

CONTRADICTIONS IN FAN
CULTURE AND CLUB OWNERSHIP
IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH
FOOTBALL

This page intentionally left blank

CONTRADICTIONS IN FAN CULTURE AND CLUB OWNERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH FOOTBALL: THE GAME'S GONE

BY

CHRISTOPHER McMAHON

University of Liverpool, UK

AND

PETER TEMPLETON

The Open University, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

Copyright © 2024 Christopher McMahon and Peter Templeton.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. No responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of information contained in the text, illustrations or advertisements. The opinions expressed in these chapters are not necessarily those of the Author or the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-024-2 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-023-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-025-9 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction	
Football without Fans is Nothing?	1
A Game of Two Halves: Who are the Owners?	3
For My Sins: Who is 'The Fan'?	12
1. PLC United – From Clubs to Corporations	27
2. FC 'til I Die – Economic and Cultural Asset Stripping	45
3. Big Game Players – The Benefactor Model	61
4. Clean Sheets – Sportswashing in Football	81
Conclusion	
The Game's Gone	99
<i>About the Authors</i>	111
<i>References</i>	113

This page intentionally left blank

PREFACE

In English football, there is always one underlying assumption: that football is the game of the people. Existing academic work has gone some way to problematise this notion, but anyone who has spent any time in a football stadium, or following a game online, will recognise the power the notion retains even in contemporary fan discourse. However, in an era of buyouts from consortia and sovereign wealth funds, where football clubs become secondary to the financial and political advantages owning them brings, the relationship between football clubs and their fan communities has never been under such strain. Nevertheless, fans continue to turn up games in their thousands, signing up to goals and objectives with which they ostensibly disagree.

We consider the fan – or at least, the idealised image of the fan that suffuses the discourse of English supporter culture – as the underlying foundation for the ideological structures of football. Necessarily grounded in the class concerns that, due to its unique history, underpin the attitudes of the majority of football supporter discourse, successive chapters tackle the dynamic by which football organisations, as global businesses, often operate in ways contrary to the perceived *essence* of the sports club at the heart of their operation.

Providing insight into different notions of football club ownership, specifically the Public Limited Company, the ‘remodel’ and asset stripping, the benefactor model sometimes thought of as a ‘billionaire’s plaything,’ and the sportswashing project, the authors raise significant issues faced by football club fandoms. How do fans who are forced to accept, as part of their club, ramifications that run so counter to their own histories and identities continue to turn up every week? And for the rest of us, even in less contentious cases, does the unifying entity that is the football club that holds a significant place in the hearts and minds of individuals and communities even *exist* anymore?

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION: FOOTBALL WITHOUT FANS IS NOTHING?

ABSTRACT

This introduction provides the methodological framework for the book, approaching the business of football through the lens of its most reliable consumers – the fanbase. Fan cultures necessarily inform the normative understanding of a football club, due to the popularly held belief that it is the fan’s – or some reified idea of the fan – that is the permanent feature of a football club and that provides its identity. Players and owners come and go, but the relationship between the club and the fan is, theoretically, never-ending. In truth, this is never a real fan who could exist, but a constructed image of the fan built out of other narratives and that, at some level, football fans associate themselves. This fan is no one in particular, but is drawn from a close reading of football culture and identifying the directives of the traditional fan. Utilising a combination of critical theory and the existing literature on football club ownership, our goal is to reveal the distinction between how people talk about the social dimension of football clubs, and how they actually relate to their fans and the wider world in the era of late capitalism. A club is not simply the romanticised notions held by those within the games, but, as with all businesses, it is also the product of it conducts itself in a series of other networks of exchange. Often irreconcilable with the aforementioned romantic notions, these networks often get hidden by the prevailing discourse.

Keywords: Fandom; nostalgia; imagined communities; working-class values; capitalism; cognitive mapping

'Not the buildings or the directors or the people who are paid to represent it', said Robson. 'It's not the television contracts, get-out clauses, marketing department or executive boxes. It's the noise, the passion, the feeling of belonging, the pride in your city. It's a small boy clambering up the stadium steps for the first time, gripping his father's hand, gasping at the hallowed stretch of turf beneath him and, without being able to do a thing about it, falling in love'. (Bobby Robson quoted in Hamilton, 2019, pp. 21–22)

The above quote is from Bobby Robson, a significant figure in the game of football whose presence and memory loom large across a broad spectrum of football fans. In this quotation, the former England manager (not to mention the one-time manager of Ipswich Town, Fulham, and Newcastle United, as well as clubs in the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Canada) discusses the nature of football fandom. Robson's framing of fandom is, essentially, romantic in nature. It depends primarily on emotion rather than reason, prioritising things felt over football clubs' more definable, material structures. Put another way, the *true soul* of a football club – a disagreeably slippery term for an academic volume, but essentially an idea with which Robson would likely have agreed – cannot be found within the corporate entities that are primarily concerned with economic value and the day-to-day running of the club as a business concern. Instead, it can be found only in fans' different, intangible feelings towards their football club. Immediately apparent are references to family connection and matchday experience, focussed on the sights and sounds of a football stadium. Following this logic, this feeling is likely fostered from a young age as the fan becomes deeply, and often irretrievably, connected to a football club.

The views expressed here by Robson would be wholly uncontroversial within English football, yet his words reveal a near ever-present contradiction within the game. One cannot refute the importance of television contracts, marketing departments, or executive boxes, without simultaneously highlighting their presence, even their ubiquitousness, in the modern game. Indeed, contemporary football fandom is a constant navigation of inconsistencies. It is still primarily a working-class game in England despite ever-soaring ticket prices and efforts at gentrification in the Premier League era; notwithstanding this, proprietorship of and in the game has always been dominated by the rich. In so far as it has unrivalled reach and popularity, it is the world's game, yet there are increasing economic barriers to access. The discourse around the game insists that it is run both for the fans and by the fans, whilst at the same time, owners are backed by the unimaginable wealth that puts insurmountable distances between them and working-class supporters. The deeply

entrenched bonds fans form with their club are forced to reckon with these inconsistencies and owners whose motivations are often wholly incompatible with the goals or values those supporters publicly espouse.

This book aims to examine the implicit gap between fan discourses around football clubs and the material conditions of their operation. In this volume, we aim to analyse how highly romanticised notions within fan culture effectively obscure aspects of the neoliberal system that underpins the business of contemporary football. As such, views of a football club become, in the round, a fictive creation of the fanbase. The football club they support is a third-order simulacrum or an idea with no real object to represent it. This analysis will be achieved by highlighting different forms of owners and ownership models that have been especially prevalent over the last few decades and how fan cultures necessarily react, and in some cases adapt, to deal with the challenges to their values that each of these models present. Specifically, these forms are the Public Limited Company (PLC), owners who strip assets or treat club assets as disposable, the benefactor model (in which clubs are sometimes seen as a ‘billionaire’s plaything’), and clubs being a part of a state-sponsored sportswashing project. Furthermore, this introduction will now be split into two parts: the first will discuss the development of the uneasy relationship between fan and owner, reflecting critically upon how football is primarily run by a group of people with different backgrounds, experiences, values, and objectives than most football supporters. The second will consider who is ‘*The Fan*’, the mapping symbol we will construct to study the four forms of ownership we have identified.

A GAME OF TWO HALVES: WHO ARE THE OWNERS?

Issues concerning the ownership of clubs throughout English football are of ongoing relevance in the Premier League era. Williams and Hopkins (2011, p. 164) highlight the ‘changing corporate structure and financial outlook of English clubs in the new global markets for professional sport’ when discussing the increased presence of American ownership of Premier League teams. This ongoing evolution (and the change implied) forces us to ask what, actually, a football club *is*. What Fisher (2009, p. 18) identifies as a ‘business ontology’ that arises from capitalist realism and the pervasive nature of neoliberal ideology is the notion that it is ‘simply obvious’ that everything should be run as a business. Football clubs are an especially pertinent example since the club as a business entity has seen a quickening in the post-1992 landscape of English football. We focus on this period as 1992/1993 was the first season of

the Premier League. This breakaway league took a far more significant share of the money in the game for those clubs at the top table, and, as a result, clubs in the English Premier League saw their revenues increase to £5.5 billion in the 2021/2022 season (an all-time high) (Deloitte, 2023). At the time of writing, the Premier League is dominant financially in Europe, and this growth is expected to continue with lucrative new sponsorship and broadcasting deals. The difference in average club revenue with the closest league in terms of finances (Spain's La Liga) is €3.3 billion (Deloitte' Sport Business Group, 2023, p. 7).

It is evident just from the dizzying numbers involved that English football generates an enormous amount of money. No level of English football is insulated from the business ontology that governs the everyday running of clubs. Even below the Premier League, football club ownership demonstrates that football clubs are entities in the global sports market. Let us briefly consider the example of Wrexham AFC; during the 2022/2023 season, the Welsh club were on the brink of going from the fifth tier (the highest allowed league for part-time or 'semi-professional' teams, known as the National League) to the fourth tier of English football (known since 2004 as Football League 2) (BBC, 2023a). Despite a relatively lowly status (Wrexham have never participated in the top-flight of English football), this club are the subject of a documentary streamed on Disney+, with their celebrity owners, the actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenny, taking centre stage. *Welcome to Wrexham* (2022–Present) follows Reynolds and McElhenny's attempts to revive the fortunes of one of the oldest professional football clubs in the world (Wrexham were founded in 1863). The first season of the documentary shows the team narrowly missing out on promotion via the playoffs, but the second season documents the record-breaking promotion in 2022/2023. The fact that a documentary with widespread global appeal can be made about a team in the fifth tier of English football indicates the sport's global nature.

Furthermore, and more troublingly, it demonstrates that it exists in a converged media environment that sees the club as an entity optimised towards its owners' commercial and cultural ends. During Wrexham's time in the National League, two teams in the same division were Maidenhead United and Wealdstone FC, both semi-professional clubs. In many ways, they are worlds apart – as semi-professional sides without the backing of Hollywood actors and, implicitly, the Walt Disney Corporation, it at first appears implausible to expect such clubs to be able to compete with Wrexham on anything like an even playing field. However, even Wealdstone FC has a venture capitalist presence on their board. The incursions of global late capitalism into football extend even to the grassroots of England's working-class game. Wealdstone

FC are a particularly good example of many of the trends of football clubs being run as commercial enterprises rather than social assets since they are also a club that almost ceased to function. Lacey (1992) documents how 'poor financial management' and disinterest led to the club selling their ground so a supermarket could be developed there instead (p. 91). The club then went on to play in a different stadium in entirely different suburbs of West London, leading Lacey to conclude that 'the club I loved is dead' (Lacey, 1992, p. 92). That sense of place, so strongly felt that once the connection is severed, the club itself is altered so fundamentally it might as well be a different entity, is vital in understanding the fan and football fandom more generally:

Most clubs are still run as the ego-extensions of rich businessmen who regard them as their personal playthings and see constructive criticism as arrogant interference. Their attitude is still 'If you don't like it, you can go elsewhere,' which takes no account of the fact that football is not just a product and not just 90 minutes' entertainment. The football fan has an illogical brand loyalty which means he may get a bad product or poor value for money, but it takes a lot to make him go elsewhere. Chairmen and directors depend on this loyalty but they neither possess it nor understand it. (Lacey, 1992, p. 94)

The sentiment expressed by Lacey neatly establishes the opposition at the heart of this book. The idea of what a football club is to a fan and its owner is often irreconcilable; the contradictions that subsequently emerge create substantial dissonance between how fans imagine their club (and their relationship with it) and the tangible material impact of the club in the world. Despite a potentially apparent discrepancy between fan ideals and the actual function of the club, some level of accommodation of fan sentiment is needed by football club owners, as Lacey highlights. The experience documented here is often described as fans' worst nightmare; conversely, Wrexham's current situation would appear to be dreamland. However, Lacey's example shows that changing one aspect of a club (in this case, location) can effectively change the whole beyond recognition. A club may still be called Wealdstone, but there are two different sets of geographical coordinates at play and moving from one to the other changes the relation of the club to other elements within the game, including its supporter base. If one looks beyond the romantic patina with which we often see football, one inevitably recognises that a football club is inextricably tied not only to its fans but at least as much to its owners and their objectives. Far from being simply a manifestation of supporter emotion, football clubs exist as a part of many different structures, including

sporting and corporate systems. Consequently, football clubs act as a nexus, bringing together parties with vastly different values and objectives.

Extending the same logic that we can in Lacey's example to the *business* of clubs, the injection of capital and new owners effectively reorganise the club as an entity, as the relation of Wrexham to every other club in the pyramid and of every Wrexham match to each other observable point in the footballing firmament, is necessarily changed following their new profile. Consequently, many football clubs within England are essentially Theseus' ship; grounds, kits, crests, and other symbols give an illusion of continuity from the nineteenth to 21st centuries, but practically speaking, each club has been taken apart and reassembled according to the needs and whims of different owners and socio-economic circumstances over the last century, with each change unavoidably altering the relations between the club and every other point in the organisational, political, emotional, and sporting structures to which it belongs. This conclusion inevitably raises the question of what different types of ownership models *mean*. Still more pertinent for the fans of many clubs in the contemporary game is the question of how far a club's ownership can deviate from the claimed values of a fanbase before the idea of any coherent continuity is strained to the point of rupture.

Football clubs are rapidly moving away from what they were in the Victorian era and the beginning of the 20th century. At the time of writing, the recent passing of Everton Chairman Bill Kenwright saw his tenure commented upon as being something good due to his background as a fan of the club. His presence at that level of English football was considered noteworthy since, as discussed, ownership is routinely distinct and distant from the club they represent. There may be admirable attempts to reconcile this, such as Ryan Reynolds' and Rob McElhenny's at Wrexham. The Wrexham owners have made several charitable donations and kind gestures and have invested money into improving Wrexham's stadium facilities, prompting the label 'dream owners' (Jabbar, 2023). The rate of philanthropy is such that shortly after Nasir Jabbar's list was compiled, the Wrexham owners donated to an event raising funds for a children's ward at Wrexham Maelor Hospital (GOAL, 2023). However, the realities of ownership in English football reflect the global and capitalistic nature of the game. Kenwright was one of the few remaining examples of a type of chairman or owner that would have been typical as late as the 1990s, an ownership model rooted in links to the local community and thoroughly infused with Victorian notions of custodianship. Even with this, the last few years of his chairmanship saw the Iranian Businessman, Farhad Moshiri, become the majority owner of Everton FC (Sky Sports, 2018). As this book is being written, Everton are subject to a potential

takeover by 777 Partners (an American private investment company based in Miami). Moshiri commented on this situation, stating that ‘The last two transfer windows have shown that the days of an owner/benefactor are seemingly out of reach for most and the biggest clubs are now typically owned by well-resourced PE firms, specialist sports investors or state backed [sic] companies and funds’ (Mr Moshiri’s Open Letter to Everton Shareholders, 2023). This statement from the billionaire owner of Everton Football Club points to a reality where the complexities of ownership models are so involved that even the mega-rich are squeezed out. From non-league to the top of the pyramid in British football, the concentration of ownership by states, private equity companies, and specialist investor groups is ever-increasing.

This brief overview of two different points in the English football pyramid showcases the concentration towards a detached ownership model. Even approaching amateur football, football clubs are utilisable as a business with substantial economic and cultural potential. To return to Williams and Hopkins’s (2011, p. 35) work on the proliferation of international investment in the English game, they noted how a search by Liverpool’s then-owners for an equivalent of an ‘English Victorian custodian club owner’ was fruitless. This work discussed fears of Americanisation and concerns for the impact on the club’s heritage, holding up examples like Randy Lerner’s ownership of Aston Villa as an example of an owner aware of that level of responsibility. It was Lerner’s philanthropy that placed him apart from other owners – at least, this is how the article framed things – but the actual operation of the club was significantly detached from a more romantic consideration of a football club. Even at the point of publication of that work in 2011, it was becoming clear that the Victorian custodian was a thing of the past. More than a decade later, this trend has continued apace, as even the few teams run by figures with local connections need to employ the practices of their competitors just to keep up. The Liverpool FC owners in 2007 launched a ‘charm offensive’, with George Gillett Jnr stating “‘We are custodians not owners of the franchise”, thus combining the Victorian Britain of John Houilding with the discourses of late-modern American sport and both reassuring and alarming Liverpool supporters simultaneously’ (Williams & Hopkins, 2011, p. 28). This reference to the Victorian origin of the football club is the loyalty on which (as Lacey noted) Chairmen and owners rely. However, even with the pretence, there is still the frank admission that this is a business enterprise. Nevertheless, the club can only be monetised and utilised through the fanbase; consequently, the fans’ feelings must be recognised, and so the pretence is necessarily maintained. In blunt terms, the fans are resources to owners, as are the emotions the football club elicits from those fans.

Showing how quick-moving football can be, seemingly during the time the article (Williams & Hopkins, 2011) was awaiting publication, Liverpool FC were purchased by Fenway Sports Group in 2010 (CNN, 2010). The principal owner, John W. Henry, admitted to knowing ‘virtually nothing’ about Liverpool FC or the Premier League prior to the acquisition, with what motivated the purchase being the parallels between Liverpool FC and another of his properties, baseball team The Boston Red Sox (Conn, 2011). Liverpool FC were in a precarious financial position before their purchase, and Anfield (the club’s stadium) was outmoded and needed expansion to increase matchday revenue. The previous article noted that such expansion would be funded by borrowed money and increased ticket prices (Conn, 2011), meaning that the club’s business operations would be effectively funded by money from club turnover and the fans’ pockets. The people who would ultimately benefit from this – financially, at least – were the club’s new owners.¹

The initial fears of Americanisation (often deployed as a substitute for commercialisation) can be reconciled with the success that the ownership model brought the team. A Liverpool FC fan site was generally positive when considering 10 years of the current ownership, noting the significant on-field success they have brought to the club (Rabinowitz et al., 2020). The waning of scepticism towards the owners is also reflected by a football journalist asking Liverpool fans who want the Fenway Sports Group out of the club if they would prefer owners connected to oil-rich states (such as those running rival clubs Manchester City or Newcastle United), they go on to state:

Yet while FSG is ultimately a group of investors who want a return, they have been able to strike a balance in investing in the club at the same time as growing its value with success on the pitch. They have built a team and rebuilt a stadium, connected with fans’ groups better than most owners of top clubs, and they have been able to keep pace with City when others have failed to do so. Maybe that still isn’t enough for some, but if FSG is a bad owner in the eyes of supporters, it raises questions as to what fans really want from their clubs in the modern game. (Ogden, 2023)

Any negatives discussed by the Liverpool FC fans primarily concerned business decisions related to the club’s administration, such as the application for the government furlough scheme during the initial wave of COVID-19 lockdowns. One point in particular stated:

[...] one thing which really irks people, when owners appear completely out of touch with the masses and make such cold-blooded business call which flies in the face of supporters’ core