the soccer schools lads?

SC: They can be and so we have to try to make sure that we strike the right balance and ensure that the dominant culture is ours. This is difficult at the moment because the soccer schools lads tend to constitute the younger element. We are doing four training sessions a week, one of which is a boxing session. Our younger players come to every session, while the older ones are more likely to have an excuse. I take and join in all the training sessions myself. I’ve recently brought in two players from other clubs and, after a few games, it was apparent that they weren’t fit enough. I took a training session last week that consisted of an hour of futebol de salão, followed by a four-mile run and then ten hill runs. Afterwards they said to a member of my staff that they’ve never done a training session as hard as that in their lives. So it’s clear, they don’t train and practice enough. We are aiming for a culture where if you’re not up to it, you stand out.

We are looking forward to the time when we have a team of soccer school graduates because their work ethic is so much in advance of players that come from traditional backgrounds.

PM: What’s the idea behind the boxing training?

SC: It’s something different. From a cardiovascular standpoint it’s very good. They work on the pads and
work in twos, taking turns with a protective vest. In psychological terms I think it makes them feel tougher. Some of the older players have been so stiff after these sessions that they’ve pulled out of games on the Saturday, but the fitter ones have had no problems. In addition to the group training, some of my players have individual training programmes.

PM: Of its very nature futebol de salão doesn’t involve the development of heading skills. This is just a speculative question, how many of the goals that you concede come from set-plays?

SC: It is a general misconception that the training provided by our soccer schools is only futebol de salão. We have a size one ball for the children age five to nine. From nine eleven they do fifty percent with a futebol de salão ball and fifty percent with a conventional football. From eleven to sixteen it’s one-third futebol de salão, two-thirds conventional football. In this latter context, we spend a great deal of time developing heading skills. In direct answer to your question, we hardly concede any goals from set-plays. Three of the things we work on are defending corners, wide freekicks and long ‘throw-ons’. We go man-for-man on the basis of size and tell them to look at the their man, not the ball. They stick to this strategy during any secondary phase of play and then decide when to pull-off their man and move on to the attack. They know they’re in trouble if it’s their man that scores. I don’t think we have conceded one goal directly from a corner. Conversely, more than half of our goals have come from corners, goals from the head and feet.

PM: And speaking of feet, how do you try to rectify the predominantly one-footedness of most players?

SC: We have a pyramid. The technical, then physical and that’s very important and, finally, the tactical/psychological. We spend a great deal of time with youngsters developing their individual skills and we declare certain months ‘weaker foot months’. It’s surprising how quickly their confidence grows when they are working solely with their weaker foot. Of course, with our programme for younger children, SOCATOTS, we’re addressing the development of two-sidedness from more or less from the outset. Of course, these youngsters are going to take a long time to come through, but I’m prepared to wait. In the meantime I have to focus on improving the skill levels of players who haven’t had the benefit of this pre-soccer schools experience.

PM: Your SOCATOTS graduates aren’t going to reach the ages of seventeen or eighteen for another ten or eleven years.

SC: I’ve got the patience. When the South Africans were in discussions to take over Newcastle, they wanted me to become technical director and they offered me a ten percent stake in the club. But I knew that they were really trying to buy into the Soccer Schools network. Our Soccer Schools only went national in 1999 and at that time most of the participants were aged nine, ten and eleven. At that time we only had twenty-seven franchisees. Now we’ve grown to over six hundred soccer schools and around three hundred SOSATOTS schools. We have now got 2.2 million kids involved. The more we have at the base the more we get through. Our national squads have been extended up to eighteen years and many of them have ambitions to play for Garforth Town. Accommodation has been a problem, but we have now got an arrangement with Leeds Carnegie, one of our partners. They will do a qualification in football coaching. We hope to have around twenty students per year and they will play for our under-19s in the Conference Reserves League. I’ve also re-established our reserve team in a local league so that some of the youngsters are getting two games a week. We just have to be patient until the flow of graduates from SOCATOTS and our soccer schools really starts to come through. Some indication of the quality of our players is that our Harrogate soccer school recently played the Blackburn Rovers.
Academy under-13s side and beat them 11-0. We want to recruit young players not only with a high level of skill, but also with our work ethic.

PM: In a previous interview you said that you wouldn’t tolerate a player who engaged in consistently foul play. From my observations of professional football, the majority of defenders incorporate a substantial amount of this element into their game. Since, by and large, they are less skilful than the forwards they are playing against, many of them wouldn’t survive in the game without resorting to a range of surreptitious and more blatant fouls. How do you handle this ‘moral’ dilemma?

SC: I don’t encourage foul play. There are managers out there that tell their players to kick certain opposition players, indulge in shirt pulling and cheating in general. In our last promotion year we had the best disciplinary record, but at a certain point this season we had a bad disciplinary record. This was largely down to two players. They were picking up yellow cards time and time again. I dropped them from the team. They have pleaded with me to let them back into the squad. I’ve had a long talk with them and, as a result, one of them is back in the team and the other is on the bench. Most of our yellows stem from late-tackles and usually this is down to bad timing.

PM: What’s your attitude towards the professional foul?

SC: I’ve never instructed my players to engage in a professional foul. We had one straight red for a player who the referee judged to have jumped for the ball and elbowed his opponent. On that occasion, my player broke his own nose. So I’m not sure about that decision. The players that we have had sent-off in my time at Garforth are those that have collected two yellows. I always approach the referee at the end of a game, shake his hand and thank him. I never complain. We have produced printed T-shirts for our players and fans with the message ‘respect the referee, no fouling, no cheating, no swearing’. We’ve also distributed leaflets with the same message.

PM: Do the players bad-mouth the referee?

SC: Never. If they did they would be in big trouble with me.

PM: I’ve read that you are intending to bring the Brazilian International, Cafu, to Garforth Town for the last month of the season. What’s the thinking behind this move? Is it largely for publicity?

SC: Well, as I’ve said, I see this season as one of transition. I’m bringing Cafu in for the last two games of the season. They are both at home and against teams at or near the bottom of the league, so it’s not going to disrupt the team. Hopefully, it will attract the media and help to put us on the map. It will give me an opportunity to remind them that, when we had Socrates with us four years ago, we were nine promotions away from my goal, the Premier League. Now we are only seven promotions away. In addition, any publicity for the club helps to repay our sponsors.

PM: What kind of budget do you run on?

SC: When I took charge of the club the budget was £665 a week. I immediately reduced that to around £350 a week. At the beginning of the 2004-05 season our budget increased to £900, but when Jimmy Martin resigned I reduced it to £700 a week and that still stands. This is about what we can afford. We made a profit of £8,000 last year, so that’s about break-even point. I’m not prepared to go above this figure. We have got the highest fee for a shirt sponsor in our league from Genix. In total this brings in around £30,000 a year. All the money from the gate, the bar and refreshments go back into the club.

PM: Although you employ some of your players. Do you include these payments in the club budget?

SC: No we don’t include their salaries, but these are genuine jobs, not sinecure posts. The two players we employ more than earn their money. Some of the teams in our league have budgets of £5,000 and £6,000 per week. One club, Durham, pay one of its players £900 a week. That’s more than our total budget. We are the lowest payers in our league and it will be the same next year. I’ve signed the players that I want to retain on contracts of two or three years.

I am never going to put any money from SOCATOTS or the Brazilian Soccer Schools into Garforth. The club has got to be self-financing. But, to compete with the bigger budget clubs we need to sell players in order to boost our coffers. In the short-term
this would allow us to bring in players of the right calibre to compliment our younger players and in the longer-term it would enable us to retain the younger ones and pay them accordingly. I think that in time Garforth will become one of the richest clubs in non-league football. For every player that we sell we will have a ready replacement. In the long run I can’t see how we can fail.

PM: Finally, Give me your thoughts on the prospects for Garforth Town over the next, let’s say, five years.

SC: I think we’ll stay in this league this year. I expect us to get promotion next year or the following one. The next promotion one will come close on its heels. This second promotion would take us into the Conference North. If we went up this year we would struggle to avoid relegation because, instead of competing against a couple of teams that are spending about £5,000 a week, we would be up against a league of clubs with that sort of budget. I was disappointed that we lost our match against Wakefield on Boxing Day. If we had won, it would have given us a fighting chance of getting into the play-offs. Even so I’m happy enough with our position in general. My intention is to give the players just a month off in the close season and start training earlier than the other clubs and really go for promotion next season.

(This interview was conducted at Simon Clifford’s office in Leeds on Friday 16th January 2009).
They don’t know their left foot from their right

Patrick Murphy

Riding a hobbyhorse

The saying ‘they don’t know their left from their right’ is generally employed with pejorative intent, the imputation being that the person in question is embarrassingly awkward. It is the more respectable version of ‘not knowing their arse from their elbow’. Both phrases tend to be uttered with dismissive aplomb. And yet, surprisingly, when another variation is employed in the context of professional football, it is more akin to a neutral observation, seemingly devoid of negative connotations. The vast majority of professional footballers are very aware of which is their stronger and weaker foot. Their stronger foot is the one with which they predominately control the ball, pass with, lead a tackle with and shoot with. Very often players will forgo an apparently good opportunity to shoot with their weaker foot, to try to move the ball on to their stronger side, and, in the process, they are often closed down and the opening is gone. Their weaker foot is the one they stand on. It’s sometimes affectionately referred to as their ‘swinger’. It plays an auxiliary role in all their movements. Less obviously, it is a bias that is not confined to the feet. It tends to find expression in the ways in which players move their bodies as a whole. This can be illustrated by inviting them without further instruction to run to a certain point, turn and run back. If left to their own devices, they will invariably turn off their favoured foot. This pattern has implications for their defending and attacking styles. It enables their usually equally handicapped opponents to read their game more easily and channel their play by encouraging forwards to attack defenders’ less favoured side and for defenders to usher attackers down their weaker channel. It may be that many people who watch professional football are untroubled by this perennial feature of the game. For me it has been a perpetual irritant and, I confess, a personal hobbyhorse. For an example of the impact of this limitation, look no further than the England team and the way the absence of naturally left-footed players has been a thorn in the side of a succession of England managers.

It fell to their weaker foot

If a manager or coach has to decide between two players of identical ability and character, save that one is predominately one-footed and the other was equally dexterous with both feet, which one will he select? Even if the manager or coach in question is a stalwart of the ‘up-and-at-em’ brigade, an aficionado of the long-ball game, the question is still a ‘no-brainer’. Clearly, he would opt for the latter player because, at the very least, he offers him greater positional flexibility. More generally, however, the argument that players would be more effective if they were equally comfortable on either side seems unanswerable.

Yet, notwithstanding this fact, the majority of professional footballers go through their entire careers accompanied by the observation: ‘it fell to their weaker foot’. When we hear commentators making this observation about a player, we could be forgiven for thinking that it is intended as some sort of justification. I don’t doubt that it does contain an element of justification, but my impression is that it is also a self-justification. Why? Because it is a remark often made by ex-professionals, now commentators,
and as players the majority of them were constrained by this same limitation. Use of the phrase 'it fell to his weaker foot' is doubly unfortunate because it seems to carry with it the implication that: 'this is the way things are and, therefore, nothing can be done about it. While one might get the odd player who is naturally blessed with two-footedness, the majority of us are not so lucky, therefore, we have to make the best of our singularly'.

The reader could be forgiven for interpreting the above text as a scarcely veiled criticism of the professionalism of professional footballers. It is not. The target is not the player as an individual, but prevailing coaching system, the way in which young footballers are nurtured and taught. It seems reasonable to suppose that scouts and coaches of professional clubs select youngsters for their academies and schools of excellence on two counts: the existing qualities they display and some estimation of their developmental potential.

I don't for one moment doubt that the primary aim of coaches as a group is to produce the best possible young talent for their respective clubs. It is, however, undeniable the case that the prevailing system of development excels in producing one-footed or predominately one-footed players. This cannot be in the best interests of their clubs and there in lies the puzzle. How can coaches as a body have the best interests of their clubs at heart and yet, notwithstanding their best efforts, contrive to ensure the mass production of one-footed players?

Not the finished article

It is surely safe to assume that the 'other foot' of mature professionals did not featured prominently in their football education. But why is this the case? An obvious, but important point to recognise is that people don't choose to be right or left-handed, right or left footed or right-handed and left-footed or left-handed and right footed. Nor do they opt for the facility to switch under certain circumstances, as, for example, is the case with a minority of boxers who find themselves equally comfortable in the orthodox or southpaw stance. These are inborn potentials, not consciously chosen preferences. These biological biases are no more chosen by us than are the colour of our eyes. When a manager signs a young professional from another club, he is apt to say that 'he's not the finished article', the sub-text being 'give us time and me and my staff will hone him into the fully-fashioned article'. If so many young adult professionals are held to be unfinished footballers, what then of academy entrants? Yet their one-footedness is not treated as something to work on and counter-act. Rather it appears to be viewed as an unalterable condition. What accounts for this assumption on the part of coaches? Firstly, this approach mirrors their own experiences as young players and the neglect that their own one-footedness received. This interpretation is confirmed and reinforced by the prevailing consensus. It is a consensus indicative of an insular, insider culture. Members of this culture tend to disregard outsider views that diverge from the prevailing insider ones. I suspect that it is a disdain that gains its sustenance from an uneasy mixture of arrogance and insecurity. Secondly and crucially, it is the easiest path to follow. By the age of ten or twelve the vast majority of young recruits have already developed a one-footed approach to the game. As such it is so much easier to play to their strengths and carry them forward on this narrower track, than it is to take them back to basics. It can be done, but the preferences of the coaches and the young player conspire to make it an unattractive option. After all there other lessons to impart and, of course, matches to be won. Even if this alternative path entered the consciousness of coaches, it would quickly be dismissed as an unnecessary distraction that could consume a recruit’s first year and delay the onset of the ‘tramline’ development programme they have in store for them. The underlying principle informing this approach seems to be ‘let’s build on their strengths’.

It is important to recognise that this argument is not without merit. I concede that, if on arrival at an academy or school of excellence, the coaching staff immediately set about dismantling a youngster’s game, this could prove to be a disconcerting, frustrating and confidence-draining experience. A youngster could easily experience this detour as a retrograde step. It would be very much akin to taking a ten-year old who has been taught to write with one hand and who is beginning to derive satisfaction from this newly developed skill and then require him...
to start again with the other hand, once again first mastering the letters, before moving on to joined-up writing. It should be recognised that slowing a young player’s development with the aim of ensuring that he acquires commensurate or improved ability with his weaker foot has to be done with great sensitivity. To do otherwise runs the risk of demoralising young players who just want to play the game. Therefore, it is probably best done in conjunction with other activities aimed at ensuring the retention of the immediate gratification element that led them to want to play football in the first place. But once mastered, in the longer-run, greater two-footedness would surely provide an even stronger basis on which to advance.

While habits can be unlearned, I recognise that by the age of ten or twelve the selected boys may be already sufficiently set in their ways to ensure that the easiest course of action is for coaches to go with the flow. This in turn may encourage the pragmatically inspired reflection that: ‘we will never know what kind of players they would have developed into had they been two-footed, so let’s not waste time pondering that question. Let’s just make the best of what we’ve got’. In other words, when a young lad has shown himself to be good enough to be recruited by a professional club, thereafter, the downward slope of the institutional landscape only adds momentum to his one-footedness.

An alternative approach

One-footedness can be undone, but it isn’t easy and the older a player gets the more difficult it becomes. But there is an alternative way. To instil in youngsters an appreciation that two-sidedness is an advantage when playing football and, indeed, a wide range of other sports doesn’t require that we wait until ‘bad habits’ have already been embedded. We can try to ensure that, even before they can walk, we begin to encourage them to circumvent the cul-de-sac of one-sidedness or, more accurately, one-sidedness. This is the underlying principle of the SOCATOTS approach developed by Simon Clifford.

From the age of six months up to five years the programme aims, on a phased basis, at encouraging young children to engage in a series of carefully designed exercises involving bean-bags, skittles and half-balls and balls, the broad objective being to develop their general balance, co-ordination and dexterity. Moreover, it’s worth reiterating that these are not just attributes that can be applied to football. They are central to the development of a range of sporting skills.

Of course, the extent to which people are one-sided and one-footed will vary considerably, as will their level of co-ordination. Therefore, it may be that under a similar intensity of coaching one person will be better able to develop a two-sided dexterity than someone else. But this isn’t a reason to uncritically embrace this limitation. On the contrary, it’s an argument for recognising that even the least flexible of youngsters can improve their dexterity at the margins, while the majority can almost certainly make great strides. A balanced assessment also requires that we recognise that the presence of elements of un-coordination can prove to be an asset in some sports, including football.

The SOCATOTS programme aims at trying to offset the tendency for youngsters to develop a one-sided bias before it becomes entrenched. This is what makes Clifford’s project, his experiment so interesting. If over the coming years he does succeed in producing a stream of youngsters who quite literally don’t know their right from their left then he will have demonstrated that the Football Association, the Premier League and the Football League don’t know what is best in their claimed area of expertise; that their neglect of this younger age group and distain for Clifford’s approach testifies to their seemingly incorrigible myopia. And so while the leaders of Football Association busy themselves fighting crises, many of their own making, and the owners of Premier League clubs continue to be parochially absorbed with defending and advancing their own interests, Clifford swims against this prevailing tide.

Whether Garforth Town achieve promotion next year or the following one is, in one sense, neither here nor there. He is not into ‘short-termism’. It will be many years before some of the products of SOCATOTS go on to graduate from the Brazilian Soccer Schools and play for Garforth Town. While, of course, he has ambitions for Garforth Town FC, first and foremost, he sees this club as a means to an end and the end

continued...
in question is the long-term future of football in the round. He is playing the long game. His aim is to produce a generation of footballers that don’t know their right foot from their left and, in the process he wants to transform an insult into a prized attribute. Those readers who have followed my interviews with Clifford over the last seven years will, I hope, acknowledge my willingness to ask some pointed questions. That having been said, over this period I have formed the strong impression that he is in it for the long haul. He sees it as his mission, one that is both a privilege to enjoy and a burden to carry. I find it difficult to see how he can fail. The more meaningful question is to what extent will he succeed in the face of an intransigent football establishment?