

Moans, Money and Membership

It might be tempting to say that had television been invented 50 years earlier, the Football League as we have known it might have ceased to exist long before its Centenary year. But that would merely be falling into the contemporary trap of failing to take responsibility for the present chaotic state of the game.

Television dominates our lives. It has started to take over football. World Cup matches have to finish on time, otherwise programme schedules are at risk and sponsors' interests compromised. Now the small screen has discovered that it needs the game like a drug, when a year ago it appeared to have kicked the habit for good. The unifying manner in which the structure of the Football League was threatened in the close season by the response to rival bids from ITV and BBC/BSB must have brought the image of the game into disrepute. Football needs to convince the people who are not particularly interested, plus those who have been driven away, that it is doing everything possible to improve its tarnished reputation.

The twin TV offers caused a summer of discontent. Ten clubs from the First Division – a top five of Liverpool, Everton, Manchester United, Arsenal and Tottenham with a second string of Aston Villa, Newcastle, Nottingham Forest, Sheffield Wednesday and West Ham – were apparently so seduced by an exclusive offer from ITV of £32 million that they were prepared to leave the League and form the Super League which has been threatened before. The news sent shivers throughout the rest of the League, whose clubs were fearful of losing the revenue from those potentially top drawers. The BBC/BSB offer of £39 million as a minimum over four years, possibly rising to £47 million but divided among League and Football Association, might have had a long-term guarantee but no popular appeal among the 'super ten'. An interesting point. These were almost the best supported ten in the League. Nearly, but not quite. Chelsea, relegated to the Second Division, would have made it along with Leeds who failed to gain promotion to it. Forest and Villa would have missed out.

How much was bluff, how much flexing muscles to remind the lesser lights that the attraction came from just a few, is for conjecture. But it was left to Gordon Taylor, the PFA Chairman, to appear once more to come to the rescue of the League in a bid for continued unity. Taylor, in the familiar guise of leading a footballing seventh cavalry charge to the scene of devastation, was apprehensive that he might have been Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn, swept aside in a stampede of short-term financial expediency.

The trauma came at an inconvenient moment. Graham Kelly was about to leave the Football League to take over as Secretary of the Football Association from the retiring Ted Croker. Ironically, Kelly joined Barclays Bank, the current League sponsors, in 1964 before moving to the League four years later. Moreover in a period when accusations were flying around that people in the game were facing in both directions at once, he could be forgiven for looking forward and backwards at his own situation.

Clubs claim that the Government's imposition of a national membership scheme for spectators, to be implemented by next summer, does not attack the cause of hooliganism. The game's governing bodies also criticise the media for magnifying incidents when they occur. We know it is a social cancer, but football is part of society and none of us who have the best interests of the game at heart should scratch around for scapegoats. We are all guilty.

For years the media have fuelled the concept that winning is everything. Losers are no longer considered runners-up or placed somewhere in a table, they are looked upon as failures. Thus the fear that this has produced in a highly professionalised industry has brought an unbearable pressure, ideal for those hooligan elements who have attached themselves to football. Their aim of violently proving that if their team is not the best, they certainly can be when it comes to fighting, has been a contributory factor to worsening behaviour.

In itself this presents a moral dilemma for clubs. Surely they cannot be entirely happy to have potential vandals inside their grounds, however well policed and controlled, knowing they can and do cause havoc elsewhere before and after matches. It is not the fault of television that it has allowed violence to enter the home. The human race has failed to evolve in tandem with its own inventions. We remain poor specimens, susceptible to the most debasing temptations.

The downward slide was accelerated in the 1960s, during the permissiveness which



Wimbledon's Vinny Jones goes in to tackle Newcastle's Paul Gascoigne. Jones ended the season with an FA Cup winners medal, while Gascoigne, voted Young Player of the Year, went to Tottenham for a British record fee of £2 million.

seemed so free and natural at the time. But the brakes were not so much relaxed, they were removed completely. Before that period acts of hooliganism were isolated and rare, despite the popular theory recently voiced by 'experts' that football has always presented a problem. They cannot have known the sheer joy and pleasure derived from playing and watching football in one's formative years, when there was respect for authority, and crowds nearly three times the size of present-day attendances caused little or no fuss with only a handful of token police on duty. Ultimately civilisation will survive only through integration, not apartheid of one kind or another. One of the two benefits of National Service was the mixing of young men from all walks of life. The other came from discipline which has fallen away in home and school. And a society cannot expect law and order when it has abandoned discipline, any more than a referee can control unruly players in such a climate.

The Prime Minister has already shown the yellow card to the game, and a Government which has a low threshold of tolerance as far as wastage is concerned is mindful of the overall cost of policing inside and outside of grounds, estimated at £10 million. Only massive policing backed up by not always successful undercover operations outside have kept the worst aspects of hooliganism under constraint. Mrs Thatcher wanted to introduce voluntary membership schemes in the wake of the Heysel disaster three years ago. The footballing authorities chose to dismiss the idea out of hand. They would have been better advised to have agreed to the wisdom of the idea while pointing out the need for assistance in putting it into operation. Naturally the argument that the Government is not adopting the right methods is a strong one. But the opposition view, which 18 months ago was blaming hooliganism on the frustrations of the unemployed, now considers it to be the expression of too much money in the pocket. Any subsequent televising of Parliament will probably reveal 'poligans' even in this Chamber of Horrors.

Identity cards are commonplace for regular travellers on public transport and in countless offices and factories for sound security reasons. Driving licences do not force people to use their cars every day, so the casual supporter can easily be provided with one. The smaller clubs will be hardest hit, but what a wonderful opportunity for Barclays, the League sponsors, to underwrite the entire scheme with the expertise they already possess.

Ironically, at the moment that the Prime Minister chose to blow the whistle on the game, Paul Gascoigne was transferred from Newcastle United to Tottenham Hotspur for a reported £2 million record-breaking fee. Not much chance of pleading poverty. All this from a season which had many good points to commend it. League attendances rose by over half a million. Liverpool were runaway winners of the League but the little clubs did well in the cups. Wimbledon, only ten years out of non-league football, beat them in the FA Cup Final, Luton won their first major honour when they overcame Arsenal in the Littlewoods Cup Final, having lost in the Simod Cup to a Reading side who were doomed to be relegated! Even the so-called 'Mickey Mouse' Freight Rover Trophy, renamed the Sherpa Van Trophy, attracted over 80,000 to the final at Wembley.

The YTS scheme has been a success for youngsters in the professional game, giving them equal opportunity at clubs up and down the country, regardless of which division. The community programme involving clubs has also been well received and needs expanding.

England went to West Germany with hopes high for the European Championship, but missed chances and uninspired performances resulted in three defeats. Gary Lineker was later found to be suffering from hepatitis and Don Howe, the England coach, subsequently suffered a heart attack. Manager Bobby Robson's head was called for by sections of the press and a group of MPs, who invariably blame management for any failure. Yet the Football Association's involvement with General Motors at the National School at Lilleshall founded in 1984 is another step in the direction of creating players with correct discipline as well as footballing ability. There is not enough of either at present. But somehow the enjoyment has to be put back into the game. Competing is the important factor. Winning is fine, but losing is no crime. There is always the next game and even the next season, if football is to survive at top level for a further 100 years.

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